

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
September 4, 2016  
Pentecost 16  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Deuteronomy 30:15-20  
Psalm 1  
Philemon 1-20  
Luke 14:25-33

Our Scripture lessons today are rich in meaning, and each in its own way leads us to the realization that *life is about choice*. To live is to *choose*. God created us. God loves us. God desires that we be his people. But God does not coerce us. Rather, He calls on us to choose -- to help shape our destiny and to have a say in the direction our lives take. God has made us thinking and feeling beings, capable of choice, and because of that we are morally responsible to choose.

Our epistle lesson today puts flesh and blood, names and faces, onto this reality. We meet a man named Philemon, and through his experience we learn that life is about choice, and that choices matter. But Philemon's story is important to us for another reason. Sometimes in life we are placed in situations that are tough because the choice that confronts us is not a choice between right and wrong or good and evil, but a choice between what is legally right and what is *morally* right. Such a dilemma confronted Philemon.

Philemon was a respected and influential leader in the early church. The local church most likely met in Philemon's house, and he is called "a dear friend and co-worker" who brought joy and encouragement to Paul and the rest of the saints. The portrait that emerges of him in this short letter is one of a wealthy benefactor who has given both himself and his material wealth to the apostle Paul in the service of the church.

Philemon had a slave named Onesimus, who had escaped and fled to Rome. While he was there he met Paul and was converted under Paul's ministry.

Now we must understand that slavery in the first century in the Roman Empire was not exactly the same as slavery in the United States. While slaves in the first century *were* thought of as property, there was at least the possibility for some sort of social mobility. Most household slaves had the chance to work to buy their freedom or change their lot.

Indeed, some slaves were even educated, and were often sent by their masters on trips as official representatives of the master. Occasions like this, where a slave would be in possession of some of the master's money or goods, prompted some to run away.

Roman law required a person to return a runaway slave to his/her master. Doing so, of course, often meant that the slave faced severe physical punishment or even death.

In this situation concerning Philemon and Onesimus, Paul obeys Roman law and returns Onesimus to Philemon. But because of Christ there are now additional choices that have to be considered. Onesimus is now no longer just Philemon's "possession." He is also a fellow brother in Christ.

Paul asks Philemon for a special favor in this situation. He asks Philemon to receive Onesimus back, not as *property* but as a brother in the Lord. And notice how Paul does this.

Paul has the authority to *demand* that Philemon honor his request. Philemon is in a sense indebted to Paul even as Onesimus is indebted to Philemon. But Paul doesn't *demand* that Philemon honor his request. He *asks* him to do the right thing. He says, "Take this as a request from your friend Paul, an old man, now in prison for the sake of Christ Jesus."

Why does Paul approach it this way? Because if Paul were to demand that Philemon receive Onesimus back here as a brother in Christ and not as a piece of property, *Paul would be making the choice for him*. And in the Christian life, obedience to Christ should be a matter of "want to," not "have to." The life of discipleship is one *of joy, not duty*. Obedience to Christ is *about privilege, not obligation*.

Paul asks Philemon here to choose what is *morally* right, not just what is legally permissible. Sometimes in life, these are one and the same thing. But at

other times, they are not. In this case, Philemon could have received Onesimus back, and punished him and tortured him and perhaps even executed him. All of which would have been legally permissible. But the coming of Christ brings challenges and choices that go beyond what is legally permissible. Paul is convinced in this case that the right course of action is for Philemon to welcome Onesimus back as an *equal*, as a brother in Christ.

But Paul wants Philemon to do the right thing because he *wants* to, not because he *has* to. This is why Paul says to him, "I'm asking a favor of you, even though I could demand it in the name of Christ because it is the right thing to do" (8).

Sometimes in the Christian life, we are confronted with choices that go beyond what may be permissible, choices that confront us with what is *morally* right. Such decisions may be costly for us. The price of obedience may be high.

And the best of all possible outcomes in these situations comes when we obey not because we are *forced* to, but because we *want* to. When we make a choice not out of a sense of *duty* or obligation, but out of *privilege*. When we are motivated not by external pressure, but by *love*.

The choice Paul is asking Philemon to make was a radical one. It involved seeing things, and relationships, in a whole new light. Paul could have forced Philemon to make the choice. But Paul knew that ultimately, forced obedience is

really no obedience at all. As our other lessons today reveal, we are only free to say "yes" to God within the context of the genuine ability to say "no."

As we come to the Lord's table this morning, the One who meets us here is the One who did his Father's will not because he *had* to, but because he *wanted* to. He counted the cost carefully. And he paid the cost not because the Father coerced him or strong-armed him, but because he loved the Father, and he loved you and me.

Such love compels us -- and empowers us this morning -- to walk in his steps. To give as he gave. To love as he loved. To live as he lived. Such love compels us to give our lives away, not because we *have* to, but because we *want* to.

So receive these tokens of bread and wine today as expressions of Christ's lavish love for you. Then go forth and give yourselves back to Christ and those he loves.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.