

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

¹⁵ “Today I am giving you a choice between good and evil, between life and death. ¹⁶ If you obey the commands of the Lord your God,¹ which I give you today, if you love him, obey him, and keep all his laws, then you will prosper and become a nation of many people. The Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are about to occupy. ¹⁷ But if you disobey and refuse to listen, and are led away to worship other gods, ¹⁸ you will be destroyed—I warn you here and now. You will not live long in that land across the Jordan that you are about to occupy. ¹⁹ I am now giving you the choice between life and death, between God's blessing and God's curse, and I call heaven and earth to witness the choice you make. Choose life. ²⁰ Love the Lord your God, obey him and be faithful to him, and then you and your descendants will live long in the land that he promised to give your ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”

Psalm 1

¹ Blessed is the one
 who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take
 or sit in the company of mockers,
² but whose delight is in the law of the Lord,
 and who meditates on his law day and night.
³ That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,
 which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither—
 whatever they do prospers.
⁴ Not so the wicked!
 They are like chaff
 that the wind blows away.
⁵ Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
 nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.
⁶ For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
 but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.

Philemon 1:1-1:21

¹ Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,
To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker— ² also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier—and to the church that meets in your home:

³ Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Thanksgiving and Prayer

⁴ I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, ⁵ because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. ⁶ I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ. ⁷ Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people.

Paul's Plea for Onesimus

⁸ Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, ⁹ yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus— ¹⁰ that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while

I was in chains. ¹¹ Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

¹² I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. ¹³ I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. ¹⁴ But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary. ¹⁵ Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— ¹⁶ no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.

¹⁷ So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸ If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. ¹⁹ I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. ²⁰ I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. ²¹ Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.

Luke 14:25-33

The Cost of Being a Disciple

²⁵ Once when large crowds of people were going along with Jesus, he turned and said to them, ²⁶ “Those who come to me cannot be my disciples unless they love me more than they love father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and themselves as well. ²⁷ Those who do not carry their own cross and come after me cannot be my disciples. ²⁸ If one of you is planning to build a tower, you sit down first and figure out what it will cost, to see if you have enough money to finish the job. ²⁹ If you don't, you will not be able to finish the tower after laying the foundation; and all who see what happened will make fun of you. ³⁰ ‘You began to build but can't finish the job!’ they will say. ³¹ If a king goes out with ten thousand men to fight another king who comes against him with twenty thousand men, he will sit down first and decide if he is strong enough to face that other king. ³² If he isn't, he will send messengers to meet the other king to ask for terms of peace while he is still a long way off. ³³ In the same way,” concluded Jesus, “none of you can be my disciple unless you give up everything you have.

Sermon: Choose Life

It's Labour day weekend; though the sun is shining, in the last few days certainly the air has become cooler – I've even had to get up in the middle of the night to close the window. Summer is drawing to a close, fall is coming, and Labour Day is part of that transition.

Originally this holiday was a day to recognize labourers – to celebrate the contributions of those who work with their hands, and to remember those who fought for workers' rights; those people who brought us the eight hour workday instead of twelve, who brought health and safety regulations into law, and who promote living wages for working people.

These days, however, we rarely think of the original purpose of the holiday, instead Labour day is a long weekend – it's the last hurrah of the summer, a day for family, for bbq's or picnics and maybe one last trip to the beach.

For the kids, labour day ushers in the unavoidable fact that school is about to begin, that long carefree days are over and cold mornings waiting for the bus to school are

just around the corner. Labour day is kind of a little death for them – it represents both the end of summer, and in some ways also the end of childhood.

Whatever we take Labour day to mean, I find it curious that on this Labour day weekend we find ourselves reading a letter about a labourer - about the slave Onesimus.

Onesimus' name means to benefit, to help or to profit. We don't really know a whole lot about him – we do know that he has ended up with Paul and Timothy who are imprisoned in Ephesus at the time the letter was written.

We also know that Onesimus, the helpful, profitable slave belongs to a man named Philemon, a man that Paul has had some past relationship with. In fact, this man Philemon appears to be a disciple or convert of Paul who now runs a church out of his home.

It's not clear how Onesimus ended up with Paul. Some people think that he ran away from Philemon, a little like Jim in the Hick Finn novels, a slave on lam who eventually got jailed as a runaway and just happened to share a cell with Paul and Timothy.

Or, maybe he intentionally sought out Paul – often a slave who had trouble with a master would appeal to a friend of that master to stand for them as an advocate – it could be that Onesimus ran away to find Paul, knowing the influence Paul had over Philemon.

It could also be that he's not a runaway at all. Since Paul brought Philemon to faith, it could be that Philemon sent Onesimus to bring supplies and encouragement to Paul when he heard that he had been arrested.

We don't really know how Onesimus ended up meeting Paul and Timothy in a jail cell in Ephesus, but it doesn't really matter anyway. The point that Paul was making in his letter was that Onesimus had become a Christian – Paul says he 'became my son' – he actually writes 'I begat him.' The Onesimus that will be returning to Philemon is not the same Onesimus who left. Paul writes that he is sending Onesimus back to Philemon 'no longer as a slave, but better than a slave; as a dear brother.'

