



"Friendship Can Save Your Life"

Philemon 1-21

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This is the shortest letter of all of Paul's letters — just 335 words in the Greek. Even still, it's a bit hard to follow exactly what's going on. There are three major players in this letter: Paul, the imprisoned letter writer; Onesimus, the slave about whom the letter is written; and Philemon, the slave owner to whom the letter is written.

Part of the reason it's hard to follow the narrative here is that we don't have all that much information. We know that Onesimus is apart from Philemon. We don't know if he had escaped, or if he was sent away. However it came to be, he was away from his master. And while he was away, he spent time with Paul, developed a close friendship, and became a Christian, and so Paul now writes a letter on his behalf.

Here's what we know about slavery in the ancient world: "Owners had exclusive rights over slaves, including the right to inflict punishment and even death." Estimates suggest the slave population in the Greco-Roman world was between 25 and 30 percent of the entire population. And fugitive slaves were legally required to be returned. Anyone found harboring such a slave could — and usually would — be charged with theft.¹

And here's what we know about slavery in our more modern world: this letter is one of the texts long used to justify slavery in the United States. Even though that is not the takeaway for us today, we have a moral imperative not to ignore this fact, especially because slavery is not

entirely relegated to our history. There is still slavery today, even if it might look different.

I will make no excuse for how the church has used this text in times not long enough ago, but I will take this chance to remind you once more that 25 percent of the Peace and Global Witness Offering we are collecting these next two weeks will support the International Justice Mission, the largest anti-slavery organization in the world.

Paul, Onesimus, and Philemon. Paul writes a letter on behalf of Onesimus, not with a command, but with an appeal based upon love. And he goes on to tell Philemon that his slave, whose name means "useful" has been useful indeed — that Paul has in fact come to claim him as a son. Nevertheless, Paul writes, "I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. I wanted to keep him with me, but I preferred to do nothing without your consent."

"Now you have him back forever," he writes, "no longer as a slave but as more than a slave, a beloved brother in the Lord. Receive him just as you would receive me."

This letter may be little known, but there is another letter written about a slave that most of us read at some point in the course of our education.

In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck befriends Jim, a runaway slave. Jim is his companion as they travel down the Mississippi River, and Jim becomes not only a friend but a surrogate father to the 13 year old boy.

¹ Robert Wall, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, Year C, Volume 3, entry on Philemon.

After helping Jim escape a second captivity, knowing what the law of the times requires of him, Huck is overwhelmed with a sense of sin. He sets down to write a letter to Jim's master, Miss Watson, telling her where Jim is and how he she can get him back.

Then, Huck says, "I felt good and all washed clean of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life, and I knowed I could pray now. But I didn't do it straight off, but laid the paper down and set there thinking — thinking how good it was all this happened, and how near I come to being lost and going to hell.

"But I went on thinking. and got to thinking over our trip down the river; and I see Jim before me, all the time; in the day, and in the night-time, sometimes moonlight, sometimes storms, and we a floating along, talking and singing, and laughing. But somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him, only the other kind.

"I'd see him standing my watch on top of his'n, 'stead of calling me, so I could go on sleeping; and see him how glad he was when I come back out of the fog; and when I come to him agin in the swamp, up there where the feud was; and such-like times; and would always call me honey, and do everything he could think of for me; and how good he always was; and at last I struck the time I saved him by telling the men we had smallpox aboard, and he was so grateful, and said I was the best friend old Jim ever had in the world, and the only one he's got now; and then I happened to look around, and see that paper."

That paper, of course, is the letter, and Huck realizes that while the law requires him to send it, the right thing is to tear it up. So he does, thereby saving Jim's life.

This does not happen only in literature, however.

In December 1941, Japan attacked the United States of America at Pearl Harbor. Over

3,000 Americans lost their lives, and we went to war.

In February 1942, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed an Executive Order requiring the incarceration of everyone of Japanese descent in much of California, Washington, and Oregon. Orders were sent to 120,000 people to leave their homes, farms, or businesses, with no indication of where they were going.

Alice was nine years old.² She and her mother and her younger brother, Harry, packed up their farm. Her father had been picked up by the FBI two months earlier. No one knew where he was. Alice and Harry were born in California. They were American citizens. Her mother and father were born in California. They were American citizens. None of them had ever set foot in Japan.

Alice remembers it being a frantic and frightening time. When the day came, they could take only what they could carry. They walked to downtown Vacaville, California, with the other members of the Japanese American community to wait for buses. Soldiers kept an eye on everyone.

