

## The Costs and Gifts of Discipleship

Sermon preached at the Church of St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA

By The Rev. Thomas C. Pumphrey, September 4, 2016

Year C, Proper 18: Philemon 1-20, Luke 14:25-33

*Philemon 1-20 (NRSV): Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.*

*For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ.*

*Luke 14:25-33 (NRSV): Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’ Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.*

Today’s scripture readings all address what some have called “the cost of discipleship.” This term might be a little misleading, but let’s stay with it for a while. As we do, we’ll discover the gifts of discipleship as well, and how they outweigh the costs. In one lesson, we read about three verses short of an entire book of the Bible. Paul’s letter to Philemon<sup>1</sup> is the shortest of Paul’s letters that have been preserved in the New Testament, and we only hear from Philemon in our lectionary (the calendar of Sunday readings) once every three years—and today is the day. Philemon is a beautiful letter, showing Paul’s great kindness. But Paul is very subtle in this letter, and the impact of this letter is easy to miss if you don’t know the context.

Paul is in prison—he’s probably in Rome, and though he might be on house arrest, he is imprisoned for preaching the Good news of Jesus Christ. Paul writes a letter to the church in

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<sup>1</sup> Though there are variations, Philemon is traditionally pronounced “Fie-LEE-mon” (rhyming with “pie-tree-mon”). Onesimus is pronounced “Oh-NEH-si-mus.”

Colossae, in particular to a man named Philemon and his colleagues and the church in Philemon's house. Remember that at that time there were no church buildings—the church is the assembly of Christians—in this case those Christians that meet in Philemon's house. Philemon must be a rich patron to be able to gather a group of people in his house.

Without the Postal Service that we enjoy today, Paul must send the letter by a courier. In this case, he sends the letter with someone he knows, someone Paul calls his 'son in Christ'—a man named Onesimus. So Onesimus shows up in Colossae, at Philemon's house, and he delivers this letter for Philemon to read in the presence of Archipus and Apphia and the church in Philemon's house.

What is not obvious to you from the beginning is this: Onesimus is Philemon's slave. Onesimus is Philemon's *runaway* slave. Onesimus is Philemon's runaway slave who, perhaps, has *stolen* from Philemon. In the Roman Empire, the penalty for such actions by a slave is death. So now, how does this scene look and feel to you, when Onesimus returns to Philemon, and hands him this letter to be read in front of the church—a letter from Paul asking Philemon to welcome Onesimus back—and not as a slave, but as a brother in Christ?

Paul is subtle and a bit crafty—how could Philemon refuse? But Paul, setting an example for him, begs him out of love, rather than command him out of duty. Paul sets Philemon free to respond, asking that Philemon set Onesimus free as well. And if Onesimus has stolen anything, Paul will pay for it (though Paul artfully mentions—"I say nothing of you owing me even your own self.").

The letter to Philemon is an amazing display, in short form, of the cost of discipleship and the gifts of discipleship. What are the costs of being a disciple of Jesus Christ? Paul is in prison for preaching the good news. Onesimus risks losing his life when he returns to his master. And Philemon must give up his pride, his privilege, and his so-called "property" in order to welcome Onesimus as his brother in Christ.

The passage we heard this morning from the Gospel according to Luke also speaks about the costs of discipleship—in even stronger terms. This section is part of a longer section in Luke where Jesus challenges the crowds who are following him to Jerusalem. He wants them to know that being his disciple is not something chosen for self-interest or self-gain or social advantage, but out of deep love for God. Now he puts the message in stark contrast that love of God should come before even love of family or tribe or nation—even before life itself.

Of course, we shouldn't take this piece of scripture (or any piece of scripture) out of context from the whole Bible. These words stand out in order to grab our attention. They stand out because we know what Jesus says about hate and love—including loving your enemy. Jesus does not want us to hate. But Jesus knows what happens when we idolize our family or tribe or nation. Jesus knows what many of us have discovered—that when we put love of family ahead of love of God—when we idolize our families—we set in motion destructive results.

Without God as top priority, we sometimes forget what the standard of love looks like, and family relationships become destructive. Some parents, claiming their children as top priority, obsess about the perfection and performance of their children, over-programming their lives and making evaluation and academic and athletic success more valuable than their children themselves. Some parents, in the name of love, spoil their children by shielding them from responsibilities and challenges, and shielding them from the example of generosity to others. Some parents give their children every luxury, except the luxury of boundaries and discipline. Even worse, some spouses, caught-up in co-dependent relationships, tolerate horrible abuse rather than hold their spouse to account.

When a child or a spouse or a relationship of any sort becomes an idol, when our relationships are not formed by our relationship with God, the result is adversity and relational disease—not the gifts of love. However, if we love God first—even above our nation and our family, then we learn how to love our neighbor, our father and mother, husband or wife, brother and sister, and yes, life itself. We learn how to love rightly when we love God first. We learn even to challenge others to love rightly—as Paul challenged Philemon. When Jesus challenges the crowd, he is on his way to Jerusalem, where he will give up his own life. But he knows that through that price, God will bless the whole world, and that his resurrection and ours will follow.

So Jesus calls us to a higher standard, one that comes with the costs of giving up old dependencies, and accepting the amazing gifts that God has for us. Discipleship has costs and gifts: Paul in prison, Onesimus risking death or return to slavery, Philemon giving up his pride and privilege, Jesus giving his life. But Jesus goes on to resurrection and glory. Paul knows freedom in Christ despite his imprisonment. Onesimus shows the grace of God and faith in him, and Philemon has the opportunity to be a witness to the life-changing grace of God, and to be free from his own slavery to his possessions.

So what about for us? What are the costs and gifts of discipleship for us? Perhaps Discipleship costs Sunday mornings. Perhaps love of God means giving up our passion for money and control. Discipleship means ordering our lives around God's generosity instead of keeping up with the Jones' in order to expand our luxuries. Perhaps Discipleship costs turning away from that habit of sin in our life that we've dodged or denied or hidden. Discipleship certainly costs time: time to pray each day, time to study and learn about God together, time to serve the world around you with more than just a token of your energy.

In many ways, these costs aren't so much costs as they are a re-prioritizing of our lives. In God's economy, we only get what we pay for when we're shopping for substitutes for God. When we're looking for God, the price is already paid by Jesus. We need simply to open ourselves to the gifts that God has for us.

What are the gifts of discipleship? They are too many to describe, for they are rich beyond compare with what we call "costs." The gifts are life and wholeness, authentic relationships of

trust and trustworthiness in our homes and offices and schools and in our church family. The gifts are freedom from the insatiable power of our wealth—freedom to be generous and share our gifts in life-changing ways.

The biggest gift of all is the source of that wholeness and generosity—the gift of God’s amazing and extravagant love for us. Each of you here today has experienced even in a small amount, the way in which God’s love makes a difference in your life. The more you open yourself to God, and clear away the detritus that blocks you from God, the more you will see a visible and concrete transformation in your life.

So what about Paul and Philemon and Onesimus? Paul, as we know, continued to witness to the power of God in his life and his freedom in Christ even in prison. Paul changed the lives of many, slaves and free. We can’t say for sure what happened to Philemon and Onesimus, but we do know that the church in Colossae kept Paul’s letter and shared his letter for us to read. And we know that one of the earliest bishops in the church was a free man named Onesimus.

The love of God frees us from our bondage, and gives new life—in literal and powerful ways. God calls us to pay the costs of discipleship so that we might know more fully the gifts already ours in our life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ.