

Jeremiah 18:1-11 ~ Philemon 1-21, 25

On the Basis of Love

September 8, 2019 ~ 13th Sunday after Pentecost ~ Program Year Start-Up

Third Graders Receive Bibles ~ Sunday School Teacher Dedication

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Introduction to Second Scripture Lesson

Are we really giving Bibles to children? Have you read it lately? All of it? There's a lot of scary, weird and confusing stuff in there—all the way from Genesis through Revelation. When you turn on your T.V., go to a movie, or tune in to your radio, you are given ratings and advisories about content that might be disturbing, especially for children, content recommended for "mature audiences." In the "Game of Thrones" drama series, viewers are issued up to four different warnings about the particular types of "adult" content that will be occur in the episode about to unfold. If you think about it, all four warnings apply to much of what we read in the Bible.

However, with the Bible there should be one more: these stories are really about you. And yes, as it is written in 2 Timothy 3:16-17: "All scripture is inspired by God and is *useful* for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteous, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work." We believe this. But let's be honest: many of these stories are strange, confusing, and unsettling. Today, our Revised Common Lectionary has dealt us two doozies. One of the reasons we follow the lectionary is because it pushes us to engage with and be confronted by parts of scripture we would surely otherwise avoid. Today's scripture readings are great examples.

Spark is a great name for this edition of the Bible we give to our children. It refers to the Holy Spirit Pentecost fire, that birthed the church. The title *Spark* also hints, I think, at the dual nature of fire: its potential both for great good (generating heat and energy) but also for horrific destruction. This afternoon's groundbreaking ceremony for the new Wesley United Methodist Church to replace its building that was burned to the ground a year ago, serves as a vivid reminder of the destructive power of fire. Right here in our town.

Like it or not, God has gifted us with a Bible that like fire, has caused amazing good and also great harm. I feel compelled to make this point today, because both of our readings open our eyes and our hearts to the struggle of what it means to be faithful to our God whose love knows no bounds. Except one. Since it is love, it cannot be coerced. Over and over again throughout the Bible God invites, Jesus summons, the Holy Spirit calls out to us. The question is how we will respond. And then it is up to us. There is give and take throughout the Bible in how God relates to us. Twice in the Jeremiah passage we hear God say, "I will change my mind" according to how Israel responds to God's invitation to turn from evil and turn toward God. Since there are no easy answers here, we are tempted to fill in the blanks with our own biases and shape God's word according to our own view of the world. That is the great danger.

And the challenge: How do we turn, instead, toward God and allow ourselves to be shaped by divine grace? If we are honest, we will admit how hard this really is. To become useful for Christ is not a “one and done” decision. The very life and ministry of Jesus show us otherwise. Surely to operate on the basis of Divine Love every day and every hour is tough. To hear God’s voice above the din of our own self-doubt and beyond our personal biases, takes faith. To let God open our eyes to the systemic evil and injustice that we perpetuate, takes faith. Both of our scriptures cut straight to the heart of this struggle.

You may wonder what is useful to us in Paul’s little letter Philemon, the shortest book in the New Testament: weighing in with only 335 words in the original Greek. It is a letter that Paul wrote from prison appealing to Philemon, Paul’s friend, co-worker and leader of a house church, on behalf of Onesimus, a man traditionally understood to be a runaway or fugitive slave of Philemon. A man whose very name, Onesimus, means “useful” – apparently a common name given to slaves. Kind of like calling someone, “Handy.”

Although the letter does not explicitly tell us this. It is clear from what Paul has written that Onesimus, in the company of Paul has had a conversion experience and is now a Christian. Beyond this certainty, the story and the circumstances of this letter raise more questions, way more, than the letter itself answers. Why Onesimus came to be separated from Philemon, what circumstances actually brought Onesimus to Paul in prison (whether by plan or accident), how Philemon responded to Paul’s appeal---or even why this peculiar letter made the cut and is in the canon of our Bible. We can only guess.

What we do know is that this letter, was used (more accurately abused) as a proof text to support the practice of chattel slavery in the USA in the 19th century. It was even referred to by some as the “Pauline Mandate.” Slaveholders found in this letter biblical warrant for the capture and return of runaway slaves. Is that *really* what Paul is writing about or advocating here? Or is that something that was read into this letter by taking his words out of context and bending them, contorting them to justify their abhorrent behavior? Here’s the thing about our Bible: This very same letter was *also* used by abolitionists to support their fight to abolish slavery. They read the same letter and heard a very different message. That’s my very long set up, today. Now that you know, or were reminded, of the troubled history in front of this story, I invite you to see what you think, to listen and see what you hear in this ancient letter (probably written in the year 50).

Sermon

Last Thursday morning, when I arrived at the Sunrise Rotary meeting, I could feel it in the air. Well, my first cue was the sea of green and gold Green Bay Packer regalia across the crowded room. Yes: opening game of Green Bay Packers 100th season, that night against the Chicago Bears, and the excitement was palpable. It continued all day and on to our evening Deacon meeting, where Jennifer (our Moderator) was reminded, gently, politely, lovingly, that kick off was in one hour. As we know, they did win. It wasn’t pretty, but the new coach, Matt LaFleur did get his first win, 10-3 and the new defensive line up showed real strength and lots of potential success this season. But as we know: A win is a win. Then yesterday, perhaps a more beautiful

win occurred when 19-year-old Canadian Bianca Andreescu beat 37-year-old Serena Williams, the greatest tennis player of this era, to capture her first Grand Slam title, at the women's final of the United States Open. A first for young Bianca and for Canada.

