

# EVERYDAY HEROES: A STORY OF RECONCILIATION

November 19, 2017  
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First Presbyterian Church of Marion, Iowa  
Text: Philemon 1:1-25

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## SCRIPTURE

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### **Philemon 1:1-25**

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. 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. 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. 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—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you. Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

The Word of the Lord            Thanks be to God!

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## SERMON

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The holidays are upon us. Can you believe it? It always seems to catch me off-guard every year. I know they are coming and time is getting short, but all of a sudden I realize “Thanksgiving is next week!!” And I panic, sometime more, sometimes less, depending on what is going on. So here we are and many of us will be getting together with extended family this Thursday and remind ourselves just how grateful we are by stuffing ourselves silly and watching football. Now, ideally it is a wonderful time spent getting away from the routine and being with those we love. Unfortunately, this is not always the case.

Let’s face it; these family get-togethers can be extremely stressful. There is Uncle Cliff who is always critical of every single dish placed on the table. The turkey is too dry, the potatoes too salty, the gravy is cold, the rolls are burnt and the pie is not the way his mother made it. But does he ever offer to help in the kitchen? Forget that! Then there is Aunt Jean and Cousin Ron who are on opposite ends of the political spectrum and want to turn every family gathering into a knock down drag out battle over whatever is going on in Washington this week. There is your niece, Katie, who never looks up from her cellphone. Grandma is always going on about

why Julie isn't married yet. Grandpa keeps asking what everything costs and then rants about how that is ridiculous and how no one should pay more than \$5000 for anything that doesn't have a basement. Meanwhile, Uncle Bob is not talking to Uncle Steve over some altercation they had back during the Reagan administration. And Aunt June insists on bringing Twinkle, her 90 pound black Lab mix that thinks it is a lapdog and likes to chew things. And your big brother, Al, thinks he is being funny, but makes these biting sarcastic remarks that are just so irritating. We start out hoping for something out of a Norman Rockwell painting, but end up with something that is more like the Simpsons.

I went online and did a Google search for the words, "dealing with relatives at the holidays." I came up with 16,800,000 hits. A lot of them were magazine articles with titles like "8 Tips for Dealing with Difficult Relatives," or "10 Ways to Keep Family from Ruining Your Holidays." There were all kinds of ideas. One was to remember that it is not about you, so don't take things personally. Your uncle may make some crack about Presbyterians, but that doesn't mean he is even thinking about you. Another tip was to set realistic expectations. Yes, it would be nice if everyone would sit and have a pleasant chat around the table after the meal, but accept the fact that some of your family will go turn on the football game and there is nothing that can be done about that. Another tip was to have a "blankie," that is have something that comforts you, something small in your pocket, a key chain with the serenity prayer on it, a token, a button or a charm, something like that. When things get tense, just rub it, breath deep, and take comfort from this object. The tip I liked best was to pretend you are a writer for a comedy TV show and imagine how you might use what is going on as script material for the next episode.

It was George Burns who once said that "Happiness is having a large, loving, caring, close-knit family, in another city." There is a lot of truth to that. Families can be wonderful and the source of great joy, but they also can bring out the very worst within us.

For the last two months we have been working through the stories of everyday heroes in the Bible. We have looked at people who did not part the Red Sea, or kill any giants or raise anyone from the dead, and yet they have demonstrated great faith and God has been able to use them in many ways. We are closing out this sermon series today with the story of conflict within a household, a family, and an appeal for reconciliation. The letter to Philemon is one of the shorter books in the Bible, the shortest of Paul's letters. There are not a lot of heavy theological issues present in this text. It is a rather simple, personal letter. Some have even questioned why it is included in the New Testament. Yet, at its core, this letter is all about how the Beloved Community, how the followers of Jesus Christ are supposed to function in this world.

The letter is addressed to Philemon, of course, who lived in the Greek city of Colossae, a city where Paul had brought the gospel some years before. Paul calls Philemon "our dear friend and co-worker," and then mentions, "Apphia, our sister" and "Archippus, our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house." We do not know for certain, but a good guess is that Philemon and Apphia are husband and wife, and Archippus is their son. They are all one family and a body of believers, a church, meets at their house. The letter is on behalf of a slave named Onesimus, and from verse 18 it seems that this slave has done something to harm Philemon, something that perhaps has cost Philemon money. It does not specifically say so, but the assumption is that Onesimus was a slave belonging to Philemon. At some point he ran away and probably stole some money from his master. Somehow Onesimus had made it to Rome, where Paul was being held as a prisoner. There is a lot of speculation about what happened, but somehow the two met. Onesimus heard Paul's message of a new life that was available through the power of the Risen Christ. Eventually he became a believer and was baptized. He and Paul became very close, so much so that Paul calls him his child, and says he is like a father to him. They decide they must correct the wrong that has been done. So Paul sends him back with this letter, urging Philemon to welcome Onesimus back into his household, back into the family.

Now, at the time in the Roman Empire, masters had complete power over their slaves and could treat them anyway they liked. Some branded their slaves, and a master would face no more consequence for killing a slave, than he would for killing his horse or dog. When runaway slaves were caught, the usual punishment was

crucifixion. So running away would be bad enough, but if Onesimus stole from Philemon, well that was just adding insult to injury. Philemon had the power and authority to make Onesimus suffer greatly.

