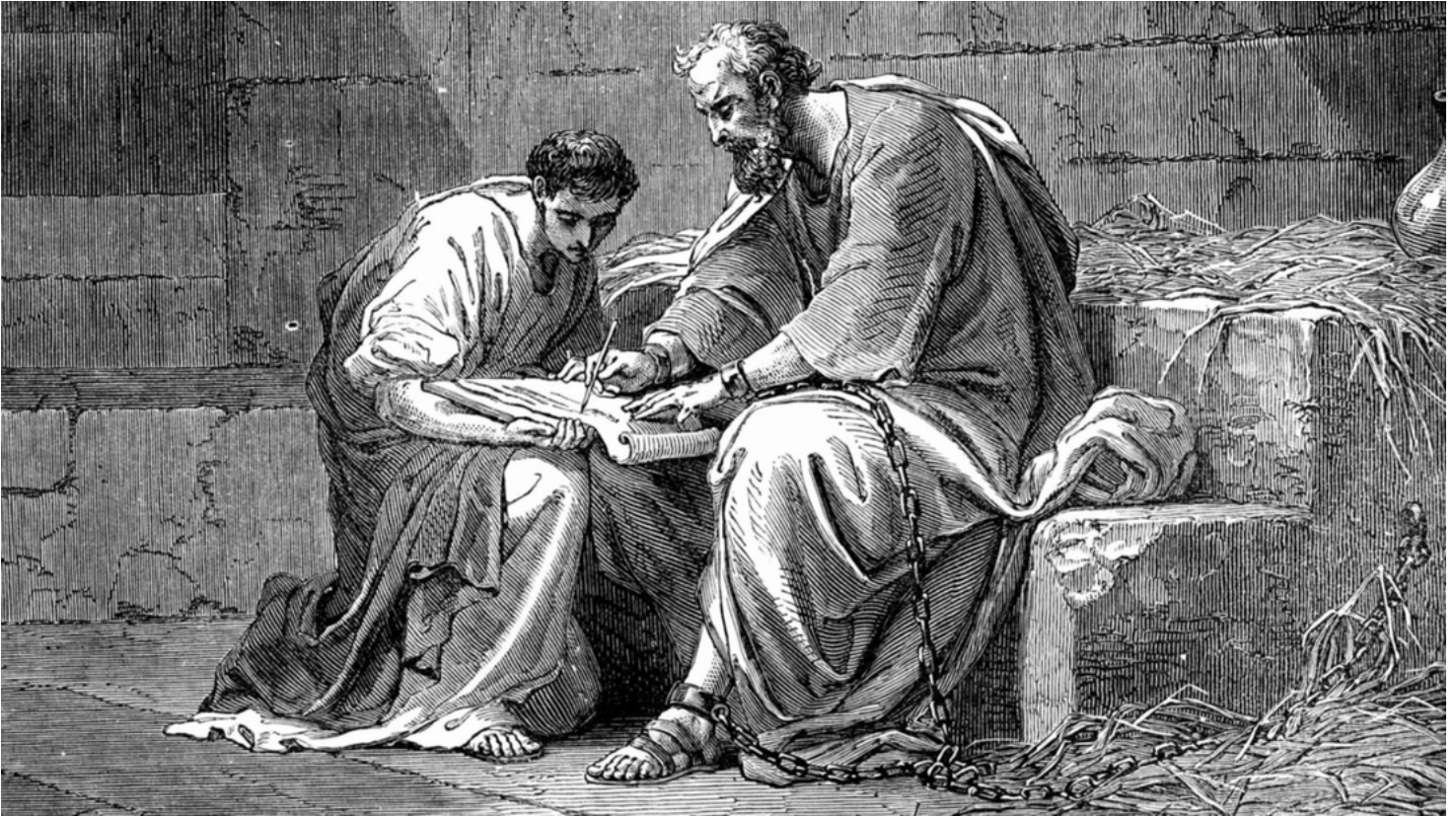


Communion

9/4/2022

Rev. Jeff Mansfield



Preaching on:

