

Sermon on **Philemon 1,7-21** for 13th Sunday after Pentecost
St. Paul's Lutheran – New Ulm, MN – Pastor N. Scharf

What is a cross? It's not just the ancient contraption of torture the Romans adopted to kill transgressors. It's not just a symbol that signifies Jesus Christ, who used a cross to atone for the sins of the world and save us. The word "cross" describes anything the Christian suffers for the sake of Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "*Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me*" (Matthew 16:24). The cross means denying yourself in the will, pride, and despair of your sinful flesh and following Jesus running to his cross, trusting in his forgiveness, reflecting his humility, walking where he directs you by his Word even though there is pain. Paul urged Philemon, and you and me, to pick up.

The Worthwhile Cross of the Christian.

1) It points us to the cross of Christ and all it means for us.

2) It points us to pick up the custom-made cross for the sake of Christ and all the blessings that it brings.

"Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker...Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people. Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul – an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus – that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. I am sending him – who is my very heart – back to you. I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I was in chains for the gospel. But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary. Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever – no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a dear brother in the Lord. So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back – not to mention that you owe me your very self. I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask."

Pick up the Worthwhile Cross of the Christian. 1) It points us to the cross of Christ and all it means for us.

What did Paul want for his brother Philemon? He wanted him to **look to Christ and see everything he had in him**. He wanted him to forgive his runaway slave. He wanted him to put away his wrath, anger, and punishment, and accept Onesimus as a brother in the Lord, and back into his service. Paul didn't command him, but urged him in the Lord. Paul was confident Philemon would do all this, and even more. Why? *On the basis of love*.

We should note that in ancient Rome slavery was often the result of being a prisoner of war (as an alternative to death), or paying off a debt, or indentured servitude. There were cases of man-stealing, but that did not take off into big industry until the 1500s, and this scourge is what we experienced in America. Slavery in any form can only be the product of a sinful world. Paul encouraged slaves to gain their freedom if able to, but even if they couldn't they had freedom in Christ (1 Cor. 7:21). The Gospel of Jesus Christ meets a person where they are at whether free or slave. The Gospel's goal is not to change the social order, but to change hearts. The reality though is that changed hearts live counterculturally.

In this culture where slavery was prevalent, Onesimus made matters worse by running away. It sounds as though when Onesimus ran away he was not a believer in Christ, but Philemon, the lord and master of the estate, was a Christian. There were penalties for running away. Whether it was being sentenced to the worst jobs on the estate or other punishments, even death, no slave wanted to be captured. But Onesimus (counterculturally) comes back to Philemon of his own accord. Philemon had suffered loss. To let this go would be countercultural. What would Philemon do?

What would you do? In our culture we can use the laws of our land to try to set things straight or even get a little revenge but really it is a matter of the heart. Sin is sin. And we live in a world full of it, and we are full of it. We have much to repent of, apologize for, and much to forgive as well. We are redeemed children of God, yet our sinful nature loves to trick, spoil, and tempt us so that we fall into sin, harbor anger against others who sinned against us. We fail to forgive. To forgive is not to say that what someone did was right, or ok. To forgive doesn't mean trust is magically restored. To forgive is handing it over to the Lord, dropping the pent-up anger and wrath over the person and their

deed and trusting that God knows how to repay, refill, help us. And for a fellow Christian, you can recognize them once again as a brother or sister in the Lord and show the love of Christ.

Why is this so difficult? We are sinners with a sinful flesh that wants someone to pay for our hurt and loss. And to our sinful nature, no pound of flesh is ever enough. So, what will you do with the relative that you are at odds with, who said some things and did some things, with your spouse who is lovelessly driving you to think that divorce is the only option, with your wayward child, your petty parent, your failed friend, your caustic coworker, with all who have hurt you? What have you done in the past? What will you do now?

The cross of the Christian here is that we follow what Christ would have us do, not society, not the strong feelings of our flesh, and not letting anger and wrath take over. Paul urged Philemon, his brother in the Lord, to respond in view of the cross of Christ and all it means *on the basis of love*. Philemon knew the cross of Christ meant the holy Son of God became man and a substitute for Philemon living the perfect life God required of Philemon. And to wipe the slate clean of any sin or stain, Jesus bore Philemon's cross and the sin and guilt and shame and the just wrath of a holy sinless God. Now Philemon was forgiven. Now Philemon had the comfort of knowing God's love, and heaven would be his home. Philemon put this love into action and supported a church in his home wanting all to know their Savior. Now as this letter was no doubt read aloud to him and all gathered, here was an opportunity as Onesimus stood before him, a "cross"roads, to put the love of Christ into action so giant and so important that God saw fit to inspire the apostle Paul to write it so we can read it today. Here was a **worthwhile cross** custom fit for Philemon. It led him **to look to Christ and his cross and all it meant for Philemon and for all of us**.

2) Paul urged him to pick up the cross for Christ and all the blessings that it brings. What blessings? Onesimus made it all the way from Asia Minor to Rome and miraculously met the apostle Paul and was converted to Christ. Onesimus served the Apostle Paul faithfully so much so that Paul calls Onesimus "*my very heart.*" Onesimus realized that what he did to Philemon was wrong. What would he do? Onesimus went back to go be a slave again, accompanied by Tychicus and Paul's letter. What would Philemon do?

What did God do? What blessings did he already bring? *Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever – no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a dear brother in the Lord.* Look what God had done with their sinful mess. The scourge of slavery, the disobedience of a slave, the danger and difficulty – all because of sin. But God brought Onesimus to hear the Word of God which condemned him and his sin, but showed him the forgiveness won by Jesus Christ, the washing away of his sins in baptism, and the new life he could now live as a freed and forgiven child of God, even if he still was counted a slave. What does God do with your mess?

Paul doesn't command Philemon but helped him see the amazing love God has for us and what he was doing. Paul, Philemon, Onesimus now have the opportunity to pick up this custom fit cross made for Philemon as he would have to deny himself, put aside anger, wrath, and the tally of the wrongs committed against him and losses he suffered because of Onesimus.

Paul was not asking him to do something that Paul was unwilling to do. Paul was bearing his cross for proclaiming the Gospel. *It is as none other than Paul – an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus.* Paul had picked up his cross and was seeing all the blessings that it brings even through its difficulty, a new way to live – willing to suffer a 4-5 year incarceration if it means the eternal blessing to us and others. Onesimus used to be *useless*, but now he is *useful* to both Paul and Philemon as a brother in Christ. God does miracles in the hearts of mankind.

So, what would Philemon do with Onesimus? *"Welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back..."* This is what Jesus did for Paul, what Jesus did for Philemon, what Jesus did for Onesimus, what Jesus did for you. To God the Father Jesus now says for you, *"welcome them as you would welcome me."* Jesus paid the price for your salvation and now God sees you as his dear child. Jesus paid all we owed, and we are free, truly free. WE are all Onesimuses.

To further bless them there were custom made crosses that God had laid before them. Paul was completely confident on what Philemon would do – forgive Onesimus and accept him and even more, because that's what Jesus did for all. Now brothers and sisters in Christ, look to your lives. What will you do as Jesus has placed custom-fit crosses that include some pain and loss, but also eternal blessings for you and others. Who is your Onesimus? *On the basis of love*, pick up **the Worthwhile Cross of the Christian**. **1) It points you to the cross of Christ and all it means for you. 2) It points you to pick up the custom-made cross for Christ and all the blessings that it brings to you and others. Amen.**