

Reconciliation and Other Things I Learned at Camp

Philemon 8-20

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I spent this week at Chi Rho camp, with 60 junior high youth and 20 adults, whose primary goal was to love the youth. I have to admit, as I prepared to go to camp, I found myself dreading it, rather than looking forward to it. My attitude changed for the better, however, when Roslin decided to go to camp too. I figured if nothing else, I would have time with her and I knew I would enjoy that. So, let me turn this into a plug for camp...I like camp more when I get to take youth from the church with me!

Thankfully, as is often the case, on the way to camp, as Roslin and I chatted, I found the dread I had been feeling replaced by gratitude that I *got* to go to camp. Having spent most of my career as a youth minister, I am accustomed to the ways of camp and I enjoy it. I like morning watch when the whole camp is quiet. I like camp songs and the silly motions that go with them. I like R&R, the hour after lunch for rest. And of course, the games, the pool, and the friendship bracelets which appear throughout the week. I think camp is a place every young person should be encouraged to go. I think it's also a good place for adults. You see, there is a lot to learn at camp...for all of us.

The theme of all of the summer camps in Oklahoma this year is Reconciliation. At Chi Rho camp, each day, campers were introduced to both a Hebrew Bible and New Testament text which focused on one or more aspect of reconciliation. On Tuesday, the New Testament text was Philemon 8-22.

Philemon is a letter, written by Paul, to Philemon, and some other church leaders in Colossae. The letter was written to encourage

reconciliation between Philemon and a man named Onesimus. Here is the body of that letter:

⁸For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, ⁹yet 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.^[a] ¹⁰I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. ¹¹Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful^[b] both to you and to me. ¹²I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. ¹³I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; ¹⁴but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. ¹⁵Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, ¹⁶no 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. ¹⁷So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. ¹⁹I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. ²⁰Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. ²¹Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. ²²One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you.

After I finished reading this to the youth in my small group, I immediately wished I had spent more time preparing for the day's lesson.

*My first thought was, "Oh, my gosh, I just read them a story that sounds like it would be okay for a Christian to facilitate returning another human being to slavery." I launched right into trying to unpack

this story in a way that might make sense to junior high students and not cause me to feel so yucky on the inside.

I talked to the campers about the differences between slavery as it was experienced in the first century Mediterranean world and slavery as it was in the United States. You see, in the first century, anyone could fall into slavery regardless of their race, nationality, or gender. It was never considered the natural state of one or another ethnicity. This is very different from western European and American presumptions in which people of African ancestry were enslaved based only on their place of origin and the color of their skin. In the first century, most often people were enslaved because they had been defeated and became the spoils of war or used as payment for an unpaid debt.

This information, while true, did not make me feel any better about the text. The traditional interpretation of this text, casting Onesimus as a runaway slave, Philemon a disgruntled slave master, and Paul as protective reconciler holds within it some unanswered questions. How did Onesimus come to be enslaved? Why did he run away? What was Onesimus thinking as Paul was sending him back from where he came?

Paul seemed to have warm, fuzzy feelings about Onesimus. Did Onesimus feel the same way when he found out Paul was sending him back? The letter does tell us that Paul and Onesimus had grown close, "I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become while during my imprisonment." This reference to Paul's becoming Onesimus' father probably means Onesimus became a Christian while he was with Paul. And now Paul was appealing to Philemon, also a Christian, to "welcome him (Onesimus) as you would welcome me."

Paul wanted so much for this to happen, in fact, that he offered to make financial amends on Onesimus' behalf in order to encourage reconciliation between the two. On the one hand, Paul seems to be

acting out of compassion for Onesimus; on the other hand, he was sending Onesimus back to resume being another person's slave. As a follower of Jesus in 21st century United States, the idea of asking someone to accept, and return to enslavement, while offering the slave master money, is repugnant, especially in light of the fact that, not so long ago, I know this text was used in the south as support for the belief that slaves should *reconcile* themselves to their condition of slavery. "See...it's right here in the Bible. You're meant to be a slave."

And so there I was, sitting in a circle with a group of junior high youth, silently cursing Paul and wishing I had chosen the Hebrew Bible passage instead of the New Testament one for that day. Fortunately, it was the first day of camp, so the campers weren't quite as free with their questions and curiosity as they grew to be later in the week. They were happy to be dismissed to the pool for the night swim...as was I. That night, I did what anyone would do when it was time to rest. I grabbed my study Bible, my computer, a glass of ice water, and sat down in the only spot that had any chance of yielding wifi and I started to read and research and generally attempt to make peace with this text in this time and place. And I have to tell you, I'm still wrestling with it.

