

First Presbyterian Church
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Rev. Ken Kalvesmaki
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Onesimus, A Lesson in Grace and Forgiveness

Police officers often find themselves in dangerous situations. Every once in a while they can laugh. A drunk driver in upstate New York, crashed his car into a gas station. No one was hurt but a gas pump was wiped out. The driver jumped out of his car and proceeded to dash down a brushy embankment. While he was thrashing around, policemen arrived. They quickly found the suspect trying to make it out of the mess. One of officers shined his light on the fellow. He immediately surrendered. "You must be Superman! You've been chasing me for 45 minutes. You're not even winded. How'd you do it?" The officer laughed. "We haven't been chasing you - we just arrived." "You mean," he sputtered, "I've been chasing myself?" "I'm afraid so," the officer replied. "Well, if I'm that stupid, you might as well put me in jail." He went quietly to the police car. ("Wanted, Dumb or Alive," Butler and Ray, Nashville, '96)

Makes you wonder what went through his mind when he sobered up. Running - from myself? No pursuers, just himself. Fear and guilt drove him into the woods. Fear and guilt exhausted him.

Fear and guilt have a way of doing that to all of us. It could happen to anyone here. We find ourselves in a compromising situation. Instead of walking away quickly, we go ahead. It might be money..or sex or drugs or any number of things that we know would be wrong to continue, but some of us do. It's after the deed that fear rattles within our wounded souls. Add guilt to our fears...running away and hiding seems to be a better idea. It could be a real place, or just burying the event deeply within ourselves. Fear and guilt can do that. But they do not have to be our final verdict. Fear and guilt can drive us right into the arms of God. It all depends. Would we recognize and welcome Him and His grace of forgiveness? It could be a life-changing moment.

Our sanctuary sets the stage. We see lifted above us the cross. We recall gratefully the death of Christ for our sins. We look at the Lord's table and see the elements of

bread and wine. They are offered to us to refresh us by the Holy Spirit to press in closer to Him...we welcome words from Psalm 32, "How blessed is he who is forgiven. .. to whom the Lord does not count our sins." Or from the 40th Psalm, "He heard my voice of despair; He drew me up out of the miry clay, and set me upon a rock..and gave me a new song." His grace of forgiveness is like that light at the end of a tunnel; or, His extended hand that keeps us from falling. He hears us and comes to our aid when we are desperate enough!

Tucked away in the back part of our New Testament is a letter showing us how the grace of God in forgiving us works. Paul wrote to his old friend Philemon. They met when Paul presented the gospel of Jesus Christ to him. Philemon welcomed Christ into his life. Even his closest friends would declare Philemon displayed a changed life. Philemon opened his home as a meeting place to worship God and study the word of Christ. He began to live into his name - Philemon means Affectionate. Apparently, at least one man took advantage of him. One of his slaves ran away to what he thought would be freedom. Onesimus ended up in Rome. In his seeking a new life of freedom somehow he heard of a prisoner who could use help in his daily needs. Though in chains, Paul showed his freedom in Christ to tell young Onesimus about Christ's grace of forgiveness. Though not in chains we could see, Onesimus was chained to what he did. He knew the load of guilt and fear that he carried with him wherever he went. As Paul shared the truth of Christ's love, Onesimus yielded his life to the Master of all - Jesus. Could Onesimus return to Philemon? Now, a free man in Christ, he wasn't free from his wrongdoing. He could die. Returned slaves never had a party to welcome them home.

Onesimus had to live up to his name...Onesimus mean Useful...no longer useless. Useful to Paul, and maybe he would be Useful to his old master Philemon. What a challenge! Think about those things in your life, as I have in my own, that showed us up as self-centered foolish, sinful persons. We might have stepped all over our most loved person in our family. With Christ we have a chance to straighten things out. Freedom in Christ happens when we've asked God's grace of forgiveness and then go to the people we've hurt and asking forgiveness. Let me offer a look at God's grace in this letter from Paul.

GOD'S GRACE OF FORGIVENESS GOES BEYOND OURSELVES. Paul declared to his friend, "I thank my God always remembering you in my prayers, because | hear of your love toward the Lord Jesus and all the saints." (4, 5) There's only One who makes note of how we minister to others.

GOD'S GRACE OF FORGIVENESS IS INEXHAUSTIBLE. Fellow believers were refreshed through Philemon. When we are seeped in the life of Christ, others receive what might be called the overflow of His grace.... You can't wear out this grace of forgiveness in Christ. That is the reason we need regular times of fellowship with other believers, (6, 7). If you want a way to get started, just tell of a rich man, a slave owner who was challenged to forgive his runaway slave...not as a slave but as a brother in Christ.

You'll be surprised where that opening might go.

HIS GRACE OF FORGIVENESS CAPTURES THE HEART. "I could order you...to welcome Onesimus back..."yet for love's sake | rather appeal to you...as the aged prisoner! | love the tug of his situation to remind Philemon how much we owe to Christ...He captures our hearts with His real love. When we face the truth, with Christ as our Advocate, He will take care of the judgment, (18,19).

HIS GRACE OF FORGIVENESS MAKES A NEW WAY FOR US. What's in a name? Paul "The Little," or "humble servant" to Philemon, "Affectionate" my friend, Onesimus has a lot to offer...he is Usefull" Affectionate, welcome him back as a brother in Christ. He'll take care of his part in showing his changed life in Chist. A new beginning...if God's grace of forgiveness has room to take over! (21,22)

What does God's grace of forgiveness look like for you? Perhaps all of us can take care of business with God...receiving His forgiveness and His tokens of bread and wine. Then, we might be prompted to clear away the things that keep us from His gracious fellowship.

We left Onesimus standing before Philemon. We have no record of what happened when he put the letter aside. Did Philemon forgive Onesimus? Judgment time came and went. We do have perhaps a clue from a letter written a number of years later.

Bishop Ignatius of Antioch had been taken prisoner, and sent to Rome to await his death. He wrote from his prison to the church of Ephesus. Within its contents came wonderful encouragement he gave to his friends in Ephesus. He encouraged the church to imitate the life of their new bishop, because he was a "man whose love is beyond words."

His name - Onesimus.

We can start over, if necessary, again and again to give and receive the grace of His forgiveness.

I invite you to renew His grace in the fellowship around this table. Come, for all is ready.