

*¹Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,
To Philemon, our dear friend and coworker,*

⁷For I have received great joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.

⁸For that reason, even though I have plenty of boldness in Christ to order you to do what is proper, ⁹I am appealing to you instead, on the basis of love, just as I, Paul, am an old man and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ. ¹⁰I am appealing to you on behalf of my child Onesimus. I became his father while I was in chains. ¹¹There was a time when he was useless to you, but now he is useful both to you and to me. ¹²I have sent him (who is my very heart) back to you. Welcome him. ¹³I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might serve me in your place while I am in chains for the gospel. ¹⁴But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that your kindness would not be the result of compulsion, but of willingness. ¹⁵Perhaps this is why he was separated from you for a while: so that you would have him back forever, ¹⁶no longer as a slave, but as more than a slave, as a dear brother. He certainly is dear to me, but he is even more of a dear brother to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

¹⁷So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸And if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge it to me. ¹⁹I, Paul, have written this with my own hand: I will repay it—not to mention that you owe me your very self. ²⁰Yes, brother, I am asking for a favor from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. ²¹Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.

“Count the cost.” We hear these words from Jesus in the Gospel this morning, and this phrase is the theme of our service. What is the cost of following Jesus? Well, from what we hear today, it's not cheap. Philemon's situation speaks to that truth. Paul begs him to do something incredibly costly, both to his pocketbook and to his pride. But this costly endeavor would also mean great gain in God's Kingdom.

Philemon was a Christian man who had a slave named Onesimus. We don't know much about their backgrounds, but we do know that slavery pervaded the Roman Empire. By some estimates, up to one third of the population of Rome lived as enslaved people. People become slaves through war, piracy, birth, abandonment as infants, or the sale of oneself. And the way slaves were treated was mixed, from some being forced to a short and terrible life in the mines to some serving as doctors and accountants. We don't know how Onesimus became in the possession of Philemon, but we do know that their relationship up to this point had not been great. Onesimus had apparently run away from Philemon. Under Roman law, a runaway slave

could face severe punishment or even execution. Philemon had every right under the law to bring Onesimus back and make his life terrible.

But the Apostle Paul, who apparently had a close relationship with Philemon makes a request. While imprisoned in Rome, it seems Paul had met Onesimus and shared with him the good news of Jesus. Now Paul is sending Onesimus back to his master, encouraging Philemon not to exercise his legal right to punish his servant or to force Onesimus to repay his debt. Paul calls Philemon to receive Onesimus back as a brother in Christ.

But this request was costly. Whether Philemon bought him as a slave of war or paid off a debt Onesimus owed in exchange for service, Philemon would certainly take a financial hit. Not only that, but his social standing would also be changed. People would see him as weak. He would have to swallow his pride to welcome his rebellious servant back into his house and he would have to set aside the satisfaction of getting revenge on someone who had hurt him. What was Paul asking Philemon to give up? A lot.

Paul makes this request to us today too. “Turn the other cheek.” The command here is not to seek out people who abuse you, or even to refrain from avoiding their abuse. But when someone wrongs you, God calls you to turn the other cheek in forgiveness. We could spend all day talking about rights that we are called to give up in love, but I think you can come up with plenty in your own life. The world says, “stand on your rights.” That phrase, “it’s a free country,” has probably poured out of all our mouths. And while that is the case – and we can be thankful that that is the case – our calling is not to exercise our rights for personal gain, but to love our neighbors and serve the will of our Creator. And remember, our neighbors are those people God places into our lives, whether they are friends or foes.

How could a person possibly do this, giving up what is rightfully theirs for a person who could be described as an enemy? Look at Israel’s relationship with her Lord. How often did God send prophets to her to tell God’s people that their indifference to God was tantamount to adultery? God’s precious bride had spit in his face and chased relations with anyone else she could find; Baal, Asherah, and even the stone and gold she shaped herself. But even though Israel had turned her back on God, his love for her never ceased. For the people who hated him, God sent his Son as that Lamb of God, whose life was snuffed out by the bride he came to save, and his blood was shed to make her holy. You and I are the bride of Christ too, unfaithful in sin. But he bought us back from sin and death at the cross. He laid aside everything – his full divine power and his life itself – for those who were his enemies in every regard. He set aside his freedom for us.

Following Jesus means carrying a cross. And that doesn’t just mean suffering when you have no other choice. Even more than that, it means suffering when you could easily escape it and dump that suffering on someone else. At work, you notice a mistake has been made, costing

the business time and money. You could toss the person who made the mistake under the bus and make them clean up their own mess or face the consequences. But you quietly help them fix it, carrying their burdens with them, knowing Christ carried yours. At home, a sibling wronged you, and everyone else thinks you should make them pay for what they did to you. But you choose patience and forgiveness instead of the satisfaction of revenge, because you know the patience and forgiveness shown to you. In your pocketbook, your living situation is one of those where it is financially beneficial to live together unmarried, maybe due to alimony or Social Security from a previous marriage. But you choose to forego the easy money and marry, taking the financial hit because you know Christ the bridegroom loved his bride, the Church, so much that he forewent any other benefit to make her his completely.

Following Christ means carrying a cross. It means that there will be a cost you will pay in your life. And if you say, “I will follow Christ in this way but not in that way,” you cannot be his disciple, and your faith is empty because it does not appreciate what Jesus did for you.

But in sacrifice of everything for the Lord, there is also much to be gained. By welcoming Onesimus, Philemon would not just have a servant, but a brother in Christ. The relationship would be reconciled and transformed into something new and better.

I think the way we can understand this best is by looking at it through the lens of something that our society has become obsessed about: power dynamics. You hear about it all the time, don't you? Who has the power in government or in a relationship or in the workplace? And that term comes out: equality. It's a term we talk about when we refer to the constitution, to our justice system, and to every equal rights movement that people engage in. People want to live in a just society. They want equality.

But the equality that Jesus brings is extraterrestrial; it does not come from earth. Here on earth, equality comes at the end of a gun. People must be forced to treat others in an equal way. That's why we have laws on discrimination. And even with all those laws and all that momentum for equality, no such thing as true equality exists. But the equality Jesus brings is perfect and complete. It's so complete, that a slave and master could stand before God's throne in his kingdom as equals. It's so complete that Philemon and Onesimus, with whatever struggles led to them being split up, would see each other as brothers. Where does that kind of equality come from? It comes from Calvary. Here, these two men gain Jesus himself, and every good gift that he shares with them: forgiveness, confidence, and resurrection.

It is that same equality in Christ that unites our family of believers. And we see it on perfect display at the communion rail. Standing side-by-side are rich and poor, strong and weak, democrats and republicans and every other political label, fans of this team or that team, and people from near and far. What unites them all? It's not what they look like or how they talk or how they vote. It's their faith in Christ and the unity of their confession of that faith.

True forgiveness does not come without the cross. How could I walk through life so sure that I'm right with God, even as I continue to rack up sin in my thoughts, words, and actions? How could I forgive others, setting them free, unless I was first forgiven for much more than would ever be committed against me? And when I know I'm forgiven and am moved to forgive, life looks a lot less chaotic and a lot more peaceful. I live at peace with the brother or sister who sinned against me because we both stand forgiven. No more "forgive, but I won't forget." Sin is gone. The past is left in the past. We have peace with God and with each other.

And when division arises again – and we know it will because we are sinners living in a sinful world – we go back to the well of God's grace again, following the Christian life's rhythm of repentance and forgiveness. This is life in the kingdom of God. This is the life of following Jesus. And how much is gained by it? Everything. Count the cost and count the gain, friends. Amen.