

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time: The Letter to Philemon and the New Way

Today I'd like to focus on the second reading, *the Letter of Paul to Philemon*. This is the shortest of Paul's letters. We only come upon this letter once every three years. Paul's epistles are usually quite theological with practical applications for the entire Church. The *Letter to Philemon* is closer to a letter one person would send to another. It was added to the New Testament, though, because it has an important insight into the Way Christians were to live.

Many times people reduce this letter to a discussion of Paul's view of slavery. It really has little to do with slavery, even though the subject of the letter, Onesimus, was a slave who had run away from his master Philemon. Now, as soon as you or I hear that Philemon was a Christian with a slave, we immediately question whether or not Philemon was really a Christian. That's because the word slave calls up in us the pictures of the poor African and Native Americans who were kidnaped from their homelands, or whose parents or ancestors were. Slavery as we have sadly experienced it in the history of our country involved beatings and tortures, separating parents from their children, and husbands and wives from each other, as well as other atrocities, basically treating the slaves as animals. Slavery like that did exist in the Roman empire, but it was mostly confined to the galleys and mines. Christians could not own that type of slave. But there were also many slaves with quite a different status in society. Some of these slaves were pedagogues, teachers, or servants. These slaves could have their own families. They could work side jobs, save up money and even purchase their own freedom.

Onesimus was this type of a slave. Only instead of working for his freedom, he ran away from his master. He also might have even stolen some of the Master's property. Onesimus escaped from Colossae in ancient Asia Minor, modern Turkey. He made his way to Rome. This was about 61-63 AD. In Rome, Onesimus heard about Paul and his teaching about the Christ. At this period in his life Paul was under a sort of house arrest. He could receive people, teach non Christians about Jesus, help individuals grow in faith. Paul converted Onesimus. When Paul learned that Onesimus' master, Philemon, was also a Christian, Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon along with a letter, much of which is in today's second reading. He tells Philemon to welcome Onesimus as a fellow Christian while at the same time forgiving him for running away.

The point of the letter is not about slavery. It is about a whole new way of living. In fact in its earliest days, Christianity was often called the Way. The Christian Way demands forgiveness for those who have offended the Christian.

It is easy for us to forgive some of those with whom we have had minor disagreements. There are always squabbles within families. We realize that ultimately there are two sides to every story and that we very might well have a share of the blame. However, it is not so easy to forgive someone who has unjustly offended us or

one of our loved ones. In this case, it takes a lot of courage and determination to really be a Christian. Paul's letter is scripture because it calls us to have a different view of life, one that forgives those who have unjustly hurt us.

I think all of us have heard about people who are willing to forgive even after being unjustly attacked. One of the greatest examples of this determined Christianity took place after the horrible attack on children at an Amish School in Nickel Mines, PA. in 2006. Sadly, there have been so many mass killing that this attack might be buried as just one of many atrocities. But it was very different than many of the others in the reaction of the families and friends of the victims. You might remember that a man, Charles Roberts, who was not Amish, burst into the one room school house, sent away the boys and adults and then commenced shooting ten little girls before taking his own life. Five girls were killed, the other five were critically wounded. In the days that followed, it wasn't the hate of the killer, but the forgiveness of the victim's families that became the center of the story. The Grandfather of one of the victims said, "We must not think evil of this man." Another Amish father noted, "He had a mother and a wife and his own children." An Amish neighbor comforted the Roberts family hours after the shooting and extended forgiveness to them. One Amish man held Roberts' sobbing father in his arms for almost an hour to comfort him. The Amish set up a charitable fund for the family of the shooter. Some even attended Roberts' funeral.

A reporter mentioned to one of the grandfathers that he was shocked at how the Amish reacted. The man responded, "We are Christians. We are not allowed to hate."

Nor are we.

Now, I am sure that many of us have had people who have unjustly attacked us or our loved ones. A stranger attacked me once looking for money. When I was in a religious congregation, one of my superiors really tried to make my life difficult. Years later on the evening before I was ordained a priest, he knocked on my door in the seminary and apologized for the way he treated me. I told him that it was water under the bridge, but with all the excitement of the ordination, I never really thoroughly forgave him. About five years ago I was making a retreat down in the seminary when I felt overwhelmed by my own guilt over those I had hurt throughout my life. I stayed awake all night. When I got up early in the morning I knew what I had to do. I went to the chapel and prayed for that priest who really I had not thoroughly forgiven. And then I could seek forgiveness for anyone I had hurt.

I am sure that many of you have your own battle stories. I am sure that you also realize the weight of living the Christian way. This way of ours, this way of Christians, is a way that is still hidden from much of the world including many Christians. Someone once said to me, "Father, I am taking this grudge to the grave." My response was, "Well, that will fix him." You have heard this saying, and it is true: *Vengeance and hatred are poisons we prepare for others and then drink ourselves.*

Do we have to forgive and forget? Well, we have to forgive, but prudence tells

us not to forget, and certainly not to put ourselves into a situation where we or our loved ones can be attacked. The homeless man who was given a painting job by Elizabeth Smart's father in Salt Lake City and who then abducted and brutalized 14 year old Elizabeth for nine months can be forgiven, but his life sentence without parole has justly removed him from society. Elizabeth has spent the last twenty years as an advocate for missing persons and victims of sexual assault. She said she has forgiven her captors, even though she knows they are not sorry for what they did to her, and they need to remain in prison, where her testimony put them. What if the man were to be released from prison. Should Elizabeth's father hire him to paint his grandchildren's house? I think not. The man may be forgiven, but Elizabeth's father would need to use prudence and not forget what the man was capable of doing and offer him a job painting his grandchildren's house. I am not aware of any part of the bible that says "forget," but that does not mean we should refuse to forgive.

At its basis, the *Letter to Philemon* is stating that the way of the Christian is very different than the way of the world. The way of the Christian is the way of love and forgiveness. It is the way of Jesus Christ who from the cross, being tortured to death, mustered up the strength to say, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Jesus was the kindest person to ever live. And he said, "Follow me."