

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor
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Luke 14:25-33 (NRSV)

Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them, [26] "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. [27] Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. [28] For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? [29] Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, [30] saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' [31] Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? [32] If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. [33] So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

Philemon 1:1-21 (NRSV)

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,
To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, [2] to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:
[3] Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

[4] When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God [5] because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. [6] I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. [7] I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

[8] For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, [9] yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love--and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. [10] I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. [11] Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. [12] I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. [13] I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; [14] but I

preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. [15] Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, [16] no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother--especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

[17] So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. [18] If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. [19] I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. [20] Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. [21] Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

RISK AND DISCIPLESHIP

What are you willing to risk? What are you willing to bet?

That's a question you might be asked in Las Vegas. But, that's also a question that Jesus asks us a well. How much are we willing to risk in obedience to the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ?

Are we willing to bet it all? Are we willing to risk our job, our family, and even our life in order to follow Jesus? In our gospel lesson for today, we learn that following Jesus is not for those who are afraid of risk. Jesus said, "... anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:27)

We've talked about this many times. The decision to follow Jesus should not be taken lightly. We must count the cost of discipleship, and the cost is everything. Everything we have and all that we are must be entrusted to the lordship of Christ.

Jesus tells would be disciples in Luke 14:33, "... any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple." Is that cost too high? What might it mean for us to risk everything for the sake of the gospel?

Again, I think that we're not specific enough when we talk about the cost of following Jesus. The average person rightly says, "Give me a practical example of what this might mean. Surely I'm not called to risk everything for Jesus? Isn't that something that just happens to people with a special call?"

You would think that might be true by the way many Christians live today. But, I think that real sacrifice is still necessary in order to be a disciple of Jesus. And the sacrifice is often comes when the values of the world clash with the values of the kingdom

PHILEMON

Today's second lesson from the little letter of Philemon gives us an example of how that happens. It shows us how ordinary people are often called to make extraordinarily difficult decisions in order to remain true to the kingdom of God.

Paul's letter to Philemon is unique because it is the only private letter in the New Testament collection of Paul's letters. The other letters were written to groups of people, the church at Corinth or the church at Ephesus for example. But, this letter was written to one person, a man named Philemon.

It seems that Philemon was the owner of a runaway slave named Onesimus. And it just so happened that the apostle Paul met this slave when he was imprisoned, perhaps in Rome or in Ephesus. We're not really sure where.

But, we do know that Onesimus became a Christian under Paul's influence. He was yet another person changed by the gospel.

So, what would this new Christian do about his old life? He was a wanted man. He was a runaway slave. There is even an indication in the letter that he might have taken some money from his master. It wouldn't have been the first time. Where else could a slave get any money to run away from home unless he would take it from his master?

I suspect Onesimus told Paul about his predicament, and wonder of wonders, by the grace of God Onesimus' master, Philemon was Paul's old friend. The

church in Colossae met at Philemon's house. Paul had apparently also been responsible for Philemon's conversion to the Christian faith.

But, now the Apostle was faced with a dilemma. Paul was getting older. Many of those who had supported him in better times had now abandoned him. And Onesimus had been of great help to Paul in his time of need. More than that, Paul had come to love Onesimus like his own son.

I'm sure he was tempted to do nothing. It certainly would have been the safe thing to have done, and it would have been beneficial to Paul personally.

But, Paul knew that the safe way was not always the best way. And so, Paul decided that Onesimus must go home and make things right. In this letter Paul makes his plea for Philemon to take Onesimus back ... not as a slave but as a dear brother. This would be a risky and dangerous situation for everyone involved.

ONESIMUS

And it seems like poor Onesimus was being asked to take the biggest risk of all.

That name Onesimus seems strange to us, but it was a good name for a slave. The name Onesimus meant useful. Lots of slaves were named Onesimus. It was a kind of advertisement.

We do the same kind of advertising today. Public relations firms come up with names for our cars that gets our blood flowing. We tend to buy cars with names like Charger or Stingray or Mustang.

Well, the same sort of thing was done with slaves in the ancient world. There were given names like Onesiphorus, which means profitable or Epaphroditus which means lovely or Onesimus which means useful.

But, Onesimus did not live up to his name. Useful slaves did not run away. Indeed, if they did run away, they faced the most severe of penalties.

Some slaves were branded with an “F” on their head. It stood for the Latin word *fugitivus* which means runaway. And that would be the punishment for those who were lucky. The unlucky ones might be killed on the spot or even crucified.

There were 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire. It would have been very dangerous to let even one of them escape without punishment. Slaves were valuable property.

They were ... well, useful.

We’re not told why Onesimus decided to leave. Perhaps he was mistreated.

Perhaps he was tired of being useful.

Perhaps he was just sick and tired of being a servant.

