

Sermon

September 4, 2016 | The 16th Sunday after Pentecost
Text: Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33 | Preacher: Dan Puchalla

There are not many Biblical texts that have loomed as large in the history of the United States as our second reading this morning, St. Paul's letter to Philemon. It is often said that before the Civil War was fought on the battlefields, it was fought in the pulpits. This letter was central to that homiletical and theological debate, a debate that echoed out from holy sanctuaries a reverberated throughout this nation's halls of power. The question was, Does this letter – this letter with which Paul returned the slave Onesimus to his master Philemon – does this tell us that St. Paul was opposed to slavery or that we was permissive of it? Abolitionist preachers were convinced that this letter absolutely shows that Paul thought slavery was wrong. Pro-slavery preachers were convinced that this letter absolutely shows that Paul thought slavery was fine. The same text, two wildly different interpretations.

It's a bit like the Constitution. I remember my high school civics teacher telling me it's all about where you put the emphasis. For example, the Second Amendment says, "A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed." Emphasize that last part, and it might seem like the state cannot regulate gun ownership. Emphasize the first part, and it might seem like the state must regulate gun ownership.

Likewise in the letter to Philemon. If you emphasize that Paul is returning Onesimus to Philemon, then it seems like Paul is fine with slavery, otherwise he wouldn't be returning the slave to his master. However, if you emphasize where Paul says, "that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother," then it seems like Paul's goal is Onesimus's freedom. It's all a matter of emphasis.

Both the Constitution and Philemon are riddled with ambiguity. But the key to understanding Philemon, I think, and the key to hearing what it says to us today, is to understand why it is so ambiguous.

Unlike the Constitution -- and indeed unlike Paul's other letters -- this letter isn't written for a wide audience. This letter is unique among Paul's letter in how intimate and personal it is in both tone and subject matter. And what is generally true for all Paul's

letters is excruciatingly true for this letter -- when we read it, we are literally opening somebody else's mail.

This letter is ambiguous because we are eavesdropping on someone else's conversation. It's like when you catch yourself listening too closely to someone else's cell phone conversation on the El -- we're only getting half the conversation and none of the context.

Whether Paul was in favor of slavery or not is a question this letter cannot answer -- but more importantly, that question is beside the point of reading it. At the end of the day, it should matter very little to us what Paul's opinion of slavery was because we know very well that Paul and all the earliest Christians had yet to work out all the ethical, political, and social implications of the new life they had received in Christ Jesus. All the same, this letter overflows with that new life, and that is what makes it worth reading, because this letter centers on the intimacy and friendship between Paul and Philemon and Onesimus and reveals how Christ makes it possible for one person to fully love another.

The new life in Christ Jesus makes that love possible by tearing down, flipping over, reordering, and creating anew the relationships between persons. That is the message in today's Gospel. Today Jesus tells us that in order to follow him, one has to be willing to give up that which is most dear because the whole world has to be reordered. And he's very particular. He says, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters ... cannot be my disciple." I do think Jesus meant this in a very literal way, inasmuch as it's necessary to risk alienating even family members if it means doing what is right. But I think there's something else Jesus is getting at, too. He starts this teaching talking about hating family members but he concludes it with a command to give up possessions. I wonder then, if that is also what he means by hating parents, spouses, children, and siblings -- that we must give up those, too, as our possessions, as if they were things to be possessed, like a slave.

Last year I turned 32, which is the same age my parents were when I was born. And when I realized that, I had this epiphany. I looked at myself, I thought about how hard it was in my 20s to

stretch from childhood into adulthood, I thought about all my dreams and apprehensions about the future, and most of all I thought about how much I still don't have figured out about the world and about myself. In realizing that my parents probably weren't that different from me when I was born, for the first time I could start to see the real people my parents had been all along. The thingness of "Mom" and "Dad" gave way to the personhood of Sue and Chris. This, I think, is what it means to hate "father" and "mother," it means to give them up as things in order to love them as persons.

This is the new life in Christ that overflows in Paul's letter to Philemon, whether or not he or his reader ever grasped the full implications of it. This letter is a plea and command to Philemon to give up the thingness of the slave in order to love the person who Onesimus is. The possibility of this is the hope of salvation for the world.

