

A businessman is traveling alone through unfamiliar territory. He is out in the middle of nowhere and his car dies. Fortunately, he can make out a structure in the distance. He sets out on foot and eventually reaches a small, poor farm. The farmer welcomes him, gives him food and drink, but is unable to help him with the car. However, he does offer his donkey for transportation to the nearest town where he can get help. Most thankful, the businessman accepts but needs some instruction about the donkey. The farmer explains that it is a Christian donkey, and to make him go you must say, "Thank God." To go faster, say "Thank God, thank God." And to go faster still, 'Thank God, thank God, thank God.' The businessman tells him he understands. "And how do I stop the donkey?" "You must say, 'Amen'." "OK, got it," the man says, in a hurry to leave so he can reach the town before nightfall.

The man mounts the donkey, halfheartedly says, "Thank God," and the donkey slowly starts out. The man is impressed, but wanting to go faster, he tries "Thank God, thank God," and sure enough, the little donkey picks up speed. This is working great, he thinks. And then, not wanting to be caught on the unfamiliar trail in the dark, he encourages the donkey to go faster by saying "Thank God" three times, and off they zoom! The man feels confident that they will reach the town quickly, but then realizes they have wandered off the trail and are fast approaching a cliff. In a panic, the man cannot remember how to stop the donkey. "Stop, WHOA, SLOW DOWN," he yells. And then he remembers it's a Christian donkey and shouts AMEN! With that the animal stops, inches from the edge of the cliff. The man takes a deep breath, and filled with a rush of relief and gratitude, the businessman utters, from the depths of his being, "Thank God!"

I'm switching my focus today to the second reading from Paul's letter to Philemon. I've actually never preached on this letter before – but I've always thought that there was a great homily in there somewhere! For the last 40 years I have been filing bits and pieces away, waiting for the homily to finally emerge. You'll have to judge whether or not I should have kept on collecting for something better than this – but here goes. This letter to Philemon is actually a personal letter – the only one contained in the Bible – written to a friend of Paul's with a name I've never been asked to give to a child in baptism! At the time, slavery was legal in the Roman empire, and Philemon had a slave named Onesimus, another name that doesn't get much play with parents of newborns these days. Onesimus means 'useful.' Scholars have various opinions on the details behind the letter, but the largest amount of agreement seems to be that Onesimus had stolen something from his master Philemon and then run away. As it was in our own nation, to be a runaway slave was a serious event.

Paul met Onesimus while they were both in prison, probably in Rome, and somehow, under Paul's influence, this runaway slave became a follower of Christ. It must have awakened a great hope in Onesimus to hear of a God who welcomes the outcast home, who restores the broken, who loves the least and lost with grace and forgiveness. But Paul did not offer to Onesimus an easy grace, a cheap forgiveness devoid of responsibility to those offended. Yes, God forgave Onesimus, but now there was still work to be done to restore the relationship with his master Philemon. Seeking that forgiveness would be much riskier, to be sure. But Onesimus had inflicted a wound on Philemon, and that wound needed to be healed, both for the sake of Onesimus and for Philemon. For in such cases, both parties carry the damage, and both parties need to be set free from its load.

There was only one way to set this failure right again, and that was to send Onesimus back to face Philemon. We can well imagine that this scenario did not thrill Onesimus when Paul proposed it. This matter

had to be settled in a way that satisfied both the demands of justice and grace. But one thing was for sure, the answer was not for Onesimus to continue running or hiding. Such a strategy makes the failure attach permanently to the soul. Paul knew that Onesimus would never really be over his mistake if he had to be looking over his shoulder, or dreading the day he might see Philemon again. He had to go back and face the one he had wronged.

It is clear that Paul had grown quite fond of Onesimus. But Paul had a huge dilemma. Legally Onesimus belonged to a man named Philemon. And as life would have it, Paul and Philemon were good friends. They had met in Colossae. Philemon was a devout follower of Christ – a house church actually met in his home. (adapted from DYNAMIC PREACHING, July-August, 2010, p. 63-64)

So here's Paul's dilemma: should he send Onesimus back to Philemon as the law dictates? Runaway slaves could be put to death or, at least suffer harsh punishment. Now we might think that this is no dilemma at all. Philemon is a Christian. Case closed. Surely he will forgive him – and even set him free. I wish it were that simple. It ought to be. Unfortunately many Christians through the centuries have been able to rationalize lots of bad and immoral behaviors – even the owning of slaves. It happened here in America – even the Jesuits owned slaves at Georgetown University. You may have read about the wonderful and generous steps the Jesuits have made to make compensation to those slaves' descendants.

