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Saint John's Episcopal Church
Sandwich, Massachusetts 02563

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Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Today's sermon is taken from the letter to Philemon, verses 1-20.

O God, we come together because we need you, we need one another, and we need to hear your word; and if we hear it here, let us become so possessed by it that we become servants of it out in your world. Amen

It's always interesting to get a glimpse into the world of the Bible. When we do we realize very quickly that these were men and women who were very much like ourselves, but they lived in a culture quite different from our own. For one thing, biblical people lived in a society that condoned the owning of slaves. Of course, the same thing could be said of our own society up until one hundred fifty years ago; and as in our own nation, to be a runaway slave was a serious event.

Today's scripture centers on one such slave - a man named Useful. That's what his name means - *useful*. We know him as Onesimus. St. Paul is writing from prison, probably in Rome, and somehow under Paul's influence this runaway slave named Useful (or Onesimus) has become a follower of Jesus. It is clear that Paul has become quite fond of Onesimus; but Paul has a dilemma. Legally Onesimus belongs to a man named Philemon. Ironically, Philemon is a good friend of Paul's in Colossae, and Philemon is a devout follower of Jesus. A house church meets in his home.

So here's Paul's dilemma: Should he send Onesimus back to Philemon as the law dictates? Runaway slaves could be put to death or at least suffer harsh punishment. Now, you may think this is no dilemma at all. Philemon is a Christian. Case closed. I wish it were that simple; it ought to be. Unfortunately, many Christians through the centuries have been able to rationalize owning slaves. It happened in our country. Many otherwise devout Christians in the South owned slaves and seemingly thought nothing of it. It's amazing how many terrible attitudes and actions can be rationalized in the name of religion. Besides, Philemon was part of a society that condoned owning slaves. If he acted kindly toward a runaway slave,

how would he be treated by his friends who were probably also slave owners. The issue seems black and white to us - no pun intended - but it was not that black and white to the people of that time.

Even worse, it may be that Onesimus stole something from Philemon before he ran away. Philemon may have had many reasons for not feeling too kindly toward Onesimus. But Paul wants to do the right thing; to give Philemon the opportunity to do the right thing as well. So Paul sends Onesimus back to Philemon with a letter. This letter is the little book of Philemon which Michael just read from. He asks Philemon to welcome Onesimus back, not as a slave, but as a brother in Christ. Paul even makes a little play on words with regard to Onesimus' name. He says, "Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me." Again, his name meant *useful*. So Paul is saying once he was useless, but now he is Onesimus - useful.

Jesus has done that for millions of people through the ages, hasn't he? Jesus has changed them from useless to useful. And so Paul asked Philemon to give Onesimus a second chance. Christian faith is the faith of the second chance. You do understand that, don't you?

This is what the cross is all about. We were all, every one of us, useless at one time or another; but Jesus gave his life to make us useful to God. You don't have to be a criminal, a prostitute or a runaway slave to qualify for a second chance. Sometimes you can be wealthy, educated, cultured while at the same time being prideful and snobbish and condescending and qualify for a second chance. Second chances are why Jesus came into this world.

Police stopped a teenage girl in Idaho sometime back, and there had been complaints that a car had been seen going around her neighborhood in reverse. The girl told police that her parents let her use the car, but she had put too much mileage on it. "I was just trying to unwind some of it," she said. There are parts of our lives that all of us would like to rewind. If driving around the block in reverse would expunge our record, we would all go out to the parking lot and rev up our engines. But something more than that was needed.

Back in the 1978 for three months I served as a chaplain at Massachusetts General Hospital, and as part of that program I had to go to McLean Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts. That's the psychiatric wing of

Massachusetts General Hospital. During that time I learned that an unusually high percentage of those undergoing treatment for alcoholism had received childhood religious training. However, the vast majority of these alcoholics received this one message in their religious training: One mistake and you're going to hell. "Since we're going to hell anyway," one patient explained to me, "we might as well enjoy the ride."

The God that they had been given as children was a God without grace, without love, without forgiveness and new life. That God is too small. The real God in Jesus forgave those who crucified him while he hung on the cross. The real God in Jesus offered paradise to thief who repented while on the cross himself - a U turn at the very last minute. The real God is a God of grace who offers people second chances, and third chances and fourth.

