

SERMON
“Sense of Place”
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September 5, 2010
St. John’s Chapel UCC

Jeremiah 18: 1-11 “Come, go down to the potter’s house...So I went down to the potters house...The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled (blemished) in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.”

Philemon 1-21

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our dear friend and coworker, 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 be 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.

Luke 14: 25-33

“Estimate the cost to see whether there is enough to complete the job”

SERMON

Hate my father and mother? No way! And my children? Impossible! Hate is a pretty harsh word for even my brother and sisters! My husband? Well, there are days!

Trying to decide how to replace a broken chair has become a major event in Dean's and mine's life. I don't remember when the chair broke and Dean and I started looking for its replacement, but I can tell you, it has been months. Nowhere near this amount of time was given to my decision to become a follower of Jesus Christ—at least, not the first time around. Basically, what Jesus is saying here is if you do not consider the cost, (and discipleship can be very costly—as costly as ending up in the crossfire with those you hold dearest), then you may end up halfway through this adventure with God without the wherewithall to finish the project.

Let's say that halfway through this adventure you receive a letter from a guy named Paul who pleads for you to accept the unacceptable. He asks you to consider your **sense of place** in your relationship with others. He asks you to move from “lording it over others” to treating them like brothers and sisters. Remember on August 15th of this year I told you that God's intention—God's will for all human beings—is for us to become what in fact we are, brothers and sisters. Well, here it is again. It's there throughout the Bible if you take some time to read it.

We went on a Habitat for Humanity Mission trip to San Antonio, Texas. There at the build site, up on the roof pounding in nails, one of my students said her mother and father were building a new home. Offhandedly I said, “How does it compare to this home we're building?” She said in an upset tone of voice, “Well, of course, it is much larger than this house and in a much better neighborhood.” She was insulted that I would even consider that her parents would live in a home like the one we were building for a low income family.

Thinking this a teachable moment, I plowed forward. “According to the teachings of Christ, we are called by God to eliminate privilege over others. If this house is not good enough for your parents then it is not good enough for the couple who will live here.” Bad move! Before long the whole group of OU students were upset with me. After all. They, unlike other students, were giving up their Spring Break to build a home for a deserving family, and now that was not good enough for me. Trying to explain that I was just pointing out Jesus’ teachings on the cost of discipleship did not help. I repeatedly told them that they were doing was a good thing, yet it was still below the standards of the radical equality God proposes.

One can easily see that the gospel, the “good news”, can cause all sorts of problems between friends, colleagues and family if we get serious about implementing its teachings, or if we call one another to faithfulness.

The letter Paul did send Philemon, calling him to faithfulness, recommending he relinquish his “sense of place”, was a lot more tactful than my approach—if not downright cunning.

Paul’s in prison. Onesimus, a slave, has run away from his master and gone to Paul. Why would Onesimus do that, for in going to see Paul he flees the cruelty of slavery and goes to the most dangerous place imaginable, a Roman prison.

Borg and Crossan tell us that according to Roman law, when severe punishment or even death was pending, a slave could flee to a friend of his master’s to ask him to intercede on his behalf. Even better, a friend who could operate from a position of superiority. Onesimus must have seen Paul as a superior of Philemon.

Interesting! In a letter recommending the downsizing of Philemon’s **sense of place** from slave master to that of *brother*, we learn that Paul is being asked to use his superior position to

help this slave. Yet from the very beginning of the letter, Paul models a behavior befitting of an exchange between beloved brothers, or friends on equal footing. “Philemon, I could command you to do your duty, yet I prefer appealing to you on the basis of love.” (Philemon verse 8, there is no chapter here since the whole book has only one chapter). Have you ever read Philemon? Neither had I until about two weeks ago. It only takes up one page in our pew Bible. It is a quick read packed full of insights.

“Philemon, I could command you to do your duty (I am in a superior position here), yet I prefer appealing to you on the basis of love.”

What is Paul asking Philemon to do? Is he asking Philemon to take back his former slave with whom he must have already been extremely upset, for he was ready to severely punish or kill him? Now the master’s anger has been compounded with the slave’s running away from him. And Paul has the audacity to ask him to what?! Take him back as a forgiven slave?! No, it is something much more radical than that. Paul sends Onesimus home to Philemon so that he can voluntarily liberate him from slavery and welcome him into his family as a beloved brother. Receive him, “forever, no longer as slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother.” Philemon

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Paul does not issue this appeal in a personal letter to Philemon. No. He also addresses it to Apphia, our sister, to Archippus, our fellow soldier, and to the church meeting in Philemon’s house. How cunning! The letter addresses a private matter in a very public way. His church is watching to see if Philemon will indeed do his Christian duty as Paul defines it. It is one thing to sin privately, but another for the whole church to know. Imagine for a moment Onesimus arriving home with this letter. If Philemon does not adhere to Paul’s plea and free Onesimus, he’ll end up with egg on his face before the church. If he does free Onesimus, all his other slaves

could demand their freedom and people of the village, who were also slave owners, would not be too happy with Onesimus for setting this example.¹

This was no small matter. Paul's request will cost Philemon. It will exact a price, not just in monetary terms, but in his sense of place...not only in his relationship with Onesimus, but in relation to his position in the village. How does a radical change in relationships that eliminates privilege and advantage feel to those involved on both sides? Is such a change even possible?

How deeply embedded are our assumptions and sense of place in our daily lives and in the global context? Who, do I feel is to cater to my needs...at the expense of others? Who, do you feel is to cater to your needs? Have you ever heard yourself saying, "I don't like that and it shouldn't be that way", as if the whole world should come to a halt, shift perspective and do it the way you like. What challenges lie in this text for us, personally and communally? We are shown not only, at times, to downsize our station in life, but also to cunningly using our station to help others move up in theirs. This is hard stuff—near to impossible if left to our own devices.

That's why we must go down to the potter's house, where imperfections in the potter's hand are reworked into another vessel, as seems good to God. That's why we go to this table to drink wine and break bread together, to take in Christ, so that we can be transformed as individuals and as a community, and thus enabled to live a very radical gospel. It is our calling. It is God's mission. Amen.

¹ Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The First Paul*, p,39-45