It's amazing how many terrible attitudes and actions can be rationalized in the name of the law – or religion. Philemon was part of a society that condoned owning other human beings. If Philemon acted kindly toward a runaway slave, he would likely be ostracized by his friends who were also slave-owners. The issue seems to be black and white to us – no pun intended – but it was not that black and white to the people of the first century. And again, there is the issue that apparently Onesimus stole something from Philemon before he ran away. Philemon may have had many reasons for not feeling too kindly toward Onesimus. But Paul wants to do the right thing, and to give Philemon the opportunity to do the right thing as well. So Paul sends Onesimus back to Philemon with a letter, this letter, the little book of Philemon. He asks Philemon to welcome Onesimus back not as a slave, but as a brother in Christ. Paul even makes a little play on words with regard to Onesimus' name. He says "Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful (Onesimus) both to you and to me." (adapted from GRACEWORKS, 5 September 2004)

OK, so what? Second, Christ has done this for millions of people down through the ages. Christ has changed us from useless to useful. Paul is asking Philemon to give Onesimus a second chance. Our faith is the faith of the second chance. This is the very heart of our theology. This is what the cross is all about. We were all – every one of us – useless at one time or another. But Christ gave His life to make us useful to God. We don't have to be a criminal, a prostitute or a runaway slave to qualify for a second chance. Sometimes we can be wealthy, educated, cultured – while at the same time being prideful, snobbish, stingy, unforgiving, judgmental, condescending – and qualify for a second chance. Second chances are why Christ came into the world. (all of the above adapted from DYNAMIC PREACHING, July-Sept 2010, Vol XXVI #3, p. 63-64)

But we need to realize that PHILEMON is being given a second chance as well as Onesimus. How did Philemon respond to Paul's request that he be lenient with Onesimus? Did he have his former slave punished? Did he cave in to the peer pressure of his friends and fellow slave owners? Did he grant Onesimus his freedom so that he might return to help Paul in his ministry? We don't know. Scripture does not say. Legend has it that Onesimus later became bishop of Ephesus; there in fact WAS a bishop of Ephesus named so. But Onesimus was not an unusual name back then. It may or may not have been this runaway slave.

Third. We know that Philemon bore the name Christian – but did he also bear Christ’s heart? Did he forgive his former slave or not? It’s a question for each of us, and at the heart of why we come here on Sundays. We are trying to take on the heart of Christ – for the sake of the world. It’s easy for us to say we are Christians – we may even think coming to Church every Sunday makes us so. But sitting in church on Sundays doesn’t make us Christians -- any more than sitting in a garage would make us cars! How Christ-like are our hearts?

I suspect that each of us has somebody in our sphere of influence that we are a bit hard on. It may be a family member or a neighbor or a co-worker. At some time or another in the past that person has offended us or hurt us or betrayed us. And we have a difficult time forgiving. We act civilly perhaps, but deep down we are distrustful, resentful, and we have a hard time keeping it from showing. Maybe it does show. Maybe our temper flares more easily with this person than it does with others. Maybe we find that they get on our nerves far more quickly than others.

We can think to ourselves – that person doesn’t deserve another chance. That may be true. But neither did we deserve another chance when Christ forgave us and accepted us – over and over again throughout our lives. Maybe Philemon’s letter is asking us to reconsider and bring that person’s situation before God and let God decide. It may be the hardest thing that as a Christian we are called upon to do – to forgive someone who has done us wrong, but we see in the New Testament, that this is exactly what Christ calls upon us to do. We even have it enshrined in the Lord’s prayer from the lips of Jesus Himself: “Forgive us our trespasses, *as we forgive those who trespass against us.*”

Mahatma Gandhi once said, “The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attitude of the strong.” He’s right. Are we strong enough to forgive? Are we strong enough to give someone else a second chance? God does it for us every day. We need to do the same for others. Amen. (last point adapted from DYNAMIC PREACHING, IBID, p. 66-67)