It is easy to think that this is not at all relevant to us here in Iowa in 2017. Slavery was abolished in this country over 150 years ago, and while it does still exist in some parts of the world, and certainly human trafficking goes on here in our state, even so most of us here this morning are insulated from these kind of things. So what does this letter have to say to us today? Well, this is a story about power, status and privilege, which comes right out of the recent headlines. For months now we have been hearing news stories about women accusing men of sexual harassment and assault. The reason these women have not complained before is that these men had power, status and privilege, and these women did not. They felt that they were helpless to do anything about these unwanted advances, that they would not be believed or worse, they would suffer more if they said anything. So this is not about flirting and dating. It is not about just fooling around and being funny. It is about totally inappropriate behavior, if not outright assault and abuse. That is why this is so wrong. But there are other stories in the news. At the heart of all the recent demonstrations by the Ku Klux Klan, white nationalists, and Neo-Nazis are issues of power, status and privilege. Health care reform, tax reform, almost any of the political battles going on are all about power, status and privilege. Those who have power and status are not about to give it up, no matter what political camp they might belong to.

It is safe to assume that Philemon had power, status and privilege. Onesimus had less than nothing. So what is Paul's message to Philemon? He begins by saying, "I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love..." Paul says he has some power and status over Philemon and could use it, if he wanted to. But he has no desire to do so. He goes on to say he would like to have kept Onesimus with him, because he has been such a help to him while he is in prison. The implication, of course, is that if Onesimus did stay with him in Rome he would be safe from any consequences of his running away. But Paul had decided he won't do that, but is sending him back to Philemon so that he "might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother." Paul then asks Philemon to welcome Onesimus as he would welcome Paul. Paul says if Philemon will do this it will "refresh" Paul's heart, and actually the term used implies that this will give much needed rest to Paul's weary heart.

It is so easy to get caught up in the power and status struggles that go on throughout our society and nation. These struggles go on at work, throughout the business world, and yes, even in church structures. And let's face it, these struggles go on within our families. It is easy to just shrug and say that is the way things work in this world. You have to look out for yourself because no one else is going to. You are going to be sorry if you let down your guard for even a minute. But in this little personal letter to one who Paul calls his "co-worker," he asks Philemon to set aside this kind of thinking. The Greek word for co-worker is synergy, working together to make something happen. Paul essentially says, "Let the world fight their battles over who has more power, and who has more status. We are not of this world. Rather we belong to God's Beloved Community and are in this together. We are all siblings, brothers and sisters, all on the same level, all working together out of our love for our Lord Jesus. Together let us be reconciled, let us be one in Christ. If you would be willing to do that for me, Philemon, you would refresh my heart."

As I read what Paul was saying I could not help but wonder if Paul was thinking of Barnabas, our everyday hero we talked about last week. If you remember the story, Paul started out as Saul, a powerful law enforcement officer responsible for arresting and imprisoning the early believers in the months following Pentecost. Many within the infant church had good reason to be bitter and resentful against this man who was responsible for a great deal of suffering. But Saul encountered Jesus and his life was forever turned around. He wanted to become a part of the church he had initially persecuted. It is understandable that they were extremely suspicious of him and perhaps even wanted some sort of revenge or compensation for all the harm he had done. But Barnabas, whose name means "Son of Encouragement" went to the disciples and said "Saul is not who he once was. He is now one of us, a brother in Christ, a co-worker, one who is loved by God. We need to be reconciled, all part of the Beloved Community." And so what Barnabas had done for Paul, Paul was now trying to do for a runaway slave named Onesimus.

I began by talking about tension at family gatherings during the holidays. Now, I know there are some families that are highly dysfunctional where all sorts of toxic behavior goes on. But in most families the conflict is all about power and status. It is all about who is in charge, who gets to call the shots, who gets their way. It may be very subtle, but often while the words of the argument are about who is going to carve the turkey, the feelings behind it are all about the longstanding pecking order in the family hierarchy. My suggestion is to just step out of that web of power and status. Don't play those games, for they don't really matter. Instead, focus on love. Frederick Buechner is one of my favorite writers and theologians. In one of his sermons he made this simple, but wonderful statement. He said, "We are above all things loved—that is the good news of the gospel." That is much more comforting than keeping something in your pocket as your grown up version of a blankie. You are loved. No matter what Uncle Cliff or Grandma or Cousin Ron might say or do. Hopefully you are loved by all those in your family that drive you crazy, but above all that you are loved by God. It has nothing to do with power or status or privilege. You are loved, deeply, completely, unconditionally. Nothing can happen to stop that love. Remember that and let that be a source of reconciliation and hope. No matter how messy things become, no matter what anyone says, no matter how many times you have the same argument over and over, you are loved.

So how did Philemon respond to Paul's request? Did he welcome Onesimus back as a brother or did he call the authorities and have him arrested and punished him in some way? The Bible does not tell us, but there is another letter in existence, written maybe 45 to 50 years after Paul wrote to Philemon, around the year 100. This letter was from a theologian named Ignatius, and in it he mentions the bishop of Ephesus whose name was Onesimus. There is no reason why this could not be the same person, this runaway slave. Onesimus ends up becoming the senior pastor of one of the mega churches that Paul began. He becomes a great leader in the early church when he could have just as easily ended up a nameless victim of the ruthless empire, nailed to a cross in some forsaken place. The difference is that Philemon listened to Paul, forgetting about power and status, remembering above all things that he was loved. That makes him a hero, an everyday hero who was faithful and true, and who God was able to use to do great things.

I hope you have enjoyed our sermon series on everyday heroes, and that you have come to realize that God can work through any of us for God's purposes. I also hope you have a wonderful Thanksgiving. If you are traveling anywhere, my prayers go with you for a safe journey. As we take time to be thankful, may God refresh our hearts. And as Paul says to Philemon, may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.