



“KEEP ON GROWING”

A Sermon by

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Scripture Reference: Philemon 1:1-22

Have you ever wondered how so many of the letters of Saint Paul were preserved and made a part of our New Testament? Given the conditions of the first centuries, it is a miracle they did not get scattered and lost forever, for there were few organized libraries back then, much less the kinds of “information retrieval systems” that we have today. However, many scholars trace this “miracle” of collecting and preserving back to the efforts of one man, and the letter that was just read had a direct bearing on the drama of this one’s life.

Surely, you could sense between the lines that something unusual was taking place. It seems that some time before this a slave named Onesimus stole some money and ran away from his owner, a certain Philemon, who was a leader in the church that Paul had founded in Colossae. Like so many other fugitives, Onesimus made his way to the anonymity of a big city — probably Ephesus, and there, by coincidence — or

was it Providence? — he came in contact with an aged prisoner, Paul the apostle, and under his influence was genuinely transformed by the grace of Jesus Christ. I could stop right here and preach a whole sermon on this remarkable chain of events. Here was Paul, immobilized again in prison and unjustly at that, yet he did not give up and hide his face in humiliation or grow bitter. He continued to be spiritually creative, even under the circumstances of confinement. He did not need a pulpit or a cathedral to do the work of a witness. Even in chains he was able to go on bearing fruit for the Kingdom. And just as amazing as his indomitable spirit was his sensitivity to so lowly an individual. After all, Paul was well-born, a citizen of Rome. He had appeared before kings and rulers. He could hold his own with the finest minds of his day. He had the responsibility of an expanding number of young churches on his mind. Yet, in the midst of all this, we see him having the time and the sensitivity to recognize the worth and potential of this nonentity of a slave boy. Paul realized that “gold is gold, wherever it is found, even in the gutter.” He was alert enough to perceive genuine potential in so unlikely a person, and it was Paul’s interest in and affection for this one which fanned that spark into flame. In the most literal sense, the young slave was “converted,” and his name gave Paul a good occasion to make a play on words. The name Onesimus literally means “useful” or “profitable,” so Paul would later write to his owner: “Formerly he was useless, but now he is going to be useful to both you and me.” (vs. 11) In other words, through Christ, Onesimus became by nature what he once had been only in name. And what better description can you find for the functional effect of Christianity than just this? We are hearing a great deal today about “recycling waste.” God has been in that kind of business for a long time, and here is just one more illustration of how He does His work. When the Nazis saw a person they deemed “unfit,” their strategy was to liquidate such a one. But the One “who has made all things and loves all that He has made,” does not work that way. He seeks to reclaim and recycle “waste products” so that what was useless becomes useful again. This is why Clovis Chappell entitled a sermon on Onesimus: “Making the No-Count Count.” This is the high business of Church and Gospel, and in a most unlikely setting with a most unusual person, Paul was faithful to the high calling of God in Jesus Christ “to seek and to save that which was lost.”

But what was Paul to do now that the young slave had experienced conversion? It is obvious that the apostle had developed strong personal affection for this one — he speaks of him as his “spiritual offspring” and as “a part of my own heart,” Paul also sensed that Onesimus had unusual gifts for ministry. Most scholars agree that Paul really wanted Onesimus to become his assistant there in Ephesus and help him with the work of the churches. However, there were pots of sticky problems about this new convert’s situation. Life being what it is, one cannot just walk away from the past the way a coat is taken off and discarded. The life of Onesimus was still bound up with that of Philemon in more than one way. From a legal standpoint he remained the property of this man in Colossae, and in addition, he had stolen money from him and run away. Paul realized that in terms of Onesimus’ moral development he needed to take responsibility for his past, difficult as that might be. Repentance and forgiveness do not eliminate the realities of what one has done, as if that no longer existed. They rather provide new resources for dealing with that past creatively. So a sense of integrity dictated to Paul that Onesimus had to return and “face the music” with Philemon. However, for all its nobility, such a decision was fraught with danger, for Paul knew full well how the system of slavery worked in that day and the prospects of a runaway and a thief returning and surviving were not good at all. Historians estimate that there were sixty million slaves in the Roman Empire at that time. The whole culture was organized around that institution, so it is not surprising that any “threat to the system” was handled swiftly and violently. The phenomenon of slaves running away could not be tolerated, lest that spirit spread, so the usual punishment for such a crime was instant, visible execution to teach all the other slaves a lesson. If allowed to survive at all, such runaways had a huge “F” standing for “fugitives” painfully branded into their foreheads and thus remained marked forever.

Now all of us are in some sense “prisoners to our age,” so the dilemma Paul faced was a delicate one indeed. Even though Philemon was a Christian leader in the church he probably felt about slavery the way all slave owners of that time felt. It was so much a common place of history that he had never given the institution much thought. Thus, how could Paul get Phile-

mon to make a revolutionary step of growth? How could he get him to think of a person who up to that time had been simply regarded “a domestic animal” or “a living tool” as something more — as a fellow human being and fellow Christian? This was the challenge Paul faced and since he could not accompany Onesimus in the flesh, he composed the letter we just heard. Much was at stake here — a human being’s life for one thing, and the growth of Christian consciousness for another — and never was the apostle more inspired than when he began to put together this delicate and revolutionary appeal.