Philemon 1:1–21

If you go out into the world, you'll find that a lot of people well, maybe not a lot, but a lot more people than just Christians read the Bible. And there's good reason to read the Bible. There is some of the greatest works of literature, amazing stories, incredible theological treatises that have defined Western culture. You know, you think about something like the gospel according to John, I think the majority of people have read it at least once. They know a little bit about that struggle between the light and the darkness there in the beginning, or you think about the Nook of Job and that grand mythological story of the deal between God and the devil, the bet that they play, job's incredible suffering and his endurance, the friends that come along and give him all kinds of bad advice, but he holds on until God comes to give him an answer, and the answer is just another mystery. The story of Jonah being swallowed up by a whale, because he's trying to run away from God's commands. Just these incredible stories. And Paul wrote the Epistle to the Romans all about faith and grace that has defined Christian theology on both sides of the issue for hundreds of years.

Not many people who are familiar with the Bible as a work of great literature are familiar with Paul's letter to Philemon. It is a tiny little thing. Nikki read almost the entirety. There's just a few more lines saying goodbye at the end. It's not a great work of literature. There's not some amazing story. There's no theological pronouncements in it. But I think for us as Christians, people who read the Bible on the inside of the faith, there is more to the book of Philemon than there is maybe to some of the other books that are considered to be the great books of the Bible. And the reason for that is that this is a book all about relationship, a letter about relationship, a personal letter from Paul.

The context here is that Paul has been apparently imprisoned at this time. We're not entirely sure about exactly what that means perhaps it was while he was in prison in Rome. We know that he was imprisoned multiple times during his ministry. A friend of his, from some Christian community that he apparently founded or was close to named Philemon has given Paul one of his slaves to serve him while he is in prison in his ministry. Presumably Philemon is a Christian and so is Onesimus. The slave is a Christian. During this time, Paul becomes incredibly close in his relationship to Onesimus and he writes a letter back to Philemon saying, I am sending Onesimus back to you. He's your slave. And I could tell you what to do. I could command you, but I'm not going to do it. I'm going to let you decide to do the right thing. But I want you to free him. I want him to become more than a slave to you. Give him his freedom, let him go. Paul sits in the middle of a relationship between Onesimus the slave and Philemon the slave master, both Christians, both friends to him. And there he is in the midst of it, trying to work out God's will, God's love, God's vision of heaven on earth, and it's not easy to do.

Paul had, was familiar with slavery and he wrote about slavery in some of his letters. Paul wrote this, one of the most incredible lines in the entire Bible, "In Christ, there is no male or female, no Jew or Gentile, no slave or free." In other words, in Christ all of our social distinctions are obliterated. We are equal. We are children of God. And there's no reason that a church shouldn't have members who are male and female, shouldn't have members who are slave and free, shouldn't presumably have leaders and deacons who come from all of these different backgrounds, Jew, and Gentile, all together. He saw this, the church, as a little bit of a vision of what heaven must look like, where all the distinctions are taken away, and we can all be one body of Christ together. But at the same time, Paul wasn't a radical, he wasn't a revolutionary. He wasn't saying let's overthrow the power structure. Let's get rid of the Roman empire, let's end slavery all together and fight to the death until we get what's right. Paul kind of sat in the middle. Paul believed that Christ was coming back and coming back soon. So he didn't necessarily think that the world order was something that needed to be changed. He kind of just said, well, let's just let the world order be and have a spiritual revolution within our churches and within ourselves. So he was kind of in the middle.

But then he writes this letter and this letter isn't a theoretical theological letter. It is a practical letter, a practical explanation of what it is actually like to be a Christian who is in relationship. This letter doesn't answer for us, "What should I, as a Christian, think about slavery? Is slavery, right? Or is slavery

wrong?” Instead, it gives us something more. It answers for us, “What must I as a Christian do in relationship to slavery, in relationship to injustice, in relationship to people on two sides of an issue who are in conflict with one another?”