MORE THAN JUST USEFUL

We no longer have slavery or at least it is not the firmly entrenched institution that it used to be. But, many in society are still treated like slaves. Many in society are treated like non-persons. Many in society are treated like cogs in a machine.

According to some they are only of value for the service they can provide. Their name is Onesimus. They are important to us only because we call them useful. They give us the services we need. And when they are no longer useful, then we reject them.

Have you ever heard that old saying that if someone is not kind to the waitress or waiter who serves them dinner, then that person is not to be trusted? Several of us at Bible study talked about the fact that we won’t go out to eat with certain people because they treat those who are trying to serve us so badly. Not only is this a bad practice in general, it is a particularly bad practice for those of us who profess to be a Christian.

Not long ago I had the opposite experience. I ate lunch with a pastor who asked our waitress about her family and what she wanted to do in life. When

we asked God's blessing for the meal we included her in the prayer. What a difference it made in how we looked at that waitress.

She was not just someone who was being useful to us. She was a human being with real needs, desires and hopes. You could see in her eyes that she was grateful for our interest; she talked with us openly and honestly. She went from being Onesimus, the one who was useful to being someone with a name.

That's what I think Onesimus wanted. He wanted a name, a real name. He wanted to be more than just useful and used up. He wanted to be somebody.

It takes courage to become somebody. It takes courage to leave the security of being useful to people in order to become your own person. I wonder how many people in this world stay in dead end jobs or abusive relationships ... who continue to be useful and used up by others because they are afraid to take the risk of leaving.

Onesimus was willing to leave the old life behind despite the very real risk. And that turned out to be the first step in becoming a real person. By the grace of God Onesimus met Paul who nurtured him in the Christian faith.

Under Paul's training he learned that in Christ Jesus we are all God's children, loved not because of what we can do for others but because of what God has already done for us. He learned that in Christ there is neither slave nor free, Jew nor Gentile, male nor female. He learned that we are all one in Christ Jesus.

DEALING WITH THE PAST

But, even as Onesimus learned about and experienced the love of God in Christ through the ministry of Paul, he also learned something else. He learned that he could only be free if he became a slave to Christ.

And order to be a slave to Christ he had to deal with his past. He had to end old unhealthy slaveries in order to experience the freedom of being a slave only to Christ. He had to go back and work things out with his old master.

Paul knew from personal experience that all of us need to make peace with our past. Paul had quite a history when he entered the church. Before Paul was converted he was the chief persecutor of the church. Paul thought that the Jesus movement was a terrible heresy.

And then Paul met Jesus on the road of life, and everything changed. But, before he could become an effective evangelist to the world, the apostle had to come to terms with this terrible history.

Paul did come to grips with his past, of course. After great personal struggle, we know that Paul even used his checkered past to great effect, talking openly and often about what he used to be and what he had now become in Christ Jesus. His transformation from persecutor to evangelist was an important part of his message.

Something similar had to happen with Onesimus. He could not become an effective follower of Christ until he came to grips with his past. Onesimus would have to go back and confront Philemon before he would be truly free. Onesimus had to be transformed from a slave into a free man.

And so, out of faith Onesimus took a great risk. With Paul's letter in hand he made his way back to Colossae hoping for a name change. He hoped that he could leave the title of slave behind in order to embrace a new name, the name of brother in Christ.

PAUL'S RISKY BUSINESS

We look at this encounter from the comfort of time and distance. But, can you imagine the pain and discomfort this risk caused not only Onesimus but also the Apostle, Paul? Paul had much to lose in this situation.

Suppose Philemon didn't take Onesimus back as a brother? Then Paul would not only have lost the one who was like a son to him he would have also lost a leader in the church at Colossae.

More than that, Paul's request was challenging ... at least in an indirect way ... the very institution of slavery itself.

We might say “well and good” from our modern standpoint. But, challenging slavery would have been a mighty risky proposition given the situation of the ancient world. In fact it would have given Paul’s adversaries just one more reason to put him to death ... as if they needed another reason.

But, Paul was always willing to take a risk for the gospel. His vision of the risen Christ sustained him. Through thick and thin, prison and persecution, Paul never flinched.

He preached the gospel of grace to those who were jailed with him and to those who held him captive. He preached the gospel of grace to those who were leaders and to those who were slaves. The message never changed. It was never altered to make it more attractive and palatable to the society at large.

Looking back on Paul’s life we can see how these risks and setbacks often served in the long run to advance the gospel. For example, if Paul had not been imprisoned, he might not have had the opportunity to write the letters that comprise much of our New Testament. In order to fulfill God’s purpose for his life, Paul had to take many risks and hardships.

ASKING OTHERS TO TAKE A RISK

And now he had to encourage one that he loved like a son to take a risk as well. It’s one thing for us to take a risk; it’s quite another thing to encourage someone we love to take a risk. I think that can be quite a bit harder.

