

Consenting to Good

A Sermon for Morning Worship On World Communion Sunday
United Congregational Church, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

October 1, 2016

Texts: Philemon 1-25

Time is a funny thing. It both distorts our memories and sharpens them. On some days, we look at the calendar and wonder where the time has gone. That “bucket list” dream trip you’ve been waiting all your life for always seems just out of reach but the calendar years slip by anyway. That precious baby just born is now walking out the door to a life far away. How is that even possible? Where did the years go, we wonder. But then, on other days, time seems to crawl. Recovery from illness or injury seems to take forever when life as we want it to be once more eludes our grasp. Waiting for a house to sell or a job to come or a love to re-emerge too often slows time to a crawl. Through it all life continues to unfold, one day at a time. For ourselves. For our nation. For our world. The seconds tick by, inevitably and inexorably. Leading us to what? That is the question, isn’t it.

This relentlessness of time is something we usually don’t even notice. We take it for granted. Or, we just don’t think about it at all. And why would we? Time is just – well – time. It marks how we use the moments of each day. It helps us bring order into chaos because we know when we’re supposed to do what and that helps us fit all the other pieces – who, how and why – into a

clearer picture of how life happens each day. But time itself? That we just don't think about too much. Until something breaks into our lives which jars our complacency revealing that despite the passage of time, quickly or slowly, some things remain disturbingly the same.

We see just such an issue embedded in today's Scripture text. Philemon is a letter from Paul to a friend and the congregation he housed in his home. It is one of only two New Testament texts which virtually all biblical scholars agree was actually written by Paul. That it is a personal letter is evident in several places: personal greetings to Philemon, Apphia (most likely Philemon's wife) and Archippus, another leader in the church and in the intimate personal references and statements Paul offers. Toward the end of the letter, Paul even asks them to get the guest room ready for a visit for him when he is released from prison. You can't get too much more personal than that!

So, what is the issue addressed in this text that defies the passage of time? The answer is quite simple: slavery. Now perhaps that answer shocks some of you. How could slavery be a contemporary issue for us? We did away with that in the 1860's! Yes, we did. The Emancipation Proclamation was issued by President Lincoln in 1863 and the 13th Amendment to the Constitution abolishing slavery was passed by Congress and ratified into law by the states in 1865. So, it's a done deal. Right?

Well, that depends on how we think about all the possible answers to that question. Human trafficking – the transport and sale of humans to other humans for all sorts of reasons economic and sexual – is a major international criminal enterprise. That’s bad enough. What’s even worse is that there have been a few voices within the past two years from the far, far right who have made public statements that slavery wasn’t all that bad for blacks here in the United States. Slavery wasn’t all that bad. Really. Most notable was Loyola University professor Walter Block, an economics professor, who stated publicly that slavery wasn’t all that bad for black people because all they had to do was “pick a little cotton and sing songs.” He sued the New York Times for libel when they reported on this, and he lost the suit because his racist and outrageous comments were so well known, he could not prove he was just kidding. In fact the faculty of Loyola had been trying for some time to get Block censured for his attitudes toward race before this incident happened.

The rise of this kind of speech and this kind of racist attitude during this election season has been frightening to witness. Some have downplayed it, like Block attempted to do, by saying “just kidding” or “my comments were taken out of context.” That those comments have been made at all in the 21st century, a century and a half after we thought we had resolved the slavery issue once and for all, is just hard to process. So too are black protest actions like

street marches in response to police shootings and black athletes kneeling during the playing of the National Anthem at sporting events. Aren't things any better, we wonder? Aren't they being disrespectful, some of us ask? What's happening to our country, we agonize. And well we should.

I should stop for a moment and tell you that this is not the sermon I intended to preach on this first Sunday in October, the day when we remember and celebrate that we are part of a huge Christian community that spans the globe. I had intended to preach your typical upbeat sermon grounded in scripture and assuring us all that hope is still alive and well here and elsewhere. Hopefully this will still be a sermon you find hopeful and upbeat. But as I read and studied more about Philemon and the context from which this powerful story in the form of a personal letter arose, I realized to my shock how so many of the sentiments it embodies could be contained in such a letter written today. But for the odd names and sentence structure, this letter could be written today with a few changes. Here's what it might say:

Return address: Paul and Timothy, c/o Adult Correctional Institution, Providence, Rhode Island

Written to: Philemon and his wife Apphia and friend, Archippus, plus everyone in his church.

