



Trinity United Methodist Church Newsletter



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Understanding the New Testament The Letter to Philemon

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.
Philemon 10-16 NRSV

Philemon is a fascinating document. It is accepted as an authentic letter written by Paul but it is unique in the New Testament because it was written primarily to an individual rather than to a congregation. Paul is helping a parishioner understand the meaning of the Gospel and, perhaps, seeking to better understand the Gospel himself.

Paul appears to be writing from prison to a wealthy Christian named Philemon. We can assume Philemon was wealthy because he owned slaves, one of whom has run away and has been staying with Paul. Paul also asks that Philemon prepare a guest room for him when he next visits indicating that he owned a large home. Philemon may have hosted a house church. The slave's name is Onesimus which is Greek for "useful" or "beneficial." Paul is being held as a prisoner but we are not told where. Prisons in the first century varied by locality and the status of the prisoner. Some prisoners were held under conditions that we would call house arrest and were able to receive visitors and transact business while awaiting trial. Post-trial incarceration was less common. The penalty for conviction was usually death or exile.

Paul is in a quandary. Onesimus is a runaway slave, a serious crime in the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire had a massive slave population and Roman citizens lived in constant fear of slave uprisings. The penalty for a slave running away from his master was death by crucifixion. Although it is conjecture, it seems likely that Paul established the church of which Philemon is a part and then baptized Philemon and his household, including his slaves. Onesimus ran away from Philemon to Paul. He has since been helping Paul in his ministry and Paul has come to depend upon Onesimus. In the letter he offers this play on Onesimus' name 'Useful':

¹¹ *Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. Philemon 11 NRSV*

Paul has even begun to think of Onesimus as his son. Vs 10.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, probably written at least a decade earlier, Paul advised slaves not to seek their freedom:

²⁰ *Let each of you remain in the condition in which you were called.*

²¹ *Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. Even if you can gain your freedom, make use of your present condition now more than ever.* ²² *For whoever was called in the Lord as a slave is a freed person belonging to the Lord, just as whoever was free when called is a slave of Christ.* ²³ *You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of human masters.* ²⁴ *In whatever condition you were called, brothers and sisters, there remain with God. 1 Corinthians 7:20-24 NRSV*

As Paul saw it, all are slaves to Christ and stand equally before the Lord. And, since Paul was anticipating the imminent return of Christ, there was no point in seeking to change your status even if you were a slave. However, if we are all the same in the eyes of God is it right for one Christian to own another? When the letter to the Corinthians was written Paul does not seem to have been concerned about that question.

There is some dispute about exactly what Paul is seeking from Philemon. Most people believe that Paul is asking Philemon to free Onesimus. One could speculate that close association with Onesimus has caused Paul to question his belief that slavery is not a significant issue. It's also possible that Paul is asking Philemon to have Onesimus return to help Paul.

One thing is clear, however. Paul does believe that the fact that both Onesimus and Philemon are brothers in Christ ought to have an effect on how Philemon treats Onesimus:

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. Philemon 15-16 NRSV*

It is here that I find the Gospel. This is probably one of the most difficult of all Christian principles. According to the standards of society there are often many differences between us, especially differences in social status. But Christians are called to see one another as brothers and sisters in Christ and treat each other accordingly. Too often we are encouraged to ignore those who are not “like us.”

Next week: the Letter to the Hebrews

Your Forehead is Dirty

[A]ll have sinned— ...15 I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

Romans 5:12; 7:15

I remember reading once that Billy Graham always made it a point to preach on Romans 5 whenever he held one of his crusades. At some point he would look at the crowd and pronounce, “All have sinned.” He believed, quite correctly, that no one could realize the need for God in their life unless they acknowledged that they too were sinners; that they needed God. It’s not the “unsaved” who need God. It’s all of us.

In our society, Romans 5 is not a very popular passage. People don’t like to think of themselves as sinners. Sin separates us from God and no one likes to think that they might be doing something that separates them from God. People prefer verses like John 3:16 (For God so loved the world...) or some other passage that isn’t quite so honest and personal as Romans 5. But, Romans 5, and the follow-on in Romans 7, points up both the depth of God’s love and the reason we need God in our lives. God loves the world, us and everyone else, in spite of our sin. God wants something better for us and is prepared to help us. Christianity is not about our independence or self-sufficiency. Christianity is based on the belief that we are dependent upon the sustaining power of God to live lives. Christianity assumes that we need God and one another to live full and productive lives. And our belief is that God reached out to us through Christ because of the sin that harms us and those around us. We profess that Christ provides the connection with God that bridges the separation caused by our sin. We don’t need Christ as a good friend; we need Christ like we need the air we breathe.

The season of Lent begins on March 1st, Ash Wednesday. The Ash Wednesday service is a liturgy that Protestants have reclaimed in recent decades, recognizing that we need the symbol of the ashes to remind ourselves of our sin and our need for God. Ideally, an Ash Wednesday service should take place first thing in the morning so that the mark of the ashes is worn all day. I’ve never been very successful in getting people out for a service early on a Wednesday morning. However, we will have a service at 7:00 PM on Ash Wednesday for all who wish to come.