But, sometimes in order to be faithful to the gospel, we have to give up those we love to a higher purpose. We sometimes have to let people go so that God’s will might be done. We have to trust God enough to send people on their way to a new life and a new calling.

Have you ever had to do this? Perhaps a child or a parent or a good friend had to move to another place. Perhaps someone you know and love had to make a difficult and dangerous journey in order to be faithful God’s call.

Carrollyn has a friend who taught last year in the middle school in St. Cloud. Last summer she and her husband went on a short mission trip to Central

America. They were so overwhelmed by what they saw that they felt called by God to go back and live among those people as teachers.

Can you imagine the risk that they were taking? Can you imagine how uncomfortable their family must have felt about such a trip? We have seen pictures of the rugged living conditions in their area.

Both of the large hurricanes did some damage in the areas where they serve. But, they continue to be upbeat and serve with joy.

Sometimes we have to say goodbye to people we love; sometimes we have to let people take risks. Sometimes we may even encourage people to take risks.

We might not see it at the time, but we trust in the fact that God reigns at both ends of the journey. We believe that the risk and sacrifice will not go unrewarded. God's word and purposes will be worked out in ways that we can scarcely imagine.

PHILEMON

So Onesimus risked going back to an uncertain past, and Paul risked losing a friend to an uncertain future. But, there was one more person who being asked to take a risk, and that person was Philemon.

Philemon was being asked by Paul to take Onesimus back ... not as a slave but as a brother in the Lord.

That was easier said than done. As we said, there were 60 million slaves in the ancient world. They were all useful. They were all necessary for the maintenance of society as they knew. Society couldn't tolerate an end to slavery. A modern day equivalent might be our dependence on oil. We might not like being dependent on oil, but we know that we are. And if something threatened that upon which we depend, we would act very forcefully.

In the same way it was dangerous for even one slave to be freed after running away. Society was dependent upon slavery. Perhaps the other slaves would get the idea that they too could be free. This was a very dangerous idea.

No doubt other slave owners would take a very dim view of what Philemon was being asked to do. Paul sent this strongly worded letter in an effort to persuade Philemon to take a risk for the sake of the gospel. But, there would have been equally strong pressure for Philemon to reject Paul's request.

Paul seemed confident that Philemon would do the right and courageous thing.

ORPHANS PREFERRED

But, we don't know for sure how it turned out. Did Philemon welcome Onesimus back as a brother instead of a slave? Did the man with the slave name of useful finally get a real name? Did Philemon make his decision based on fear or faith?

The questions facing Philemon are also questions that we must face as well. We must decide whether we will take up our cross and follow Jesus or take that easier broader road of selfishness and self-indulgence. We must decide whether to embrace people on the basis of how useful they are to us or embrace them as brothers and sisters in Christ.

There is no middle ground; there is no compromise position. There is no easy way when it comes to following Jesus. Cross bearing comes with the call.

I think that we when advertise for the Christian faith it should be something like the ad they used to run for Pony Express riders. Their ad read, "Duty is hazardous, orphans preferred."

Why would anyone answer an ad like that? I guess they all had their reasons, but I suspect that many answered that ad because they wanted a challenge. Many answered that ad because they wanted to feel free as they road across the open, hostile landscape.

And I think that people are willing to answer the costly call of Christ affirmatively even today for the same reason. Our greatest fear should not be losing our life. Our greatest fear should be living without purpose or meaning. Jesus gives us what we need most, a reason for being.

More than that in the final analysis, even the greatest and most difficult of faith risks can be seen in retrospect as a gift from God. Over and over again the Bible tells us these stories of faith ... of how God used the most unlikely situations and people to further His purposes and glorify His name.

That's still happening today.

THE REST OF THE STORY

We really don't know what happened between Onesimus and Philemon. I wish we had a written account of that reunion in the Bible. But, I suspect that the reunion went well for two reasons.

First, if Onesimus and Philemon didn't become brothers in Christ, I'm fairly certain that this letter wouldn't have been included in the New Testament. If the relationship between Philemon was a glaring failure, it certainly wouldn't have been a very good advertisement for the fledgling church.

But, there's a second, reason I think that things turned out okay. In the first century before Ignatius of Antioch was executed, he wrote several letters to the churches in Asia. And one of those letters was to the church at Ephesus and was addressed to the Bishop of Ephesus, a man named Onesimus.

Early Christian tradition also suggests that this was none other than the former slave. And not only was this slave a bishop, he was also primarily responsible for collecting and publishing Paul's letters. And among those letters was the one that literally saved Onesimus' life.

Who would have thought that a runaway slave and an old prisoner for the Lord would have made such a difference? But, they did. In a desperate situation three men found the courage to act out of faith instead of fear, and the whole world was blessed by their courage.