So what does this mean? Theologians differ about what exactly Paul is asking of Philemon in this letter. Certainly Paul expresses that he would like Onesimus to remain with him in Ephesus rather than send him back, but it also seems that Paul is asking Philemon to grant Onesimus' his freedom – to receive him no longer as a slave, but as a dear brother.

We know that Paul was a devout Jew – he never stopped observing the Jewish law. As such he would certainly be aware that since his own people had once been slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt that it was not permitted for Jews to have Jewish slaves for life. Jews could not be sold into slavery to other Jews, at most they could be rented. There was always a time period that would expire after which the slave would be free again. There were provisions in the Torah for their release after a prescribed period of time.

This, then, raises an important question – if Jews cannot own Jews, is it morally permissible for the Christian master Philemon to own the now Christian slave Onesimus?

Paul doesn't clearly state that Philemon can no longer own Onesimus, but he does write of a new relationship that Philemon is to have to Onesimus, no longer as a slave but as a brother – a dear brother. This has much larger ramifications than merely stating the Philemon has to be nicer to Onesimus. The social and power dynamics between them also has to change.

And even more than receiving Onesimus as a beloved brother, Paul writes to Philemon 'when you receive Onesimus, receive him as you would me.' Paul wants Philemon to look at Onesimus and see Paul. Remember, Philemon came to faith through Paul; so he respects him, looks up to him, loves him, owes him a deep debt of gratitude.

So, we can see that when Paul is asking Philemon to receive Onesimus as a beloved brother, just as beloved as Paul is, that this is no small thing. By changing the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus, Paul is changing Philemon himself.

It should be that when we truly see each other as "brothers and sisters" in Christ, then we can no longer accommodate gross inequalities in social position. We shouldn't be able to, on the one hand, consider other people as family that we love, and yet on the other allow, and even cause, their suffering.

As these thoughts of power imbalance were running through my head this week something happened that I couldn't ignore. On Friday night I was in Canadian Tire; I had to return something so I was at the service desk speaking with the lady working there. While I was there people were coming and going – many of them farm workers – blacks and hispanics. As the workers came into the store, they dropped off their backpacks at the service desk I was at.

When I finished my business and was actually inside the store I watched as twice an employee came up to black workers and asked them to leave their bags at the front. Nobody asked Kyoungsoo for her backpack. There were other white customers walking through the store with bags – it didn't seem that they had to leave their bags

at the from. The whole situation was demeaning and shameful - honestly, it made me sick.

This is not the way we treat brothers and sisters. This is not the way we treat people that we value. Now, it's not realistic for me to expect Canadian Tire employees to exemplify Christian values, but there's a lesson here for all of us.

This is what happens when we fail to look at each person and see a child of God who is greatly loved and valued. This is what happens when we don't look at each other as brothers and sisters but instead see each other as outsiders. When we look around and see the dropout, the one with the criminal record, the immigrant, the one who didn't go to college, the person with a disability, the older and slowing-down person, the one who doesn't speak like us, or look like us, or act like us.

When we see people as others, somehow that allows us to treat them with contempt, to see them only as objects, as people who pick tobacco for us but aren't really welcome in our stores. But if we see them as our brothers, then we can't treat them like that anymore.

This is the position that Paul put Philemon in. Onesimus is your brother. How do you treat your brother?

Look around you. All these people are your sisters; they are your brothers. When you leave here this morning – those people out there – not just the nice ones at the Blue Elephant - but the homeless ones, the crazy ones, the dirty ones, the loud and make you uncomfortable ones, the working immigrant ones – they are your brothers and sisters too.

In our gospel reading Jesus cautioned his followers not to be too eager to follow the miracle man but to count the cost of following him. The cost is not measured only in the alms that we throw to the poor as we pass them by; discipleship is not just one more hobby or extra-curricular activity. Jesus tells us that we have to place our loyalty to him above our loyalty to friends and family, we have to pick up our cross, and ultimately, Jesus says, 'none of you can be my disciple unless you give up everything you have.'

Everything. What we really have to give up is ourselves. We have to give up our ideas about otherness, the idea that we really are not our brother's keeper. We have to give up our ideas that our wealth and power are things that we have earned and therefore deserve.

We have to give up the idea that we are Philemon in today's story – the rich one, the privileged one, and instead realize that we are Onesimus. We are in captivity to the world and we need a champion, we need an advocate who will plead our case for us

– who will send us back to our Master and Maker with a letter saying receive these people, not as sinners, but receive them as you would receive me. Look at them father, and see me. We are Onesimus – Jesus is our Paul.

When we embrace our own position as Onesimus, then we will realize the utter vanity and foolishness of treating others as anything less than precious siblings. We are beggars ourselves, we have no cause to think we're any better than anyone else we see out there in the world.

Instead, in our humility we become grateful servants, grateful to have each other, grateful to have the word to inform us, the spirit to guide us and to have Jesus as our advocate, the one who calls us sister, brother.

Amen.