

13th Sunday after Pentecost

Philemon 1-22

Luke 14:25-33

Pastor Ann Hultquist

“Family is everything.” So says a large frame you can buy online, adding a family picture to display in your entryway or living room. Take a stroll down the aisle at Home Goods or Michael’s and you’ll see plenty of these type of items with their own sayings:

“Family: Where life begins and love never ends; and

“Our Family: A circle of strength and love, founded on faith, joined in love, kept by God...Together Forever.”

Maybe you have something like it in your house, certainly they are a celebration for some; words that are probably more aspirational than always reality if we’re honest.

What do you think manufacturers would do with Jesus’ words this morning:

“Whoever comes to me and does not *hate* father and mother...brothers and sisters...cannot be my disciple.” I’m guessing Hobby Lobby won’t be putting *that* on a plaque anytime soon, and we wouldn’t be buying it, either.

Jesus and the disciples are on their way to Jerusalem. Jesus has been healing on the Sabbath, calling out hypocrisy, and mixing up the seating chart at the banquet table. People loved it, so much so that Luke makes a point to tell us that “*large crowds*” were now following Jesus. Jesus turns around and makes it pretty plain that the journey ahead will not be easy, and will not be life in the status quo, or everything they’ve been used to. “Think,” says Jesus. “Just think about what you’re doing.”

Everyone knew that the family was the center of life. In the Roman world, your father was in charge of you until he died; for Jewish families, children were expected to care for their parents without restriction. What Jesus says is radical--again: “hate” your family. (Turn away from them, or detach yourself from them.)

Who would do that? A disciple will, says Jesus; because just like so many areas of our lives, Jesus is going to redefine what *family* means.

It's not going to be about who you are born to, or loyalty, or patriarchy. Your *family* will be those beside you on the journey of following: brothers and sisters, siblings, children of God drawn together in Christ's love. Look around you for a moment this morning. As much as "family" can be a complicated word to use in the church, that's who we are.

That redefinition of family is what Paul's letter to Philemon is all about. I know we hardly ever do this in worship, but I'm going to invite you to turn to that reading again. Paul is the master of run-on sentences and making things complicated when they could be simple; so I'm guessing you may have had no idea what these verses were about as Mark/Matt read them. It is the shortest book in the entire Bible, in fact, just add 3 verses to this reading, and we would have heard the whole book this morning!

Look at the first few verses: Paul is in jail, likely in Ephesus--we won't hear that until a little later in the letter--from there, he is writing to Philemon, to Apphia, "our sister" and to "the church in your house." What follows is meant not just as a personal letter for Philemon, but meant for *everyone* who gathers to worship at his home, read aloud during the service.

The next few verses (4-7) are much like the start of Paul's other letters--thankfulness, joy, a remembrance of all Philemon has done so far--*and* there are those words again in verse 7: "my brother." Not by birth, but in Christ--brother...sister.

Then here comes the reason for the letter: I could command you, but instead I'm asking you to do something because we are united in Christ's love:

(verses 10ff) "I am appealing to you for *my child* Onesimus, whose *father* I have become in my imprisonment. I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me *in your place* during my imprisonment for the Gospel; but I preferred to do nothing without your

consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. (Paul laying it on thick here!) Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so you might have him back forever, *no longer as a slave but as more than a slave, a beloved brother.*”

Did you get that? Onesimus has been Philemon’s *slave*. Think Paul is upsetting the status quo a bit here? You better believe it!

We need to pause here and wrap our minds around slavery in 1st century Roman colonies. Unlike our own country, slavery was not a race-based institution. Slaves might be Prisoners of War; sailors captured and sold by pirates; people who were unable to pay their debt; even children of Roman citizens. At the height of the Roman Empire, 2 million of the 6 million people living in Italy were slaves. So it wasn’t based on race, but it was an institution that made the economy work. They were farmworkers, bodyguards, gardeners, cooks, maids, etc. Unfortunately, like our own country, slaves were the *property* of their owners, could be abused, mistreated and sold.

Over the centuries, many scholars said that Onesimus must have run away from Philemon. But it’s just as likely that he was *sent* to care for Paul, to bring him food and clothing in jail, which were not provided by the government.

Think about living in that kind of a culture and how important it was to know just where you fit in the hierarchy. Think of how we do that today--decide where we fit and where others fit in terms of importance--most often, it’s a snap judgment, isn’t it, based on just a few moments. And in our sharply divided society right now, we are encouraged to think of other people as “less than,” aren’t we, based on skin color or language or ability or economics. Sometimes we can feel a kind of despair, telling ourselves “that’s just the way things are; it won’t change.”

Here comes Paul, following Jesus, with no interest in any of that. As Paul will write to the Corinthians and to us: “if you are in Christ, you are a new creation”--things in your life will be different, must be different. So, Philemon, welcome Onesimus as a brother in the family of Jesus; as if it were *me* on your doorstep.

And then Paul grabs the stylus from the scribe and writes in his own hand: Brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord!

It's easy for us to forget that following Jesus doesn't always solve our problems, but instead creates them for us--like making us uncomfortable with the way others are treated; inviting us to reprioritize our priorities; pushing us to question how things "just are" in the world. Where in your life do you feel those challenges?

Look at that last verse: "One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you." (I'll be there soon to check up on you...)

Can you imagine what happened the day it was read in the house church? Can you see the heads turning to look at their brother Philemon? What happened next? It's not recorded anywhere, but this short letter likely wouldn't have been included in the Bible if Philemon hadn't done exactly what Paul asked: welcomed Onesimus as a brother in Christ, and no longer a slave.

"You did what?!" his neighbors likely said.

"Well, that's the kind of thing disciples in this family do," says Jesus.