There's a term in golf; it's called a "mulligan." The golfers in our congregation are familiar with that term. A mulligan simply put is a do-over. It's a great thing. Hit a bad shot, take a mulligan and replay the stroke. Understand, a mulligan isn't really legal under the rules of golf. Tiger Woods couldn't get away with that. Mulligans are most often employed during friendly rounds by golf buddies or during charity tournaments like St. John's where mulligan are sometimes sold to benefit our charity. If Mulligans are for sale, that means that the golfer can buy a Mulligan for a set price each; which to me...I've been thinking about it...sounds very much like the sale of indulgences in Martin Luther's day.

Fortunately, you and I do not need to pay God for second chances. That's because of something called grace - amazing grace. Second chances are at the heart, the very heart, of Christian faith. Sometimes the biggest obstacle to people receiving a second chance is the attitude of fellow Christians. Just because the person bears the name of Jesus does not mean that he or she has the heart of Jesus. Someone has said that the Christian army is the only army that shoots its wounded. Sometimes the critical, judgmental, unforgiving attitudes of fellow Christians hinder people in need of a second chance.

Two of my good parishioners in Connecticut had a son die of AIDS. Rather than to try to hide the tragedy, Don and Carol said, "We're going to make this public. People are going to have to know." Their son was an artist, a wonderful, sensitive person. They loved him dearly, but what made Don and

Carol decide to tell the story is that following their son's death trying to bring comfort. The person said, "I am sorry." They thanked the person. Then the person asked, "What did he die of?" They replied, "He died of AIDS." Then the other person said, "I'm sorry anyway."

I'm sure that this other person didn't mean to be hurtful when he or she said, "I'm sorry anyway." It's just that it's easy to condemn death by AIDS, in a way that you would never do with a death by cigarettes, or death by fast driving, or death by overeating, or a host of other ways we hasten a premature death. Fortunately, God doesn't label people, except with one label - forgiven. Our faith is one of second chances, even if sometimes religious people can be the biggest obstacles to people seeking second chances.

And you do understand, don't you, that Philemon is being a second chance as well as Onesimus. How does Philemon respond to Paul's request that he be lenient with Onesimus? Did he have his former slave punished? Did he cave in to the peer pressure of his friends and fellow slave owners? Did he grant Onesimus his freedom so that he might return to help Paul in his ministry? I suspect so, but we really don't know. The scriptures don't tell us that. Legend has it that Onesimus later became Bishop of Ephesus, but it just is a legend. I'd like to think that it's true, not just for the sake of Onesimus, but also for Philemon's sake. This was a test of Philemon's conversion, wasn't it? He bore Jesus' name, but did he bear Jesus' heart?.

This is a question for each of us too. I suspect that each of us has somebody in our sphere of influence who we are a bit hard on. It may be a family member, or a friend, or a neighbor, or a coworker. At some time or another in the past that person has offended us, or hurt us, or betrayed us; and we have a difficult time forgiving. We act civil perhaps, but deep down we are distrustful, resentful, and we have a hard time keeping it from showing. Maybe it does show. Maybe our temper flares more easily with this person than it does with others. We think to ourselves that person doesn't deserve another chance. That may be true, but neither did we deserve another chance when Jesus' forgave and accepted us.

Perhaps it is time for us to reconsider and bring that person's situation before God and let God decide. It may be the hardest thing that a Christian is called upon to do, to forgive someone who has done us wrong, but we see in the New Testament that that is exactly what Jesus calls upon us to do.

Mahatma Gandhi once said, “The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attitude of the strong.” I believe he is right. You are strong if you are strong enough to give someone else a second chance.

Several years ago in my ministry in Connecticut, I had to let go my secretary who had worked for me for about five years. It was really difficult to call her into my office to tell her that I was going to have to let her go. The reasons, which I will not state here, were reasons which I felt were very important. So on the Sunday after I had let my secretary go - and there were many of us who were devastated by that - I was just off the sacristy and heard someone who I trusted very much and thought was a friend, criticizing my decision.

One thing I’ve learned in church life is that gossip is always prevalent, and it hurts when we hear something said about us saying or doing something that really is not reflective of our true character. This person said that I was being very arbitrary and all kinds of other things. I got very angry, and I didn’t let the person at first know what I had heard, but I was really angry with the person. It was only through prayer, and a lot of work and talking with other priests about it, that I went to this person and told them how angry I was that they questioned my judgment because they really didn’t know all the facts.

God said, “There is a seed that is planted in your heart; you either hate and be angry, or you forgive.” Paul sent a letter by way of a runaway slave. He was asking Philemon to give this man named Useful another chance. Did he? I hope so. If there’s someone to whom we need to give a second chance, I pray that we will be strong enough as well.

Amen

Transcribed by Phyllis K. Briggs

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