



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea

*The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida*

**THE THIRTEENTH
SUNDAY AFTER
PENTECOST**

SEPTEMBER 4, 2022

A Homily by the Rev. Jo P. Popham “Brothers and Sisters, not Master and Servant”
Philemon 1-21

When do we get to read an entire book of the Bible? Only today! Once every three years Paul's entire letter to Philemon is read in the church. And once again we get to look at faith, what faith looks like to Paul, what it means to Philemon and his brother Onesimus, and what our own faith looks like.

For centuries Onesimus has been seen as a fugitive, although there is no evidence in the letter of his flight. John Chrysostom in the 4th century interpreted Paul's letter to Philemon as a letter reconciling slave and master. And it has been interpreted almost consistently that way ever since. John Chrysostom saw Onesimus as a fugitive slave who had run away from his master Philemon. At the time many of John Chrysostom's contemporaries were dismissive of Paul's letter to Philemon as trifling because it had little to contribute to Christian dogma and doctrine. But John Chrysostom was among many Christians who believed that the Christian community was being ruined by libertarians who were challenging slavery as an institution, an institution of great importance to the order of the Roman Empire, And so he proposed that Paul's letter affirmed that slaves should not leave their masters. Slavery in Roman times was simply a matter of property rights. Slaves were bought and sold, rented, and given as gifts in the Hellenistic world. One could become a slave by being born to slave parents, by being kidnapped by pirates, by being taken as prisoners of war, or by selling oneself into slavery to pay one's debts. But slavery was not a matter of race. The gap between free and slave was so small that you could not even tell if someone were a slave if they were walking down the street. But the Letter to Philemon became a legal brief in support of slavery, and it continues to be so to the present time. In the early 19th century America pro-slavery advocates referred to Philemon as “the Pauline Mandate” representing that

the Bible sanctioned American slavery (*New Interpreter's Bible*, pp. 2147-8). Plantation owners saw Onesimus as a runaway slave citing Philemon as their authority to demand the return of escaped slaves to their masters even when they were in free states. Abolitionists, on the other hand, pointed out that Paul's letter said nothing about Onesimus's servile status. Paul called Onesimus not Philemon's slave, but his brother "both in the flesh and in the Lord" (Philemon 1:16).

Last Sunday I was pleased that CBS's *60 Minutes* did a follow-up on a program I enjoyed when they aired in May. An Air Force veteran originally from a Virginia county near the North Carolina border purchased a white, Gothic Revival-style house with the green roof and 10 acres surrounding the house as a gathering place for his very large family. Little did he know that it was actually the Sharswood Plantation house where his ancestors were enslaved on the plantation. The slave quarters are just behind the house and are one of the best preserved examples of such structures in existence. There is even a slave cemetery in the woods just behind the big house. In their interviews that family were united in how they feel about the property. They have found a connection to their past and their ancestors. No one in their family or among their black friends ever spoke about slavery until 1977 when the mini-series *Roots* came out. Only then did people feel free to discuss their heritage. But finding that the family now owned the key to their past has freed them to discuss openly their ancestors' indentured past. And it is no wonder. People who supported slavery (and perhaps still do) have not been forthcoming about their role in the past either.

For 16 centuries now Philemon has been used to support the institution of slavery. I believe it is time to rethink our interpretation of this letter and stop doing damage to our faith by abusing the Scripture for our own purposes. John Chrysostom as a great admirer of Paul wanted to rehabilitate this letter to Philemon and with it Paul's reputation among his peers. Slavery was accepted in his day. But we now know the evils that slavery brought upon the world. Why can we not reform our thinking? In Galatians Paul spoke of children of God, heirs of God, as minors who were no better than slaves. Paul said: "as minors we were enslaved" but as children of God we are "no longer slaves..." (Galatians

4:1-7). So, Onesimus is not Philemon's slave, but his brother by blood "in the flesh" and by faith "in the Lord" (Philemon 1:16).

I often reflect upon slavery as a way of life. I come from the bi-cultural southern world, and old ways are hard for most people to give up there. Yes, I have benefited from much privilege simply because I am white. Yet, I have a great affinity for my black brothers and sisters. At one time we lived in Liberty Hall on the eastern shore of Maryland. It was an old home on the water named liberty because it was part of the underground railroad. Harriet Ross Tubman was born into and later escaped from slavery nearby on the eastern shore of Maryland, and she became a leader of underground railroad rescues. When people escaped the slavery imposed upon them by their fellow tribesmen, imposed on them by the slave traders in their own and other villages in Africa, slavery imposed by the New England boat owners who transported them to this continent, slavery imposed by those who bought and sold them in the town square, and slavery imposed by their masters on the plantation, when they escaped slavery imposed on them they followed the waterways north, always north. They looked up at the big dipper and followed the north star to freedom – "follow the drinking gourd" they would sing. If the runaways were found they would be returned to their masters and severely punished. Sympathizers feared enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Laws that were adapted from John Chrysostom's reading of Paul's letter to Philemon. But there were staunch supporters of Harriet Tubman's underground railroad. Liberty Hall's owners were her supporters. They were fierce abolitionists, and they remodeled their home to provide space for the runaway slaves, with secret hallways behind fireplaces. There were even six panels above the fireplace in the front parlor that had false openings where small children could hide. The owners of the estate would light the fires in the parlor and the common room and unless you really paid close attention to the design of the walls you would never guess that an entire family might be hiding between the rooms and over the fireplace. I often imagined how frightened the children must have been hiding in compartments above the parlor mantle.

Let us consider that Paul was speaking not of Philemon and Onesimus as master and slave, but rather as estranged brothers. Brothers, yes, but the older brother Philemon enjoyed all the status that the younger could never gain. The younger brother Onesimus might well have been escaping the tyranny of his older sibling. He might well have left the one who had received the most inheritance, who managed the family property as a master might. Onesimus likely had played a servant role to his brother. And he left, for reasons that Paul does not mention. Paul had taken him on as a son, and he had faith that the brothers could be reconciled.

In a way, Jim and I am like Onesimus. We play the servant role often, but so have you all been servants to me and to us. We are called to servant ministry – to serve you. But we also are called to shepherd ministry –to lead you. As a priest we are servant shepherds – both – and. And you, my friends, are our sheep. A good shepherd does not allow their sheep to get into danger. A good shepherd does not allow their sheep to lead other sheep astray. A good shepherd leads the sheep where they can be safe and well fed, spiritually and otherwise. That is our job: to serve well, to feed the faith of our charges, but also to lead to places of enlightenment. We have no trusty border collie to round up stragglers, so we must trust that our sheep will follow. We will not lead us astray. I promise. Follow the drinking gourd, my friends, follow the way that leads to safety, to truth and faith as children of God, not as slaves and masters, but as our beloved brothers and beloved sisters.

Paul was “bold enough in Christ to command that Philemon do his duty, but he would rather make his appeal on the basis of love. So he sent Onesimus, his own heart, back to Philemon. Paul asked that he send Onesimus back to him, but he did not command it, for he knew that Philemon would do as he asked, indeed he knew that he would do more than asked. It is our joy to lead you on the basis of love and faith in Christ Jesus. And I trust that it is your joy to follow.

Lord, may it be so.

Amen.