What I will say is that there are scholars who don't think Onesimus was a slave, but instead was Philemon's brother. In verse 16, Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus "no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother...both in the flesh and in the Lord." In his commentary on Philemon, for the *New Interpreter's Study Bible*, Dr. Allen Callahan, Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Macalester College, makes the point that the key word in this verse is not "slave," but "as," which indicates a virtual and not an actual state of affairs. He also points out that in the very next verse, Paul uses the word in the same way, imploring Philemon to welcome Onesimus *as* he would welcome Paul. In addition, reminds us there is no mention in the letter of Philemon being "lord" or "master." And no mention of Onesimus'

flight from Philemon or the circumstances around it. So, maybe we have interpreted it wrong.

I also know that, historically, the idea of Christians supporting the liberation of slaves did not make Christianity very popular in places where slavery was an institution of great importance. Certainly, scholars in many times and places have had to contend with the consequences of interpretations that stray from orthodoxy. In our country, in the 19th century, Philemon became known as the Pauline Mandate, a biblical sanction of slavery. Plantation owners understood Onesimus as a runaway slave, so they cited Philemon in support of the Fugitive Slave Law, which required the return of runaway slaves to their masters under penalty of law. Gee...I wonder why the separation of church and state is so important.

I bring all of this to your attention, not to give you an example of just how convoluted my sermon prep process can be, but to remind us of one of the things Lisa Davison cautioned us against last week...using scripture to oppress other human beings. No human being should ever be asked to accept being enslaved, regardless of what Paul said 2000+ years ago. Acceptance is not reconciliation. Reconciliation repairs brokenness, it does not perpetuate it.

I do find it interesting and a little frustrating that the textual integrity of Philemon is fully preserved, unlike most of the canon, yet we still can't possibly know for sure what Paul was saying. Honestly, I think there is more academic support for the more traditional rendering of this text, but I like Callahan's conclusion, for no other reason than the idea of reconciling two brothers, in the way Paul attempts, seems more consistent with what I believe Christianity is about, than sending a runaway slave back to his master. I could be wrong. I'm still learning too. And I'm okay with that.

Here are some other things I learned this week...

Junior high youth have a lot to teach us about welcoming other people and making friends. I spent the week watching strangers become friends who were willing to risk being vulnerable with one another.

*Look! Roslin made a friend...Roslin made lots of friends!

I learned that what's going on in the world deeply affects junior high youth.

One day in our small group, we asked campers to use Play-Dough to make something that symbolizes the brokenness they see in our world.

*This camper made a broken heart.

*This camper made an eye...that's God's eye and it has a tear in it.

*This camper made a flag...it's a Pride flag. When this camper told us what her symbol was, she said, "I don't know why Christians would be against people loving other people. That's never made sense to me and it causes so much trouble."

*This camper made a person and a knife. She discovered last week that her best friend has been cutting herself. She told her friend's mom and now her friend won't talk to her.

*This camper couldn't stop at one thing. She made a Pride flag, a border wall, and a gun. She said sometimes she cries at night when she thinks about the people who are afraid they will be deported. She also said all of her friends are afraid of someone bringing a gun to school.

These young people give me hope because already they recognize brokenness when they see it. They recognize this is not what God wants for us. Perhaps since they can recognize it, they can heal it.

*I learned that junior high youth are willing to be brave and do hard things. All they need from us is opportunity and encouragement.

*I learned junior high youth can work together pretty well when they all understand what the goal is.

Along the way, the campers had discussions about what it means to do the hard work of reconciliation in the world. What it's like when reconciliation fails and how we can access the courage to try again. They talked about Joseph and his brothers, Rachel and Leah, the forgiving father and the lost son, Jacob and Esau, and others. They learned about why context matters and to listen for the missing voices in scripture, usually women, strangers, and people who are poor.

There was loud, raucous fun and quiet times of meditation where campers were asked to just listen, to be still. I'm proud of our region's camp program. It seems quite unlike the church camps I hear other churches in the area talking about. There aren't altar calls and messages about what a person does or doesn't have to believe to be a Christian and what might happen if one doesn't believe those things. Everything that happens all week long reinforces one single message. It is THE message...if is the heart of who we are: God loves you and God loves everybody else. Let's tell everybody. Amen.