



## The Most Fascinating People: Onesimus

TEXT  
Philemon

June 7, 2015 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Onesimus: His name means “useful.” He is a central figure in this, the shortest letter of the apostle Paul — just 335 words in the Greek. “Useful” is a good name for a slave, and that’s what Onesimus was. I say that’s *what* he was and not *who* he was because “slave” is always a less-than-human designation.

Onesimus’ master was a man named Philemon. Here’s some backstory. Onesimus had escaped or was sent away. We don’t know how, but somehow he had gotten away from his master. And while away, Onesimus spent time with Paul and became a Christian. So now Paul, Onesimus the slave and Philemon the slave master are all part of the church.

Here are some things we know about slavery in the ancient world: “Owners had exclusive rights over slaves, including the legal right to inflict punishment and even death.”<sup>1</sup> Estimates place the slave population in the Greco-Roman world at 30 percent of total population.<sup>2</sup> Fugitive slaves were legally bound to be returned. One who harbored a fugitive could be charged with theft.<sup>3</sup>

Paul sends Onesimus back to Philemon carrying this letter.

Some believe that Paul is just following Roman law; a fugitive must be returned. But a careful read of this letter reveals Onesimus may have been a slave, but he is now their brother. Paul pushed this letter through the prison bars, hoping it would reshape how Philemon lives. The church has pushed this same letter through the centuries, hoping to reshape how we see each other. “Slave” and “free” are not gospel categories. The letter invites Philemon to change.

Onesimus was on the road to the congregation that worshipped in Philemon’s house. Onesimus’ future depended on this letter. The fact that Onesimus carries this letter to Philemon tells me that Onesimus had more faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ than I have. To carry this letter is to live the hope that Philemon, by the power of the gospel, might see his former slave not as a slave, but as a brother in Christ.

Do you think people can change?

My grandparents on my father’s side lived in a small South Carolina village named Batesburg. They lived there for the better part of 70 years, I guess, and most of that time

Dr. Johnston<sup>4</sup> was the only doctor in the village. Dr. Johnston did everything from giving flu shots, to delivering babies on occasion. He set his share of broken bones and even pulled a few teeth in the early days. Things weren’t so specialized like they are today. Today you get an orthopedic doctor to set your broken arm; which doctor you get is determined by whether you broke your right arm or your left arm. But Dr. Johnston did everything — until he retired. Dr. Shealy took over his practice. Dr. Shealy had grown up in Batesburg. He had gone off to college among the Ivy Leaguers and had his medical training from Johns Hopkins or some such.

But when my grandfather needed a checkup, for the first time in his life, he paid the extra gas money to drive to Columbia to see a doctor. “Why don’t you just go see Dr. Shealy?” I asked.

My grandfather said, “I’ve known that Shealy boy since he was a boy, and he wasn’t a very good boy either.”

“Well, Boss, he’s not a boy anymore, and he’s a doctor.”

“Well, I don’t know about that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you know that he had to repeat Mrs. Amick’s fourth

grade class? He didn't know his numbers."

"Great day, Boss, he graduated from Harvard."

"I'm not going to get any doctoring from somebody who can't get out of the fourth grade. Didn't know his numbers, that's what Mrs. Amick said."

My grandfather, even when presented with the facts, was very suspicious that anyone could change.

Onesimus never speaks a word in this letter, but he was a man of deep faith. He trusted that the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ could change Philemon's heart.

Do you believe that can happen?

In this service, we have a prayer of confession. Sometimes I am pretty casual about that prayer. I'm a good guy; you are great people. Let's just skip it. I suppose I feel that way some weeks; but other weeks it's the part of worship I hold on to.

There are some weeks that I know I have hurt others, sometimes some of you. I have said the wrong thing or said it the wrong way. I have failed to see what was really going on, or I have done something that is careless. And someone I love was hurt.

It's hard to live with those kinds of failings. When we have disappointed others, particularly when they are those we love the most, it keeps us up at night.

The Christian practice of confession is not just listing our failings; it is a plea to God to change me because I don't know how to do it on my own. God, help me change. As hard as it is

to trust that God can change us, it is even more difficult to trust that God can or will change someone else. But it is just such a trust in the power of the gospel that puts Onesimus on the road back to Philemon's house.

There is little doubt that this short letter would have been read in Philemon's home, with all the members of his church gathered there. And the letter starts out fabulously: "Philemon, 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."

