

15 PENTECOST (LECTIONARY 23) SEPTEMBER 5, 2010 CYCLE "C"

TITLE: ONCE USELESS BUT NOW USEFUL, ONCE LOST BUT NOW FOUND.

READINGS: Deut. 30:15-20, Ps. 1, Philemon 1-21, Luke 14:25-33

When we read Paul's letter to Philemon it really gives us the sense of a letter. It is short; it is warm and very personal. Listen to his fraternal and tender expression in verse 7, "I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother." It is obvious that love is given pre-eminence for it is love directed towards fellow Christians that is not only praised but called upon from his dear friend Philemon. Paul is writing his friend and fellow Christian from prison in Rome. He had a runaway slave named Onesimus, whose name means useful, who had become a follower of Christ and was there serving Paul. But this posed a problem for Paul. Since it was common to have slaves in those days, any who had run away were to be returned to their masters and either would be put to death or suffer very harsh punishment. The dilemma Paul faced was this: He was required to return this runaway slave, but Onesimus had become a devout Christian.

Paul decides to send Onesimus back with a letter. He asks Philemon to welcome him back not as a slave, but as a brother in Christ. Paul even makes a play on words with regard to Onesimus' name. He says, "Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful (Onesimus) both to you and to me." Vs.11. He is appealing to Philemon to give him a second chance, to forgive his wrongs and to take him back as a brother in Christ.

Isn't that just what Christ has done for us, for people throughout the ages? He has changed us from useless to useful. He has given each of us a second chance. That is fundamental in our theology. That is what the cross is all about. We all were at one time useless, but Christ has given his life to make us useful to God. Second chances are why Christ came into the world. "I came that you may have life and have it in abundance." Remember that Christ forgave those who crucified him while he hung on the cross. He offered paradise to the thief who repented. Our God is a God of amazing grace, who gives us second chances. For it is when we are lost that we are found.

If there are any golfers in our congregation they will understand the term “Mulligan”. Simply put, a Mulligan is a “do-over”. If you hit a bad shot, you just give yourself permission to replay that stroke. Of course, Mulligans aren’t really “legal” under the Rules of Golf. They are used during friendly rounds between golf buddies. Mulligans may also be used during charity tournaments where they are sometimes sold to benefit the charity. A golfer may buy two or three Mulligans for a set price each. (Sounds very much like the sale of indulgences in Martin Luther’s day, doesn’t it?) Fortunately you and I don’t need to pay God for our second chances. That is because of God’s endless love, forgiveness and grace - amazing grace. Second chances are at the heart of our Christian faith.

But what do we do with our second chances from God? Do we accept and take advantage of God’s forgiveness and grace? Do we in imitation of Christ reach out in forgiveness to one another? This is what Paul was telling his friend Philemon. For he is saying to him that he is being given a second chance just as Onesimus. Did Philemon have his runaway slave punished? Or did he grant Onesimus his freedom so that he might return to help Paul in his ministry? I would like to think so. Scripture doesn’t say. There is a legend that Onesimus later became bishop of Ephesus. It would be great if that could be verified, not only for the sake of Onesimus but also for Philemon. Remember that this was an opportunity for Philemon to exercise his true life in Christ as a Christian. He bore Christ’s name, but did he bear Christ’s heart?

That is also the question for each one of us as well. It may be one of the hardest things a person is called upon to do, to forgive another especially one who has wronged us deeply. But that is just what Jesus calls upon us to do. Just as Jesus tells us in today’s Gospel pericope, “And no one can be my disciple who does not carry his own cross and follow me.” Lk.14:27 (Living Bible) Yes, Lord, my cross may well be that person I have not yet forgiven.

Pastor Steven Fetter tells us about a lady who went through a difficult divorce. Her father was a very strict fundamentalist pastor. When she moved out of her home and filed for divorce, her father refused to speak to her again. She was never welcomed in his church and her family cut her off and acted as though she was dead. She had grown up in that kind of rigid legalistic faith and did believe divorce was a sin. But unlike her father and family she felt that it was a forgivable sin. We know that God forgives the contrite heart and offers a second chance. Sometimes

the critical, judgmental, unforgiving attitudes of fellow Christians hinder those who need that second chance.

Paul sent a letter to his fellow Christian and friend Philemon asking him to give this man named useful, a second chance. Did he? I hope so. If he did he not only bore the name of Christ but also bore his heart as well. Is there someone to whom we need to give a second chance? You bear Christ's name, do you bear his heart as well? **Amen.**

Pastor Barney