When they arrived, having walked three miles, they sat down. Harry said he was hungry, and he asked for something to eat. Alice remembers how that question made her mother break down and cry for the first time. She apologized to her children. "I am so sorry," she said, "that you have such a bad mother that I forgot to bring food."

Alice remembers scolding Harry for making their mother cry. She left to go see if she could find something for them to eat and drink. In the crowd, there was a tall white woman with a tray of sandwiches and fruit and cups of juice. Alice asked her if she was selling the food. The woman smiled and said no. She offered the food to Alice for free. Alice refused and said she could pay. The woman insisted.

² This story belongs to the Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka. He graciously allowed me to share it. It is told almost entirely in his own words. The only changes reflect the change in narrator from first person to third person, for the purpose of this sermon.

"But I don't know you," Alice said. The woman said she was a Quaker, that she was a Christian friend, and that they thought what the government was doing was wrong, so people in her church made sandwiches and brought juice and fruit to give away.

Alice took some food back to her mother and her brother. Harry began to eat right away, but their mother asked, "Where did you get this?"

"From a white woman," Alice said. "She says she is our Christian friend."

"That's not possible," her mother said. "We're Buddhists. We don't know any Christians. They are not our friends, and white people are afraid of us."

Alice went back to the woman and said, "We don't have any Christian friends." The woman smiled again and said, "Well, you do now."

Alice and Harry and their mother boarded a bus and were taken to the Tanforan Race Track in San Mateo, where they lived in a horse stall for six months. Then they were sent by train to an internment camp in Arizona, just south of Phoenix, where they lived for two and a half years. Eventually, their father rejoined them. He had been imprisoned in South Dakota.

When the war was over, Alice and her family moved to Pocatello, Idaho, and began farming again. At school, Alice met Becky, a Nazarene, who invited Alice to sleep over at her house and go to church one Sunday.

Initially, Alice's mother said no. "You have a bed here in this house," she said. "Why would you sleep elsewhere?"

"Mother," Alice said, "Becky is my Christian friend."

And so she was allowed to spend the night. This pattern repeated itself most weekends, and eventually Alice joined the church, publicly declaring her trust in Jesus Christ. Some time later, Alice's family moved to

Hayward, California, to start over yet again. Right away, Alice began worshipping at the San Lorenzo Japanese Christian Church. She convinced her family to accompany her, and eventually they, too, joined the church and placed their trust in Jesus.

When Alice was a college student, a young seminarian from Berkley Baptist Divinity School came to serve as a student pastor. Alice thought he was handsome, but conceited. The seminary student remembers thinking Alice was smart and beautiful. He asked her out on a date, and she said no. Several times. But he was persistent, and eventually, she said yes.

They fell in love and got married. Alice and Richard had four sons. One of them is an optometrist in Los Angeles. One of them recently retired as an Air Traffic Controller in Honolulu. One of them works for a nonprofit agency serving immigrant families in Seattle. And one of them is my dear friend and colleague, the Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka, who is one of the most highly regarded, highly sought after preachers and teachers in the Presbyterian Church throughout the world.

When Rodger tells this story, which he very graciously shared with me, he says, "I am standing here today because of one Quaker woman and a tray of sandwiches, fruit, and juice."

And then he says, "When I go to heaven, I cannot wait to meet that woman. I want to ask her, 'How did you have the courage to act, when everyone else in the country, including the President, was convinced that my mother, at 9 years old, was not to be trusted?' I want to ask her," he says, "but mostly, I want to thank her."

All we known of Onesimus and Philemon is what is in this letter. There is no account of what Philemon chose to do. But ... we do have the letter. Which means, the church kept the letter.³ That's the only way it ends up in our Bibles, for us to read today. And I have to

³ I am indebted to to my friend and colleague Rev. Tom Are, Jr., of Village Presbyterian Church, for this insight which is actually quite obvious, but almost always overlooked.

assume they kept the letter because when it was read aloud in Philemon's house that first time, something changed, and so they believed that perhaps if it was read again in the future, things could change again.

This letter, all 335 words of it, bears witness to what friendship can do. It can save lives. Perhaps even more remarkably, it can change lives, too. So be a friend today, this week, this month, to someone who needs it. It is a faithful and holy task, even if all you have to offer is a simple meal of sandwiches and juice. Chances are, the impact will be far greater than you'd ever dare imagine.