THREE PRACTICAL PRINCIPLES

There are three things that I want you to take away from today's lesson. First, you need to deal with past pain. Let God help you make amends for what you have been so that you can find the courage to face the future in a new way.

Second, have the courage to go where God calls and let others whom you love do the same thing. God's will is never done when we try to hold on too much. As the saying goes, we have to "let go and let God."

And third, I would suggest that you must occasionally find the courage to stand up against the ways of the world in order to be faithful to the ways of the Kingdom of God. Personal relationships and proclaiming the gospel must always take precedence over what society thinks is right and proper. Maybe God is using you to change the world in ways you cannot even imagine.

CARL'S GARDEN

I ran across an old story this past week that illustrates that very point.

Carl was 86 years old. His church announced that the garden behind the pastor's house needed someone to care for it. So Carl volunteered to be the keeper of the garden. And just about every day he was back there, watering or weeding or tilling that little garden.

This was not the kind of neighborhood one might choose to live in today - it had changed over the years. It was a rough, inner-city neighborhood, dominated by gangs and violence. Yet it was where Carl lived.

One day Carl was working in the garden, when a gang of three young men spotted him, taunted him, ridiculed him, and pushed him around. But Carl never said anything, he simply smiled. As it was a hot afternoon, he gently asked if they would like a drink from his garden hose.

They laughed at him and pushed him down into the mud. Then they relieved him of his retirement watch and his wallet, leaving him on the ground and laughing as they continued down the street. The pastor saw the incident and rushed over to help Carl up. The old man picked up his hose, still gushing water, and continued his work.

"What are you doing?" asked the pastor.

Carl answered, "Aw, they're just punks. Maybe they'll wise up some day. I'm not going to let them keep me from the garden." A compassionate and gentle man, Carl was not prone to violence.

Something similar happened another time. Carl was again watering the garden when the young men spotted him. They insulted and derided him. He never answered back; never responded with anger. He just quietly continued his work. And, once again, he mentioned it was a hot afternoon and offered them a cold drink. They thought it was funny. They took the hose and this time doused Carl. They hosed him from head to foot. Then they left, still laughing. Dripping wet, the old man continued to water his garden.

Some weeks later, when Carl was again working in the garden, he heard a voice behind him. It startled him. As he turned around, he lost his footing and he fell back into a small evergreen shrub. Though unhurt, he had a bad leg and struggled to get up. Carl recognized the leader of the gang that abused him and prepared for the worst.

But this time the man! said, " I'm not here to hurt you, old man. Here, let me help you up," and he extended his hand. "I've got something for you." Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a crumpled paper bag. Carl reached in and found his retirement watch and his wallet. The young man continued, "It's all there, even the money."

Carl looked through the wallet until he found the picture of his wife, now dead now for several years. She was much younger, then. He asked, "Why are you doing this?"

The young man said, "I haven't been able to sleep very well, lately. I've been thinking about you, all these times we've come over here, and the things that we've said to you, and you never said anything back to us. We treated you so shamefully, and yet you never treated us badly. I guess I feel bad about that. And I guess after watching you, I know I can do better, and I think I will do better."

He continued, "I guess this is just my way of saying I'm sorry."

Carl never saw that young man again. He passed away that year about a week after Christmas. The pastor said something at the funeral about doing the best you can with your life. Make your garden as beautiful as you can, he said. Of course, he was talking about our lives, not actual gardens. But a young man who sat in the back of the church by himself heard those words.

When spring arrived, the pastor put an announcement on the bulletin board asking for a volunteer to take care of what was now called Carl's garden. In a few days, the young man from the funeral stopped by. The pastor recognized the gang leader, who said, "I believe that's my job, if you'll have me. I looked up to Carl. I respected him. I think, because of him, I'm becoming a different person. I'd like to take over that garden."

So he got the job of caring for Carl's garden. He worked on making some of those changes in his life, too. He went back to school. He graduated and eventually got married. He landed a job with real responsibility. And still every summer he cared for the garden. He watered it, weeded it, and tilled it.

After a few years, that church changed pastors. One day the young man came into the new pastor's office and announced, "I'm going to have to give up my job of caring for Carl's garden. You see, we've just had a new baby boy, and I want to spend a lot of time with him this summer."

The pastor smiled and said, "Oh, that's wonderful. Congratulations. What are you going to name him?"

The man said, "Carl. I think we'll call him Carl."

Take that as a parable of our lives. God has given us the job of tending a garden in this rough and tumble world of ours. It will require us to be diligent and patient and courageous.

But, by the grace of God there will be more to the story. People will be changed for the better; we will be changed as well. We will no longer be slaves to the past or the future. We will be all that we are called to be ... brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus.

Amen.