



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

Welcome Him as a Brother!

SERMON BY REV. STEVEN GRANT ■ SEPTEMBER 24, 2017

Our Scripture lesson comes from one of the smallest books in the Bible, Paul's Letter to Philemon. During the course of our time together I will try to look at all of Paul's letter, but I want to read to you the central verses of the letter, which are Philemon 14-16:

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. ¹⁵Perhaps the reason [Onesimus] was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever — ¹⁶no 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.

In Omaha, Nebraska where my family and I lived for a time, we encountered a phenomenon called Boys Town. Perhaps you know something about Boys Town from having watched the classic movie featuring Spencer Tracy. Boys Town was a ministry started by Father Flanagan. The idea behind it was to intervene in the lives of troubled boys before they ended up in prison (or worse). What began as just one house and a handful of boys became, over the decades, a mega-educational ministry which ministers to both boys and girls and even to families. In fact, this ministry has grown so much that the campus of Boys Town now has its own ZIP Code. It is quite an amazing thing. Going way back, there was an iconic poster that was more or less the logo for Boys Town. It shows an older boy carrying on his shoulders a younger boy. Father Flanagan had encountered such a scene and commented on the burden that the boy was carrying. The boy's response is printed on the logo, "He ain't heavy, Father ... he's m' brother."

It is a beautiful thing when our perspective is affected and changed by the relationship with another person. What might seem like a burden in one instance becomes no burden at all. It depends on the relationship we have with that person. "He's not heavy, Father ... he's m' brother."

There is another wonderful story of two elderly men who were sharing a cup of coffee together one morning. One of the gentlemen was sharing with the other that his dear wife had recently passed away and he was describing to the other man how they met, how they fell in love, their marriage, their life together, and all the things that they did. Then he recounted the point at which his dear wife became ill and began to decline; how he would go to work for 12 hours each day and then come home and take care of her. He described that as the long years of decline continued, his responsibilities increased to the point that he needed to feed her and carry her from one place to another in the house until finally she passed away. The other gentleman said that it was amazing all he had done, and that it must have been hard to continue to do it for so long. The man replied, "Not at all. It was an honor and a privilege to serve my queen." Some of you know exactly what that is like. It is a beautiful thing when our perspective is affected and changed by the relationship to another person. What might be considered a burden in one instance becomes no burden at all. It is beautiful and tremendously heartwarming to see such love wherever and whenever it occurs.

Christians particularly have a very specific calling in this regard. As disciples of Jesus, we are called not to limit this same kind of loving service or this loving spirit to only blood relatives or to spouses. As disciples of Jesus we are called to embrace the call of such love in a much more comprehensive way so that it is extended to all. Although you would not relate to someone else the same way you do to your spouse, the spirit is the same for all people Christians encounter. This is a very important thing to grasp, because this is only fully effective if we love Jesus more than anything or anyone else. When we say that a disciple of Jesus loves Him more than anything or anyone else, it does not mean that our love for others diminishes. In fact, we continue to love them just as much as ever; we just love Jesus more. The beauty is that when we put Jesus Christ as first in our life, when we love Him more than anything else, He enables us to love others even more. In fact, when we put

Him first, our love for our spouses, our families, and others actually grows more than it otherwise would. This is that spirit that Jesus' disciples are called to have.

Let me illustrate what I mean. Let me take you to one part of the Holy Land tour that I have led for several years. One of the places we visit when we are in Jerusalem is the site of the home of Caiaphas, who was high priest at the time of Jesus' crucifixion. There is a church sitting where his palace had been. You can go deep into the excavated lower level of the church and see the dungeon where Jesus was interrogated and kept overnight. It is a dark, dank, and intimidating place. When we visit we have a devotional there. I usually say something like this: "Imagine if you had been here at the time that Jesus was kept in this awful place anticipating the horrific death He would experience the next day and the humiliation and the trial and all that He went through which we remember on Good Friday. What would you have done? What would you been inclined to do for Him? Would you have wanted to comfort Him somehow? Would you have wrapped your arms around Him and hugged Him? Would you have tried to bind up His wounds? What would you have done?"