And the answer of Philemon is that a Christian always acts in relationship. That's who we are. It's interesting because we recently had a church council retreat just a few weeks ago as I was coming back from my paternity leave. We put a lot of time into planning and preparing it. It was a two day event for the church council. The first day was a Friday event and it was a time to come together and just sort of have community and eat food together and enjoy one another's company. And we had a few prompts for discussion, and we were talking about how the world had changed in the last three years after COVID and what we had lost and how the church had changed and what our hopes were for the future. And in the course of that amazing Holy Spirit filled conversation, we came to an understanding of ourselves as a church—that we are a church that defines itself by our relationships with one another. And that the most important thing to us as a church is the relationships that we maintain within our community and the relationships that we are growing out into the community around us. And everything else, no matter how amazing the event is, how important the issue or the mission is, what's most important is that we can be together in relationship to one another.

There's a couple of different ways of thinking about relationship. One is a word that we use around here all the time, and you hear it. It's a very Christian word, and it's the word fellowship. Right? We say this all the time, we have a fellowship hour, we have a fellowship hall and we often want to get together just to have fellowship, right? And fellowship is a beautiful part of relating to one another. Fellowship is being together, speaking to one another, listening to someone. And I think fellowship is even more. It's also serving someone, helping someone, being there for someone, being there for someone in their time of need.

And fellowship is really kind of the ground level of a relationship, but there is an aspect of relationship that goes deeper than fellowship. And I think that in Christianity we call that level of relationship communion. Well, fellowship is being together, helping one another, loving one another. Communion is being transformed by one another. It's about opening yourself to someone so completely that you let them change your mind, change your point of view. It's about being so open to someone that you take on their pain as your pain and their dreams as your dreams.

We're going to be having communion up here at the altar in just a few minutes. And a lot of the time we think about communion as my relationship to God, right? I'm gonna come down the aisle, I'm going to get the bread and the juice, and I'm gonna get right with God. I'm gonna be forgiven for my sins. And I'm going to reconnect with my God. And it doesn't matter what's happening with the person behind me in line. And it doesn't matter what happens to the person in front of me in line. But in reality, what this sacrament is about, the sacrament that we're going to do later on in the morning, it's about broken bread and a shared cup. It's about doing something that transforms us from individuals, looking

for our personal relationship with God, into a community that is holding one another up, listening to one another, loving one another and letting the Holy Spirit come in between these relationships and transform all of us from a bunch of individuals, into a church, into the body of Christ.

And that's exactly what we see Paul modeling for us in this letter to Philemon. Paul enters into a relationship with Onesimus and he lets that relationship change him. It changes him so much that Paul who said, "Hey, you know, don't worry about slavery. Don't worry about this world too much. It's the spiritual things that matter," that he wrote this letter to Philemon and said free Onesimus from slavery. And Paul, wasn't afraid to be in relationship to Philemon. He didn't say, well Onesimus is a slave and Philemon is a slave master, therefore I'm only going to be in relationship with Onesimus and I'm done with Philemon because he's a jerk who doesn't do the right thing. He came to him with the same kind of transformative love that Onesimus brought to him.

I think that this is the piece of Christian wisdom and practice that our churches and our wider culture need right now, the understanding that conflict and difference and disagreements do not have to be the end of our relationship or the end of our fellowship. If we let the Holy Spirit in and if we are willing to be changed by God and by our neighbors, then now is the time when communion actually can happen in our world and in our lives. It begins here with us. Are we as a church going to turn aside from our relationships when they make us uncomfortable? Are we going to hold back on giving our opinions because we're afraid that our opinions might offend someone? Are we going to walk away from a community of fellowship out of a desire for a more ideologically, pure community where nobody thinks differently than I do?

Or will we break the bread? Will we share the cup? And will we allow ourselves to be transformed by one another into what God is calling us to be?