

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Year C

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Psalm 1

Philemon 1-21

Luke 14:25-33

09/08/2019

### **Gospel**

The Holy Gospel according to St. Luke:

25 Now large crowds were traveling with [Jesus;] and he turned and said to them,  
26 "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. 27 Whoever does not  
carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. 28 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? 29 Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to  
finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, 30 saying, 'This fellow began to build and  
was not able to finish.' 31 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? 32 If he cannot, then, while the other is  
still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. 33 So therefore,  
none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."

The Gospel of our Lord

**Prayer**

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

**Trickery**

Good morning! Have you ever been tricked? For instance, my sister's ex-boyfriend had her convinced once that when the car was in neutral it floated on the road. Those are goofy tricks, but how about tricky questions? What is always coming but never arrives? Tomorrow! What can be broken but is never held? A promise! What is it that lives if it is fed, and dies if you give it a drink? A fire! One more; what breaks and never falls, and what falls and never breaks? Day breaks and night falls! Now those are some fun little riddles. But they all present a similar theme; a proficiency in words. And that is exactly what we have in our second reading, Paul's letter to Philemon. This is the shortest of all of Paul's letters and it's unique in that while it is written for a community, it is addressed to an individual: Philemon. Take a look at page 167 in the New Testament in your pew Bibles. By the end of this sermon you will have read an entire book of the Bible! This short book serves as a masterpiece in Christian writing showing us the power of persuasion that Paul can put forth.

Here is what you need to know. Paul is writing to a man named Philemon about a runaway slave named Onesimus. Philemon has become an important part of Paul's ministry and has some level of leadership in the community. Onesimus has apparently run away and become a companion of Paul's throughout their ministry, especially while Paul was in prison. Paul is writing Philemon asking that he release Onesimus.

*“Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, 2to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:”*<sup>1</sup> Right away Paul begins by drawing attention to his lowly state as a prisoner, maybe trying to make a connection between a prisoner and a slave.

*“3Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 4When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God 5because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. 6I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. 7I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.”*<sup>2</sup> He has some good things to say about the ministry that Philemon has helped with and about Philemon’s character. Paul even goes so far as to call Philemon a brother!

*“8For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, 9yet 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.”*<sup>3</sup> Now here is what I love about Paul. He’s backed Philemon into a corner. He’s already talked about the great work that Philemon has done, and now he reminds him that given Paul’s role as a teacher and leader in the church that Philemon occupies, Paul could very well demand

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<sup>1</sup> Philemon 1-2 NRSV

<sup>2</sup> Philemon 3-7 NRSV

<sup>3</sup> Philemon 8-9 NRSV

that Philemon comply, but, Paul says, he won't, he'll give the man a "chance" to save face and make the decision himself.

What's also important to remember is that this letter would have arrived via Onesimus, and would have been read for the first time publicly in the house church/congregation that Philemon was a part of. So imagine the awkwardness of the situation, the returned slave shows up with a letter from Paul to be read to the whole congregation, and they stand around together waiting to see what was said! Paul basically publicly makes sure that Philemon will comply with his request.

*"10I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. 11Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me"*<sup>4</sup> Here is where you need to know one little word in Greek. The name Onesimus in the Greek language means "beneficial or useful."<sup>5</sup> Paul is making a play on the meaning of Onesimus' name, twisting it around to say that Onesimus has become useful to Paul after he was no longer useful to Philemon.

*"12I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you."*<sup>6</sup> Come on! Now Paul is just laying it on!

*"13I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; 14but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. 15Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you*

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<sup>4</sup> Philemon 10-11 NRSV

<sup>5</sup>Bartlett, David L., and Barbara B. Taylor. *Feasting on the Word*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. p. 39.

<sup>6</sup> Philemon 12 NRSV

*might have him back forever, 16no 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.”*<sup>7</sup> He preferred to do nothing without Philemon’s consent, which is a polite way for Paul to remind him that he could very well do whatever he wanted!

*“17So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. 18If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. 19I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self.”*<sup>8</sup> Can you imagine anyone actually demanding Paul pay? It would be like the Presiding Bishop showing up at my house for dinner and telling me to just send her a bill for the food. It’s just fantastic, and just for good measure, Paul reminds him that he has never charged for the many things he has done in their community. There is NO WAY Philemon is going to demand a payment!

*“20Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. 21Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.”*<sup>9</sup> This is where the assigned text for this Sunday ends, but it leaves out the best part! Take a look at verse 22 in your pew Bibles.

*22One thing more — prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you.”*<sup>10</sup> Just to make sure there is no doubt what Paul wants, he slides this in at the very end, as if to say “I’m coming to check up on you

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<sup>7</sup> Philemon 13-16 NRSV

<sup>8</sup> Philemon 17-19 NRSV

<sup>9</sup> Philemon 20-21 NRSV

<sup>10</sup> Philemon 22 NRSV

soon!” And so ends one of the greatest pieces of church rhetoric ever to be written. You just have to love the guts that Paul had! He puts Philemon into a position where he can save face, but leaves no doubt as to what decision he needs to make. Tricky... genius!

Which brings us to today’s baptism. Mia will be baptized in just a few moments and will be welcomed into this congregation. There might come a time in her life where as a community we need to be a little tricky, where we politely show her the way of life that she has been called to in her baptism. When we walk together as a community, sometimes we need to help one another along, pushing us towards the right decision. That is the lesson of Philemon, and that is what we can learn from Paul. Amen.