**Introduction**

If you have the winning powerball ticket, please see me after service. Of course that short joke might negate the rest of what we say here today. So take it very lightly.

**Text**

Outside of the Holy Spirit, there is no way the Letter to Philemon survives to us. It is not really a circular letter. There is no reason it would have multiple copies made and sent to multiple churches. It is short. It fits on less than a scriptorium page. Losing a single page from an ancient collections would be easy. And its subject, if we understand the ask, would be buried by the world, and by many in the church, in most ages.

In the pulpit I don’t often go verse by verse, but today I’m making an exception. Please feel free to take out the bulletin and scan along.

The first thing to not is that Paul is in prison. He is a prison for Christ Jesus he says. And the point of this start I pretty sure to is ground what Paul is eventually asking in his own life. Just as Christ himself did not despise the cross. Paul himself would be imprisoned – and eventually killed – for what he believed and taught. This is the true definition of confession. Do you live it? Does what you believe and teach change how you live? Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus. It changed him.

The letter is to Philemon who is called our beloved fellow worker. What exactly does that mean? I think the rest of the address lets us know. Apphia and Archippus are mentioned who are probably relatives of Philemon that live in his house. And that house does double duty. It is the home of Philemon, Apphia and Archippus – and probably others besides – but it is also the place where the church meets. Philemon the fellow worker is probably what we’d call the ordained minister. And this is not to slight his faith or calling, but the church meets in his house. He is the patron of the church. And if you understand ancient Client-Patron arrangements, the Patron is the rich one. Philemon is a man of means, enough means to maintain a house. To maintain a house with family, and everything else you’d need for an ancient household. And I won’t do what Paul does and hide it until the end. We are talking slaves. The Roman world ran on slaves and slavery.

But Paul doesn’t jump immediately to his audacious request. Which is audacious is multiple ways. But Paul knows that the life of faith is not everything all at once. We start our as children in the faith and we grow to maturity. We often grow to the maturity through trials and failures and repentance and restoration. But along that way there are also many good works that we walk in. “I thank God always when I remember you in my prayers” Paul starts. And he expands what he means. Celebrating the life of faith evident in Philemon to date. “I hear of the love and the faith you have toward the Lord Jesus and all the saint.” He has opened his home to the church. And though Philemon’s work – beloved fellow worker - Paul recounts the many joys and comforts he has received. You’ve read some of Paul’s other letters and he’s always addressing something someone is doing at some church. In the letters we have he’s often addressing the things that pain him. But here all he’s heard is good things. “The hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.”

But Paul’s prayer buried in the midst of that celebration should have been a warning. “I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ.” When someone is asking for full knowledge you know another shoe is about to drop. And in regards to the faith, when an apostle or a Father in the faith is hoping that you might grow into every good thing, you should know that the trial is coming. That the big ask is just around the corner. And that ask is not a personal one. That ask is connected to your faith and the LORD.

There is something to ponder here. The modern church tends to shy away from such direct asks. I’m not sure if it is because we are not as confident in the faith. Saying things like “you will have treasure in heaven” is something many eras of the church had no problem with. And I’m not sure if we often lack – unlike those eras – because we fail to ask. Things to think about.

But Paul, before he makes his request completely known, wants to make a few things clear. First, as the apostle, he could demand it. “I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required.” But that would make it into the law. And the law does not save. We can satisfy the law for the wrong reasons. Philemon could satisfy Paul’s command because Paul was giving it. Not because the love of Christ demanded it. And that is what Paul pivots to. “yet for love’s sake I prefer to appeal to you.” Paul want to gospel response. Paul wants the growth in faith and that reward in heaven to abound to Philemon. He’s clear about the law. This is required. But I want you to do it not out of necessity, but out of love. Because something has been made known to you. The full knowledge of the faith you walk.

And if you want that full knowledge only look at me – “I Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus.” I’m asking you, in the full knowledge. I’ve lived this confession. And even in prison, I believe and teach it.

And now we get to the ask. “I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whose faither I became in my imprisonment.” And what Onesimus is, is a runaway slave. And Paul has made two staggering asks here. But we have to understand a bit more about ancient slavery. I said the Roman world ran on it. Everything from her ample brothels, to her temples could double as those, to her entertainment, to her schools and households, to the backbreaking labor. It was filled with slaves. And the one thing the entire Roman world lived in fear of was a slave rebellion. There is a reason why the story of Spartacus comes to us today. And it is not the Christian influenced Hollywood story of courage. It is the story of miles of crosses lining the road. Runaway slaves had to be killed. The more brutal the better. Because society depended upon it.

And this is the first audacious ask of Paul. He has sent Onesimus the runaway slave back to his master. “I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart.” He has sent him back with a known death sentence and the only argument against it probably this very letter he carries. But there is surety. Paul is leaving it to Philemon. “I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own free will.” Onesimus, your owe it to your master to go back. You are both children of God. You are both children of the apostleship of Paul. If this conversion means anything. If you are really confessing Christ, you have to go back. And not by the law, but in the love of the gospel.

And when Onesimus shows up at the home of Philemon and delivers the letter, and Philemon reads “you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, as a beloved brother.” Philemon is reading a request that is ending his world. The household will not operate without slaves. And if all it takes is conversion, and the apostle the master follows tells him to treat Onesimus as a brother…

And it is not just the personal household that is falling. You could imagine the freed salves and the former master working out some arrangement. It wasn’t unheard of freeing a slave after years of service. But if you freed a slave who was a runaway? Your neighbors would shun you. They might do to you want they demanded you do to the slave. Philemon was being ask to directly take on the world.

“Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.”

And Jesus means it. Understand what this is. Following Christ is not some vague Philosophy that is all in the head. Nor is following Christ some mere religion where you put in the coins and do the appointed sacrifices and everything is fine. Following Christ is a confession. It changes how we live and who we are.

And Paul means it. He’s writing from prison. “If you consider me your partner, receive Onesimus as your would receive me. If he has wronged you…charge it to me. I’ll repay.” There is that treasure in heaven.

Philemon, please do this. Refresh the heart of an old man sitting in prison for what he has believed, and taught and confessed. As you have assured the hearts of the saints, assure the heart of this one.

**Conclusion**

“Confident of your obedience, I write to you, know that you will do even more than I say.”

It’s a story that demands something of a conclusion. But the answer is we don’t know. Onesimus is mentioned once in Colossians. Philemon is never mentioned in the bible again. An ancient story has Onesimus eventually the Bishop of Ephesus. Likewise one other story has Philemon as a martyr in Colossae. There is no reason to dismiss them, but there is likewise little reason to accept them.

The letter stands to Christians of all ages as the depth of the gospel. It makes slaves and masters brothers. It remits death sentences. It upends all of worldly society. This is the Kingdom of the LORD.

So is the demand.

Maybe if you have the lottery ticket, today might be a dangerous day to see me. I might ask something.