I allow people to meditate on that for a while in this place. It allows them to get in touch with their love for Jesus. After they have thought about it for a while, I remind them that they still have a chance; they still have the opportunity to do something for Him. What did Jesus teach us in Matthew 25:40? "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

In other words, if you want to do something for Jesus, if you think about what you would have done if you had been in that prison with him, remember, you still have a chance! Whatever you do for another person, "to the least," it is just like doing it for Him! What we are called to do as disciples of Jesus is to see the face of Jesus in every other person.

What does the "least of these" mean? Well, the least of these could be the most vulnerable, the most humble; but it could also be the least person to whom you would be likely to relate. It might be someone who thinks entirely differently from you. It might be someone who lives entirely differently from you and you may not even approve the way in

which the person lives. It could be one's ethnicity or their nationality may be greatly different from yours, but it does not matter! Whatever you do to any of these is just like doing it to Him. The converse is also true. As He says later in Matthew 25:45, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me."

We are called to see the face of Jesus in every human being and when we do this, the all-consuming love for Jesus Christ just spills out of us into the lives of other people. No matter where we go, they are being blessed. This is how Christians transform the world. This is how Christians contribute to the growing of community.

These past days have been amazing. As terrible as the hurricane was, we are seeing community coming together and we are seeing amazing acts of love and caring. But here is the thing—why do we only do this when there is a hurricane? Remember 9/11? After 9/11, all of a sudden, everyone was waving an American flag and helping each other out; everyone was showing up for church. Then over the next year or two this spirit gradually evaporated. Right now the community is coming together and helping each other and it is beautiful to see. We must capitalize on this spirit and say, "With the hurricane over, when everyone gets back to normal, are we going to revert back to old ways? How are we going to relate to people moving forward?" This kind of caring for others is just the natural result that goes on all the time with someone who is a disciple of Jesus. Is this how we witness in a whole different way of living; living that glorifies God, and demonstrates the vision of His Kingdom?

Friends, this is exactly what is going on in Paul's Letter to Philemon. Let's take a look at this letter. The reason Paul is writing this letter to Philemon is because Philemon had a slave by the name of Onesimus. Onesimus had escaped from Philemon and had found his way to an encounter with the Apostle Paul. Under Paul's teaching and love, he had been brought to faith. Not only is Onesimus now a Christian, he is now assisting Paul and helping in his ministry while Paul is in prison. Paul is going to send Onesimus back to Philemon. Why is he doing that?

The first thing that Paul does early in his letter is to remind Philemon of his tremendous Christian commitment. Philemon is apparently

a model Christian and Paul mentions it because he is going to draw on that commitment and that love of Jesus for what he wants Philemon to do. Philemon has been such a blessing to other people and refreshment to Paul because of his love for Jesus. Look at what he says in verse 8: “Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do ...” Paul has a lot of authority and could, just by his position as an apostle, order Philemon to do something, but he does not want to do that. He would prefer to appeal to Philemon on the basis of love. He does not want Philemon to do something out of obligation. He is after a change of heart in Philemon; he wants Philemon’s response to be the natural result of being transformed from the inside out by the power of the Holy Spirit. By being a disciple of Jesus this should naturally flow from him. Paul does not want only obedience; he wants a change of heart.

He continues in verses 9-14. There is a little play on words here because the name “Onesimus” actually means “useful.” He says:

... 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—¹⁰that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. ¹¹Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. ¹²I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. ¹³I 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. ¹⁴But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary.

This reinforces Paul’s desire not to force Philemon to do anything. This is what Paul and Jesus were after. Serving should not be a burden or obligation, just as attending church or helping people should not be an obligation. That is the wrong spirit; do not do it! Do it because your heart is energized, because your heart is so full of the love of Jesus that it is spilling out! When this is the case you are going to be able to serve others with so much energy and so much joy while you are doing it because it is coming from the heart. This is what Paul wants from Phile-

mon. Now we get to the crux of the matter. What is it that he wants him to do? Look at verses 15-16:

Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever — ¹⁶no 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.