Desmond Tutu once wrote, "God calls us to be [God's] partners to work for a new kind of society where people count; where people matter more than things, more than possessions; where human life is not just respected but positively revered; where people will be secure and not suffer from the fear of hunger, from ignorance, from disease; where there will be more gentleness, more caring, more sharing, more compassion, more laughter; where there is peace and not war..." (Tutu, *God Has a Dream*, 63). We know too well that putting things above people and treating people as things are two sides of the same coin. And this much is unambiguous: What it means to follow Jesus is to give up the things for the sake of the people.

Now, before I sit down, I'm going to get myself in a little bit of trouble. I want to wade into the troubled waters around this whole thing about the National Anthem and Colin Kaepernick's seated protest of it. I want to talk about this because this is the latest piece in the critically important conversations about race happening in our country right now, and also because I have a personal fascination with symbols and the controversies they cause. Most of all, though, I have to talk about symbols right now because -- well, you know all that stuff I just said about things and persons? Thing is, symbols make a dog's breakfast of all of that.

Symbols blur the line between things and persons. Symbols are things that are more than things, pointing at their very end toward a person or persons, whether human persons or divine

ones. To the extent that this is true, a flag, an anthem, a cross, are all different from just any other thing because and only because of the lives they point to. Therefore, to that extent, it makes sense to salute a flag, to stand for a national anthem, to bow to a cross as it passes by. And it makes sense for folks to be offended if, say, someone very publicly does not stand for the national anthem. But, of course, such offense is the very substance of protest. Colin Kaepernick deliberately causes offense to the symbol in order to petition the state and fellow voters for redress of ongoing legal and societal wrongs, which is precisely the sort of political action the Framers of the Constitution thought it was so important to protect.

The controversy around Kaepernick's protest highlights for me the fact that, when it comes to symbols, as is always the case, we too readily let the thing obscure the persons. The flag all too easily obscures the republic for which it stands and its failures to secure justice and liberty for all. The national anthem all too easily obscures the land worked by the unfree and the home stolen from the Braves. The cross all too easily obscures the one who gave himself over to state execution so that we might be free to give up everything for the sake of a new society.

Jesus' teaching today holds true for symbols, too. To follow Jesus, we must be willing to give up even our most sacred ones. Or, put positively, we ought to feel free and empowered to set aside symbols when they no longer properly point to the persons they ought. And that criterion should be brought to bear on Francis Scott Key's lyrics in the anthem we know as the "Star Spangled Banner." Now, historians can debate as long as they want about whether Francis Scott Key was celebrating the deaths of black slaves in the blood-soaked third stanza of his poem. But I think that's a little bit like asking if Paul was permissive of slavery or not. At the end of the day, the more important question is, Does this song really point to who we are?

Even if we only judge "The Star Spangled Banner" by the one verse we actually sing -- or, to be more precisely, the one verse we clumsily mumble because no one can ever seem to remember how the words go -- it comes up desperately short. "The Star Spangled Banner" is overflowing with thingness, it's a thing that only points to other things, focused on a flag and bombs and ramparts, doing little to point us toward the people of the United States of America. It does not point to those many generations and communities of people who have come since 1812, those brave people of so many backgrounds and walks of life, soldiers and labor leaders, slaves and suffragettes, Stonewall queers and

North Dakota Sioux, people who have given blood and sweat and tears and dogged protest to push this country ever closer to *actually* being the land of the free.

And so, perhaps it is time for something better.

Perhaps it is perhaps time for a national anthem worthy of those generations who have

*come over a way that with tears has been watered;
Treading a path through the blood of the slaughtered.*

Perhaps it is time for a national anthem worthy of our ongoing struggle for justice and liberty for all, as we face

*the rising sun of a new day begun.
[that] we march on till victory is won.*

What is certain is that it is well past time for a nation worthy of such an anthem, a nation worthy of

The faith that the dark past has taught us;

a nation worthy of

The hope that the present has brought us.

And most of all, a nation worthy of the God

*who hast brought us thus far on the way.**

Amen.

*Italicized lyrics: James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938)