

Third Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/A)

Jeremiah 20:7-13; Psalm 69:7-18; Romans 6:1b-11; Matthew 10:24-39

June 20-21, 2020

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Did you know St. Paul had a son?? At least, figuratively speaking ☺. In his letter to

Philemon St. Paul writes:

*I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. [The Message paraphrase is, "While here in jail, I've fathered a child, so to speak. And here he is, handcarrying this letter – Onesimus!] Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother – a true Christian brother! That's what he was to me – he'll be even more than that to you.]* Philemon 10-12, 15-16 (NRSV & *The Message*)

Onesimus was a run-away slave whom Paul met during one of his stints in prison for preaching the Gospel. Paul shared the Gospel with his fellow inmate, who chose to be baptized. When it was time for Onesimus to be released, he understandably had some real angst about returning to the master from whom he'd escaped. He probably expected at least a flogging. But Paul convinced him that returning to his master Philemon was the right thing to do. Paul then wrote this letter that's now part of the New Testament to soften Philemon's heart and to soften Onesimus' landing back in his master's household. Now remember, Paul is the same guy who wrote that for those baptized into Christ "*there is no longer slave or free.... you belong to Christ....*" (Galatians 3:28-29) (He also wrote, "*Slaves, obey your earthly masters... as slaves of Christ*" (Ephesians 6:5-6), which may explain why he sent Onesimus back to Philemon. That's also a verse that was unfortunately quoted by those who fought against the abolition of slavery in the U.S. in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.)

This weekend, we remember another Onesimus: Onesimus Nesib, an Ethiopian who translated the Bible into the language of his people, the Oromo. This more modern Onesimus was born in 1855 in western Ethiopia. At the age of about 14 he was captured by slavers and taken to Eritrea in East Africa on the Red Sea. At some point Swedish missionaries bought his freedom. The grateful, liberated young man chose to be baptized. He traveled to Sweden, studied there, married, then moved back to Africa, where he preached and translated the Bible with the help of another freed slave, a young woman named Aster Ganno. A short biography of him notes, "Onesimus encountered many obstacles from both political and local church authorities throughout his preaching missions in northern Africa."<sup>1</sup> It's sad that civil officials weren't on board with Onesimus' sharing of Good News, but it's even sadder that church officials put up barriers as well.

This is the kind of worldly rejection that Jesus warns His followers about in today's Gospel. The message was for His disciples then and for us now. The bearers of Good News are not always (or even often) met with laurel wreaths, ticker tape parades, bouquets of flowers or proclamations of appreciation. The Good News of the coming of God's kingdom threatens the status quo. When God's kingdom comes and God's will is done, things change. The have nots become the haves, and that means those sitting on more than their share of blessings need to pass them along as God the Giver intended from the get-go.

Plantation owners who used enslaved people to grow and harvest their cotton and tobacco were dead against the end of slavery because that put their livelihoods and their life styles, all they knew, into jeopardy. Now in retrospect it's clear to us that opposition to the abolition of slavery was opposition to God. But do we see as clearly that protecting our

financial portfolio shouldn't be more important to us than protecting God's children? If our priority is money rather than mercy, our values are not God's values.

Jesus says something in today's Gospel that Scripture scholars tell us is probably Jesus' own words, straight from His mouth, not just the Gospel writer's best guess about what He said:

*"Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven." (Matthew 10:32-33)*

Now, not too many folks are walking around saying, "Jesus is not Lord," "Jesus is not Lord." We're more apt to deny Him by our silence than by our words. When we **don't** speak up for the voiceless, when we **don't** stand up to advocate for the powerless, when we stay silent because we're not willing to risk the disapproval, the anger, the rejection of those who might disagree with us, we're replacing the confession of faith, "Jesus is Lord," with the unspoken message, "Caesar is lord" or "Money reigns" or "Self-preservation rules."

Nowhere does Jesus promise to save His followers from suffering. According to today's Gospel, following Jesus is more apt to **increase** than **decrease** suffering in our lives. If we follow in His footsteps we may end up on Calvary, too. He asks us, why would **you** expect to fare better than **Me**? Here's a paraphrase of what Jesus says:

*"A student doesn't get a better desk than her teacher. A laborer doesn't make more money than his boss. Be content – pleased, even – when you, my students, my harvest hands, get the same treatment I get... Don't be intimidated... Don't be bluffed into silence by the threats of bullies. There's nothing they can do to your soul, your core being..."*

*"What's the price of a pet canary? Some loose change, right? And God cares what happens to it even more than you do. He pays even greater attention to you, down to the last detail – even numbering the hairs on your head! So don't be intimidated by all this bully talk. You're worth more than a million canaries." (Matthew 10:24-26, 28-31, The Message)*

Jesus talks about us taking up our cross, taking our lumps for the sake of the Gospel. For kids, maybe that's being called a loser for not being willing to cheat on a test or lie to a parent or join in mocking the kid who doesn't fit in. For a parent, father **or** mother, or for a grandparent, maybe it's being branded "uncool" or "not with it" or "unreasonable" for the expectation that weekly worship, year 'round, is what we do because it's who we are, even if that means logging in remotely from the living room during a pandemic.

One Bible commentary uses the metaphor of an alpine mountain-climbing rope "which has a 'red worsted strand running through it from end to end... The sealed followers of the Lord are known by their red strand... the red endless line of sacrifice...."<sup>2</sup> Any father worth his salt knows about sacrifice, about all it takes to put one's children consistently before oneself. Our Father in Heaven knows about sacrifice, too, having sent the Son, the only Son, to be our salvation. Our God requires of us nothing less than what our Lord Jesus was willing to give: everything. In return, our God gives us: everything, beginning in Holy Baptism and leading to eternity. That's the Good News that Paul shared with the original Onesimus in a 1<sup>st</sup> century prison cell, and that Onesimus Nesib shared with his Oromo people in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

To those enslaved by self-concern (which at points is **all** of us), our Lord Jesus says:

*"If your first concern is to look after yourself, you'll never find yourself. But if you forget about yourself and look to me, you'll find both yourself and me."*  
Matthew 10:39 (*The Message*)

Let's keep that in mind, fellow canaries!

<sup>1</sup>Gail Ramshaw, *More Days to Praise: Festivals and Commemorations in Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2016), p. 146.

<sup>2</sup>*The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 7 (NY: Abingdon, 1951), p. 375.

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