Why is this crucial? Paul could have given a lengthy lecture condemning slavery and sometimes Paul has been criticized by unbelievers for not having done so. But in fact, what Paul does is to cut slavery off at the knees! He gets right to the root of the issue of why slavery would exist in the first place and the easiest way to eradicate it. He says “welcome him back as a brother, not as a slave.” Why? Because if you think of another person as a brother, it is categorically impossible to think of him as a slave! If you treat someone as a brother, it is impossible to treat him as a slave! You can change our laws—and we should—but changing laws does not necessarily change hearts, which is what Paul wanted. Paul wants a permanent change. Going back to what Jesus taught, “whatever you do to others you do to me” means that to treat a person as a slave is as if you were treating Jesus as a slave, and to think of a person as a slave is as if you were thinking of Jesus as a slave. Christian, is that really what you want to do? You see how Paul is getting to the root of the matter?

There was a medallion at the time of the abolitionists which illustrates exactly the principle we are trying to get across. It shows a person in chains with the words, “Am I not a man and a brother?” How can someone treat a brother this way? It is because people back then were not thinking of some other people in this way. That is what Paul is after. He wants Philemon to transform his thinking due to a transformed heart.

Why does Paul say, “He is very dear to me but even dearer to you...”? How is he even dearer to Philemon? How is he useful to Philemon? It is because through Onesimus, Philemon is going to learn the lesson of a lifetime. By receiving him the way Paul is encouraging him to, he will learn at his most basic level how Christians treat other human

beings; how Christians relate to other human beings. This is going to be life transforming for Philemon. Look what he sees in verse 17—the same principle that Jesus relays in Matthew 25: “So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.” In other words, “If I, Paul, were to walk through that door, how would you receive me? Now, do exactly the same for him.” It is a whole different way of thinking. I can just hear Paul saying, “Brother Philemon, am I getting through to you? Do you understand what it means to be a disciple of Jesus? Do you understand that it is more than just being a believer? Is accepting Jesus just a matter of your opinion? If He is the Lord of your life, it means that He transforms the way in which you live your life. We are called to love one another as He loved us. Here is how you do it, Philemon!”

In verses 18-19, he shows Philemon how a Christian is to have a generous spirit. He says:

If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. ¹⁹I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self.

Paul reminds Philemon that he had come to Jesus because of Paul’s ministry. If Philemon can receive that level of blessing and grace in his life, surely he can offer it to Onesimus. When we look around, we see the tremendous blessings we have—on the world standard, they are unbelievable. Surely with the grace and mercy we have received, we should be able to share with others.

Finally we get to verses 20-22 where Paul says:

I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit 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. ²²And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers.

He is saying that if it is obligatory, Philemon will do only what he is told to do, but if his heart has been transformed, he will do things well beyond anything that Paul could ask because the Holy Spirit will work

through him, and when the Holy Spirit is working, the sky is the limit. Paul adds, “And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers.” Paul knows that he will be greatly pleased by Philemon when he arrives.

There is so much in this tiny, little letter; it is challenging and affirming at the same time. Affirming because in this recent crisis, this hurricane, so many of you have done just this: you have given of yourselves and you have done it in a loving, spontaneous, non-obligatory way. It is a tremendous witness to the community. Even my wife and I have received a tremendous outpouring of love from many of you in our own time of need. We have seen how the communities are pulling together in times of trouble; building relationships and strengthening the community. It all glorifies God in the process.

It is also challenging. Paul gives us the opportunity to examine very carefully all the relationships of our life, especially the strained ones. He gives us an opportunity to take an honest look at how we relate to strangers, especially those very different from ourselves. What is our default mode in ordinary times? What are our natural inclinations, habits, and attitudes? Do they reflect what Paul is trying to get across to Philemon and so to us? Paul’s letter gives us a great opportunity to make a major growth step in our Christian life, and I pray that all of us will continually allow our hearts to be open to the movement of the Spirit, to likewise do even more than what Paul would command, and to live a life where we can honestly, naturally and joyfully say, “He ain’t heavy, Father ... he’s m’ brother!” This is the vision of the kingdom. Grasp it! Live it! God will be glorified and served in ways that are beyond our imagination. ■