The first thing he does is give thanks for the kind of love Philemon had shown in the past “toward all the saints” (vs. 5). He recalls how again and again Philemon had “refreshed the hearts of fellow Christians” in his home (vs. 7) and then he makes a subtle shift. He tells of meeting, of all the people, young Onesimus, and how the same thing that had happened to Philemon as a result of Paul’s ministry had happened to this one. Faith had been born in Onesimus, just as long before it had been born in Philemon, and Paul claimed to possess the same kind of affection for this one as he had for Philemon. He even went so far as to identify both as his “spiritual sons.” Do you sense the revolutionary thing Paul was getting around to? He was subtly laying the foundation to get Philemon to see that slaves are human beings too, as valuable in the sight of God and as capable of spiritual experience as anyone else. By comparing the similarities of how each of these had come to faith, and how both were objects of his love, Paul lays the foundation for his revolutionary request: will you look on this one who is returning, not as a slave, but as a fellow brother in Christ? Will you extend to him the kind of love which in the past you have extended to me and other Christians? Will you receive him back in mercy, as Christ received you back, and then give him to me for his ministry and mine? In the Greek there is this subtle play on words here: “Once you made a profit out of what I did for you, Philemon. Now, will you let me make a profit out of you?”

All of this was subtly and carefully done, for make no mistake about it — Paul was dealing with dynamite considering the mindset of the first century. Paul was really asking Philemon to do a very revolutionary

thing; namely, to regard and treat a slave the same way he would treat a fellow Christian. It probably took Philemon's breath away the first time he read it. Here was a radical new thought that went beyond anything he had considered before. This may sound like a very simple thing to us today, but in the first century A.D. it was utterly earth-shattering. It meant unlearning and relearning one's whole way of doing life and relating to people. No wonder that Paul and others like him had been called "men who turn the world upside down!"

Yet this is precisely the kind of thing that moved "from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria and unto the uttermost parts of the earth." (Acts 1:8) Everywhere it went, the Christian Gospel challenged the narrow horizon of prejudice and provincialism in the name of a God "who so loved *the world* that He gave His only begotten Son." It was the inclusiveness of this love that was so surprising. People had always loved on a limited basis — on what has been called "*patri nostra*"; that is, *our* class, *our* nation, *our* race, but such exclusiveness is exactly what Jesus came to explode. He ate with sinners, reached out and touched lepers, gave to women exactly what He gave to men and asked of women exactly what He asked of men. Slaves, Gentile, rich, poor — He loved each one as if He had none others in all the world to love, and He loved all as He loved each. This led Paul to the conclusion: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are one in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3:28).

This was the revolution that Jesus started, and Philemon was not the first or the last to be challenged to grow in his understanding of "the length and breadth and height and depth of the love of God in Christ Jesus." Simon Peter was challenged to do the same thing when Cornelius the Gentile invited him to come into his house and have fellowship with non-Jews. Phillip was challenged to do this when a black Ethiopian eunuch inquired about the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. This is the story of the Church down through the ages — people being called on to grow and cross over the boundaries of their prejudices, to love those who hitherto before had been non-persons or despised persons or feared persons or whatever.

This was the significant challenge that Paul laid before Philemon of Colossae, and we have good reason to believe that revolutionary as it was, Philemon rose to the occasion and not only treated Onesimus as a Christian brother, but freed him and sent him back to Paul. Why do we think this? No other mention is made of Onesimus in the New Testament, but a little after 100 A.D. Ignatius of Antioch was being taken to Rome to be beheaded and he writes of the fellow Christians he met along that “way of sorrows.” He makes specific reference to the beloved bishop of Ephesus. And do you know what his name was? *Onesimus*! There is good reason to think that the very one who had first slipped into that city as an unprofitable, thieving runaway, ultimately became through Christ and Paul the spiritual overseer of that metropolis. Not only that, many scholars believe that Onesimus may have been the one to collect Paul’s letters and share them widely with the church. After all, who owed more to this one than Onesimus, and what better stewardship could he make of such grace than to spread the influence of Paul as widely as possible? This explains why a letter as private and personal as Philemon’s is included in the New Testament. It was Onesimus’ way of bearing witness. Instead of being ashamed of his lowly beginnings and sinful ways, Onesimus had obviously grown in the ways Paul had in mind when he sent him back to Philemon. Christ had given him the power to accept his past and even celebrate it, for it bore witness to the great thing God had done for him. Just as Simon Peter was not ashamed to recall the story of his denials that the mercy of Christ could be made known, so Onesimus was not above telling the world; “Here is who I was and what I did; and look at what God in His great mercy has done for me! You talk about recycling waste — this is what Divine Mercy is all about. Had it not been for Paul and his sensitivity, and Philemon and his willingness to grow, where would I be?”

Here then, is the drama of grace behind how the letters of Paul ever got collected and preserved and passed on to us down through the ages. A witness to Jesus Christ was faithful even in jail and sensitive to the likes of a slave boy. And a man born and bred in a culture of slaves and slave owners had the courage to grow beyond his day to “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” Because of these men, we have been blessed.

Which leads me to ask you this morning: who, do you suppose, Onesimus-like, is somewhere close to you — waiting to be discovered and liberated and recycled into usefulness again? If only someone had been to Lee Harvey Oswald what Paul had been to Onesimus, think of the difference it would have made in the last decade? And where are those frontiers in the human family across which you need to move and grow? Do you still have trouble seeing black people as persons, or brown people, or male or female or hippie or liberal or any other kind of people as persons? The reason we are having a special Week of Prayer for Foreign Missions again this year is to remind ourselves that it is the world — all of it, the whole inhabited universe — that God loves, and that all of us still have some growing to do until the length and breadth and height and depth of His kind of love describes our kind of love as well.

The problem of the Grinch in the Dr. Seuss book is still our problem — “our hearts are two sizes too small.” May Paul’s challenge to Philemon become our challenge to keep on growing. I am confident of this — God will not be satisfied until we who are made in the image and likeness of His love have achieved just that.