I'm glad I finally have the chance to write to you and send you greetings as a fellow follower of Jesus. May God continue to

surround you with his peace. I think of you often and remember you in my prayers each day. I keep hearing about what a wonderful ministry the church has and that more and more folks are coming to Jesus because of you. That's such a good thing because the world out there is so tough. There's so much hatred out there for anyone who's different in any way. If they look different, if they think or pray differently, if they sound different, people are too quick to judge them harshly, too quick to expect the worst of them, too quick to act on those fears without thinking. It scares me, Philemon, and that's why I'm writing to you today.

I need to ask you a favor. I need to ask you to consider helping out my friend Onesimus. I taught him to love and trust Jesus just like I taught you and look what a fine man you are in the community. I met Onesimus here in prison and that's when I found out you knew him. He worked for you at one time, at least he did until he got all messed up with drugs. Then, he told me he stole from you and took off. He got arrested and sent here to prison and that's where we met. That's where I taught him about Jesus and about new beginnings and about forgiveness. That's why I'm sending him back to you -- to make things right now that he's getting out of prison. It's up to you to do what you think is best but I'm hoping you can find it in your heart to forgive him. I hope you can accept him as a brother in Christ for that's what

he is. And I hope you can do whatever you can to help him get started on a new life as a free man. I could call in all those favors you owe me, Philemon, and demand you do this for him but I won't. You need to do this not because I ask you but because you want to. You need to do this because knowing Jesus has made you a different person just like it has Onesimus. He deserves a start at a new life and you're the one person I know who can give it to him. But it's your choice.

Get the guest room ready for me! I'll be coming to visit when I get out of here shortly. My case for the unlawful assembly charges should be dismissed any day now. All the guys here with me send their best. Know my prayers are ever with you as is the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Signed, your friend, Paul.

Eerie, isn't it? This 2000 year old letter carries within it the same issues we struggle with today. Slavery is not gone, by any means. It's just buried, tucked out of sight where we don't see it. What we're enslaved by might be different than the slavery Paul writes to Philemon about but it's still slavery. These days folks are enslaved by everything from drugs to religious ideology to power, money and success. Securing these things by any means necessary becomes justification for all sorts of egregious speech and behavior proving beyond doubt that slavery is still slavery in

all its ugliness. Slavery means you have no choice in what you do, in what happens to you. You are driven in a particular direction by forces beyond your control, or so it would seem.

This brings us back to the true purpose of Paul's letter to Philemon. Even though Onesimus' reality as a slave belonging to Philemon is the situation underlying the letter, the real purpose of the letter is to get Philemon to reflect more deeply on what it means to be a Christian. "I am sending him ... back to you," Paul writes. "I wanted to keep him with me ... but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced." And Paul doesn't stop there. Receive him "no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother ... both in the flesh and in the Lord." Paul is asking Philemon to set aside everything society tells him he should do – keep Onesimus a slave and punish him for whatever infractions he's guilty of – to do the exact opposite – free Onesimus from slavery and forgive whatever wrong he did. Holy cow. Don't do what the world tells you is okay, Paul is telling Philemon. Do what Jesus expects you to do. And he says one more thing. He says, don't do it because I'm telling you this is what Jesus would want you to do. Do it because you yourself *know* this is what Jesus would want you to do. Paul is asking Philemon to consent to good instead of ignoring it or pretending it doesn't matter because other folks don't see a problem.

Consenting to the good because you know Jesus and that reality makes you a different person. That's what Paul asks of Philemon. That's what Paul asks of us. Don't just do the right thing because someone else tells you it's the right thing. Figure out for yourself what that right thing is, relying fully on the love of God, the peace of Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit as the foundation of your life. Consent to good because you know it's what Jesus would want you to do! Make that choice actively and consciously because you know in your heart it's the only choice you can make as a follower of Jesus! Don't just follow along. Don't just follow the crowd. Don't just do what you think you can get away with because other people don't see a problem. Our world has far too much of that these days. Instead, dare to be a follower of Jesus in word and deed. Refresh your heart in Christ, as Paul says, and be the person God needs you to be each day. Just imagine what might be possible if you do.

Mind-boggling, isn't it? Amen.