

TWENTY THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, 2025

This Sunday, we hear from St. Paul's Epistle to Philemon. St. Paul most likely wrote this short letter during his period of house arrest in Rome, in 60-62 A.D. St. Paul addressed this letter to Philemon, a devout Christian and slave owner in Colossae, a city of the region that the Romans called "Asia Minor" and that we call "Turkey".

St. Paul's letter to Philemon deals with a slave named Onesimus, a name that means "useful". The man's name suggests that he was born into slavery, and that his master named him. Onesimus turned out not to be extremely useful to his master, since he ran away and took a little bit of money with him. Onesimus ran to Rome, where, perhaps out of desperation, he visited St. Paul. St. Paul talked to Onesimus, baptized him, and sent him back to Colossae with two letters, one for his master, and one for the entire Colossian Church. In his Epistle to the Colossians, St. Paul informed the Church of Colossae that Onesimus was "a faithful and beloved brother", and now a member of that Church (Colossians 4:8). In his Epistle to Onesimus' master, St. Paul strongly urged him to receive Onesimus back "no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, as a beloved brother . . . in the Lord" (Philemon: 16). St. Paul wrote this short epistle with considerable passion. I don't mean that he showed anger. I mean that he showed personal affection both for Philemon and Onesimus, and that from his heart he wanted Onesimus' master to receive Onesimus back not as a slave, but as a brother.

It is important to note that slavery was a normal part of social life in the Roman Empire. Some writers badly exaggerate the percentage of the population that was enslaved. In fact, while slavery existed throughout the Empire, there were only a few places where slaves were possibly half or more than half of the population. In southern and central Italy and in Greece there were huge slave plantations, but elsewhere landowners found that other ways of working their land were more economically viable. A glance at the New Testament's parables shows that in Judea and Syria, for example, landowners relied on a mix of tenant farmers and hired labor. This was probably normal in most of the Empire. Apart from southern and central Italy and Greece, slaves were either the miserable people condemned to work in the mines, or they were the more fortunate slaves who engaged in household service. Onesimus was one of these.

Concretely, then, the conditions of slaves differed widely. Still, slavery was never pleasant. There was always potential for slaves running away, or even resorting to violence. The Romans dealt with this problem with their typical practicality. The Roman attitude towards slavery had both a promise and a threat. The promise was that slaves, particularly household slaves, were given an allowance with which, if they used it prudently, they could eventually buy their freedom. Many did so. A surprisingly large number of imperial citizens, including some prominent ones, had slave ancestry. It was not unheard of for the great-grandson of a slave to become a senator. The stick was that runaway slaves could be killed if their master wanted it, and violent slaves could be killed extremely unpleasantly.

St. Paul wasn't too afraid that Philemon would have Onesimus killed, but that would have been within his legal rights. In sending Onesimus back to Philemon, St. Paul was taking a risk. He reduced the risk by offering financial restitution to Philemon, and by reminding him that Onesimus was now a fellow Christian. Indeed, St. Paul had enough confidence in Philemon's basic decency and authentic Christianity to suggest that he go beyond simply not killing Onesimus, and actually free him, receiving him no longer as a slave, but as a brother. St. Paul

suggested that since Philemon had been freed from sin by Jesus Christ, he should share that gift of freedom by liberating Onesimus.

There are those who are disappointed that St. Paul did not launch a frontal assault against slavery. As a lifetime hobbyist in military history, I can say confidently that the problem with frontal assaults is that they very often fail totally and make things worse than they were before. The history of violent social reforms is not encouraging. Sometimes a social problem, or even a set of social problems, is best dwelt with by a little socio-cultural judo or jiu-jitsu, not trying to meet muscle with muscle, but coming at a problem from an unexpected angle. The best unexpected angle for attacking social problems is a change of mentality. It was the change of mentality that St. Paul suggested in the Epistle to Philemon that made possible the eventual abolition of slavery. If you truly think of people "no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother" (Philemon:16), you realize that you can no longer buy or sell them, or treat them merely as tools of production or sources of profit.

To some minds, this sort of gradualism is infuriating; but as I survey the piles of corpses and the long history of misery and tyranny produced by violent social revolutions, which usually have more horror than heroism, I realize that there is wisdom to preferring slow persuasion to quick brute force. As people realized more deeply what it truly means to be human, they rejected slavery. As people realize more deeply what it truly means to be human, they will reject abortion. The mind has to be opened and the heart converted. The opening of minds and the conversion of hearts is slow work, but it is the best of all work. It is the work in which St. Paul was engaged in his Epistle to Philemon.

The recent evil, horrid and murderous, assault on a Catholic school and church in Minneapolis exposed at least four social problems in America: the prevalence of mental illness, especially among young men; the warping effects on hearts and minds of the notion that sexual identity can be changed at will and even on a whim; the ease with which deeply disturbed people can gain access to deadly weapons; and the reluctance of government officials to provide equal protection for children in faith based institutions. The attack exposed these problems, but the ensuing debate has, so far, been depressingly sterile, mainly an exchange of slogans and stereotypes. There can be no effective policies until after there has been intelligent and compassionate discussion. There can be no intelligent and compassionate discussion until after eyes have been opened and hearts have started to convert. As a Church, our task is to make this a "Philemon" moment. We can name the issues, and then pause before demanding particular plans of action. We can name the issues and then ask people to think and pray - yes, thoughts and prayers - about them. How deeply odd and disturbing it is that some people seem enraged by the suggestion that thinking should go before doing! But it should. Thinking should always go before doing. Otherwise, thoughtless doing will only make matters worse.

Our starting point is not to demand particular policies, but to look at each other as beloved in the Lord. That comes first. Then comes thinking about these social issues in the light of God's love. After that comes action. Pray. Think. Act. That is the right order.

Before we charge into action, may we receive each other as brothers and sisters in the Lord, and let that relationship soak into our hearts and minds. Policy decisions are downstream from what is settled in the mind and heart. May our minds and hearts be formed in faith and in love.