Prayerfully consider beginning the Lenten Season by receiving the mark of ashes. Accepting the mark of the ashes is a way of reminding ourselves that we need God in our lives. You see, even if we decline to receive the ashes, our foreheads are dirty.

The Journey to Easter

The first five Sundays in Lent I will offer a sermon series titled, “The Journey to Easter.” The series, based upon the Lectionary readings for those Sundays, will focus on our life journey as Disciples of Christ. I have also written a Lenten Study Guide for this series. The Adult Sunday School class will be using this study for the first five Sundays in Lent. For those not attending Sunday School, but who wish to use the guide, I have made it available on our web site in the Newsletter section.

Volunteer Opportunities

- Host for the Easter Egg Hunt. The hunt has been held the Saturday before Easter for the last couple of years. "Training" and some supplies are available for this event.....
- VBS director. It's not too soon to start planning. The director will get to choose the VBS theme and date.
- Nursery level (pre-K) lesson plans coordinator. We have approximately 100 lessons and related crafts ready to use currently. Coordinator will need to refresh these periodically and be able to show others the set up.
- Wardrobe supervisor for the Christmas pageant. We have 70-80 costumes currently and have fabrics, patterns, etc. for several more. This role is about getting the costumes ready for the pageant as well as helping participants get "suited up".

Preacher, What Does the Bible Say about ...?

From the time I came to Trinity I have stated on numerous occasions that I am willing to consider a sermon, or sermon series, on any subject that is of concern. If there is a subject upon which you would like me to preach I will consider it. If I do not think it appropriate for a sermon I will explain why. It might also be appropriate to address some issues as part of a Newsletter article or series or as part of the Sunday School curriculum. But, if at all possible, I will seek to speak to these issues that are of interest on Sunday morning. One purpose of worship is to contemplate our relationship with God and if something is bothering you it is likely bothering others as well.

Thursday Morning Bible Study

The Thursday Morning Bible Study Group meets weekly on Thursdays from 10:00 to 11:30 AM. We received two new members of the Group when we started up again after the Christmas holidays but there is room for more. We are currently studying Exodus.

Prayer Ministry

The following persons are part of the prayer ministry at Trinity UMC:

Elva Beard	Rachel Newman	Sam Richardson
Larry Eastwood	Kenneth Stevens	Judy Richardson
Leslie Eastwood	Patricia Stevens	Charles Wilson

The members of the prayer ministry of Trinity United Methodist church covenant with one another to pray daily for:

- Those concerns on the prayer list of the Church and for healing of body and spirit for all persons listed;

- For each ministry of the church that each ministry would work to bring the Gospel to those within our community and most especially to bring the Gospel to those who have not yet accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior;
- For all the members of the Trinity UMC community that they be led and enabled to live as the Body of Christ;
- For our local community and all its needs, especially for those who are struggling with the burden of poverty;
- For our nation and our world that God help lead the people of the world to live in peace with God's Kingdom.

If you would like to be a part of this ministry (or if you have already spoken to me about it and were inadvertently left off the list) please let me know and I will see that you are added.

Up-Coming Sermons

March 5th. Sermon: The Journey to Easter: *Starting the Journey*. Our Discipleship Journey is about choices. In a sense, we are invited each day to start our journey as Disciples of Christ. My Texts are Genesis 2:15–17, 3:1–7 and Matthew 4:1–11.

March 12th. Sermon: The Journey to Easter: *There's No Map*. If we are on a journey, where's the map? The bad news is that there is no map. The good news is that a map is not required. What is needed is commitment to the journey.

Worship Leaders Schedule

March 5th

Gina Stewart, **Liturgist**

Pat Moran and Linda Robinson, **Greeters**

Hal and Rachel Newman, **Ushers**

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Brittany Collom and Houston Hartsock will marry March 11 at 2:00 PM here at Trinity. All are invited to attend this wedding. The RSVP email address is hartsockwedding@gmail.com or tell Brittany or Houston of your plan to attend.

GraceWorks has a shortage on many items in our food pantry, and we need your help restocking it! Here is a list of some very critical items needed in our food pantry: **Critical Needs:** Canned green vegetables (not green beans), Canned beans, Canned meat (not tuna), Cereal, Hamburger Helper type boxed meals, Soup. Please support this important ministry with your regular donations. The box is located beside the side door.

Hosts and Hostesses for First Sunday Lunch: Please see the sign-up sheet on the bulletin board. Please add your name to host this occasion for the coming months. There are a number of openings for volunteers.

The Nanette Crowell Companions in Christ Sunday School Class is both learning and enjoying a new discussion-based study. We are reading a book, "Ask." This book explores "faith questions in a skeptical age." We enjoy discussion about what we are reading and the application of the lessons to our lives. We enjoy fellowship beginning at 9:45 with our study beginning at 10:00. All are welcome to join us as we pursue Biblical truths and the application for our lives.

Birthdays in March

Pat Moran, Marty Bauguess, Sherry Locke, Lilly Otto, Herb Haynes, Ava Fetting, Isabella Stafford

Happy Birthday to each of you!