Why do we love to watch professional athletes compete so much? One reason, I think is the refreshment, the focus, the entertainment of watching something that we *know* will end with a clear winner and a loser. Then everybody gets to start all over again at the next game. Although we might wish that our real lives, our real relationships, our jobs, our livelihoods, our government, economy and politics could be like that, we know they are not. No matter how much we may try to reduce any of the above into a winner/loser; black/white kind of framework. They are just not that simple. They cannot be reduced in that way. Our Bible is all about the messy complicated middle, the real, the raw: the lives we really live. We do know that Love wins: that is the story of Easter in two words. But like the Packers game on Thursday, getting to the win that is Divine Love having Her way, is rarely easy or painless.

The Letter we just read is a prime example. Don't you wish Paul just said, "Dear Philemon: for God's sake, free Onesimus! Slavery is wrong. People can't own people: it's against God's law of Love. Freedom in Christ means freedom for every person." But he doesn't say this-- at least not explicitly. Instead the reading reveals his struggle. It calls us to ask, how far can the basis of love take us in letting God change us, and the systems of which we are a part? My answer: always farther than we think it can. This letter also showcases clever Paul inviting, imploring, backing into and beyond--but not commanding Philemon to free the man who Paul now calls his partner and his son.

Rather than argue what Paul really meant, I see this scripture pushing us to face the ways people are still enslaved and imprisoned right here and now in our own country. I hear God inviting, summoning, calling us to speak out and act up on behalf of those who are stuck in prison, not because they are guilty of the crime of which they have been accused, but because they cannot afford to pay the bond, losing often their jobs and housing in a matter of days or week. Their choice is reduced to pleading guilty for a crime they did not commit or stay in jail for who knows how long. A second example is the dilemma of immigrants and refugees whose choices have been reduced to either stay in their home country and risk being killed or submit to detention and even separation from their children in the US custody system of I.C.E. And a third example is the travesty of trafficking of children, young girls, even adult men to work on farms in Wisconsin-- going on right before our very eyes. The common thread here in all three of these examples, even extending all the way back to why the Hebrews came to be enslaved in Egypt under the Pharaoh back in Exodus is this: the crushing oppression of poverty, danger and famine.

Our gospel mandate is clear, but tough as Jesus outlines in his first sermon in Nazareth: he was anointed "to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18-19) The "year of the Lord's favor" referred to the Jubilee year when all slaves were set free and all debts were erased. In my reading of Paul's letter to Philemon, Paul was inviting his friend

to choose, on the basis of love, to follow the gospel mandate and let Onesimus be freed from the bond of slavery.

What about us and this story? How can we make ourselves useful, how can we become an Onesimus, “Handy” in Jesus’ call for justice and for freedom for those who are suffering and oppressed? One thing we can do is resist the temptation to reduce our problems and our solutions to a bumper sticker approach to theology or politics. We know it’s more complicated than that and deserves real, hard conversations with those who differ, on the basis of love.

“Heaven has walls. Hell has open borders.” Have you seen this bumper sticker? Whether you bristle at or say “Bravo” to this bumper sticker, I’m sure either way, it elicits a strong, visceral reaction. One that does *not* appeal on the basis of love. Especially as we head into this presidential election year: I want to issue a warning against bumper-sticker theology, politics, or policy. As Jill Duffield, editor of the magazine, *Presbyterian Outlook*, warned, if we respond by saying, “I see your “Heaven has walls, Hell has open borders” and raise you a “Co-Exist” and “No Human is Illegal.” So there! And so, what? Do we both feel satisfied and righteous? And all the while, people, real human beings, suffer.”ⁱ

We can do better than that. God is calling us to do better. Yes, it’s hard. Yes, we’d rather not. But the choice is ours. And the stakes are high. In October we are going to begin a new series of “Forums For All,” where we will learn practice talking together: thoughtfully, lovingly, theologically about the tough issues floating in the air we breathe. The series will be called, “It’s Complicated: Let’s Talk about ____.” The first topic will be “Let’s Talk about Reproductive Justice.” Yes, let’s talk about Reproductive Justice. I invite you to consider attending.

We worship Christ who was crucified on the cross pushing back against a corrupt and sinful system of empire that defied God’s realm of justice and peace. As James Cone has written, “The faith that emerged out of the scandal of the cross is not a faith of intellectuals or elites or any sort—that is the faith of abused and scandalized people—the losers and the down and out.”ⁱⁱ Out of suffering and death comes rebirth and resurrection. Like the fire that burned down Wesley United Methodist, that church is rising again out of the ashes. We need all the Onesimus’s we can get. Love wins, and God is counting on us to do our part.

Yes, heavens yes: we are giving Bibles to our children and doing our very best to teach and equip their hearts to operate on the basis of love—for Christ’s sake. Amen.

ⁱ Jill Duffield, “Bumper Sticker Theology,” *Presbyterian Outlook*, August 19, 2019, p.5.

ⁱⁱ James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, NY, 2011, 10th printing 2018), p. 160.