There is an obvious and genuine affection between Paul and Philemon. Paul calls Philemon his brother. That's not a genetic status, but it is a real status. They are Christians, and they share that bond with one another. They are brothers in the faith. Philemon not only loves Paul. He loves "all the saints," Paul says.

I have told you before, but let me remind you of the importance of this word. When Paul speaks of the saints, he is not talking about the spiritually elite. He is talking about Christians. A saint is one who has been touched by God's grace. To claim to be a saint is not really a statement about ourselves; it is first a statement about God. Philemon loves all the saints. Paul gives thanks for Philemon's love for the church.

But of course now Onesimus is included among the saints. The question now is: Will Philemon's love be extended to one whom he considers his slave?

*I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment.*

Paul speaks of how the gospel changes how we see each other: *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 ... that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother.*

I don't know what Paul thought about slaves before, but now Paul loves Onesimus. In Paul's letter to the Galatians, he writes, *In Jesus Christ we are no longer Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free; we are all one in Christ.* Maybe he wrote that last part because he knows Onesimus as a brother.

Onesimus is doing more than delivering Paul's mail. He is carrying his hope for his future. To walk that road is to imagine that God's promised day can be trusted. To walk back into Philemon's house is to trust that the gospel of Jesus Christ is real and can be trusted with your very life.

We have a prayer of confession, and sometimes I am casual about it. I think, "We could just skip this part." I'm a reasonably good guy. You are great people. Why don't we just skip this? But then, here in worship, I am reminded of the dreams that Christ has for us.

He believes we will be the people who will go the second mile and feed the hungry.

We will be people who will turn the other cheek when we are injured; and we will be the

people who will see the image of God in every neighbor.

We will be the salt of the earth and light in the darkness.

We will treat each other as brothers and sisters because the gospel truth is, we belong to one another.

These are God's dreams for us, which is why I need to confess. Even if I have met my own expectations, I have not lived up to God's expectations. I need to confess. It is not just admitting how I have failed; it is saying aloud again that I trust the dreams God has for us.

Tom Long tells of going to Nassau Church in Princeton. It's just up the street from the Presbyterian Seminary there. Tom sat down next to a man at a church night supper, and they began to chat. "You new to Nassau?"

"No," he said, "I've been going here all my life."

"That right?" Tom responded.

"Yeah, I'm the last nonintellectual left in this church."

"No," Tom said.

"It's true. I haven't understood a sermon in this church in 25 years."

"Really? But you are still here!"

"I'd never leave. Every Monday night a group of us go to the boys' detention center. We play, sometimes pray. We learn their names. We tell them that the worst thing in their lives doesn't define them. And that tomorrow can be a new day, not just yesterday lived all over again. I've discovered, Dr. Long, that no one can prove the promises of God in advance. But if you live each day

like you trust them, you discover they are true, every one. That was the best sermon preached in that church in 25 years."

Long ago, there was a Sunday morning when Onesimus walked into a congregation in Philemon's house and someone read aloud: *So, my brother Philemon, welcome him as you would welcome me.*

There is no record of what Philemon did. But what we do know is the church kept the letter. It's the only way it finds its way into our Bibles. I can't imagine they would have kept the letter unless, when that letter was read on that ancient Sunday morning for the first time, something happened in Philemon's heart, and he changed. I am confident that the reason they kept this letter and shared it with us, is because Onesimus walked into that home, which had been for him a home of bondage, and for the first time, he and Philemon looked at one another and saw that they were brothers. They were both defined not by the brokenness of their past, but by the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

It seems to me that we are all on the road to Philemon's house. We are traveling to become the people that God calls us to be and to see the world as God desires it to be.

This gospel calls us to trust the dreams God has for us:

That justice will roll down like waters.

That the day will come when it will just make more sense for us to feed one another than to kill one another, so we will beat our swords into plowshares.

That the day will come when our children will grow to be neither the destroyers nor the destroyed.

That ordinary people like you and me will see one another not as Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free, but as brothers and sisters in Christ.

It's hard to keep our hope up on that road because people can disappoint us. We can be disappointed in ourselves.

But when you need some hope, remember that you know the name Onesimus. He was a man who trusted that the love of God can change us; he trusted it with his life. And the only reason we know his name is because he was right about that. He was right.

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<sup>1</sup>Judith Ryan and Bonnie Thurston, *Sacra Pagina: Philipians and Philemon* (2005), p. 170

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 171

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup>Johnston is not his real name, but he was a real man and a real doctor. Batesburg is also a real place, as is South Carolina!

**This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.**

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's Web site: [www.villagepres.org/sermons](http://www.villagepres.org/sermons).