

Text: Philemon 1-21 "Brothers and Sisters in Christ"

Grace, Mercy and peace are now yours from God our Father and from Our Lord and savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Have you ever been stuck in the middle? Have you ever had the unfortunate experience of being stuck in the middle of two people, where one has wronged the other. Where something happened, some tough words have been spoken, a thoughtless and heartless statement is said. A Reputation is damaged due to the other's fault. Friend hurts friend in deed, through theft, through negligence through abuse of a relationship. Whatever the situation friend has hurt friend. There is an open wound between two people and find yourself sitting in the midst of this hurt. What do you do? Each friend would have you on their side, you are pulled each and everyway to validate one over the other. What do you do?

This situation can be made even worse. What if these two warring sides, where not distant friends but instead your family. Your own flesh and blood arguing and fighting and looking to you to join their side. To champion their cause against another. The situation gets even worse as we bring it into the church. As Christians, Brother and Sisters in Christ, what do we do when we are caught in the middle as the family of God sins against one another? When members of this body of Christ injury and wound one another. What do you do, when you are caught in the middle?

The book of Philemon, our epistle reading for today outlines for us a similar situation. This epistle outlines the situation between three people. Three people who have had their lives completely changed by the Gospel, each has been called by Christ to faith, given the Holy Spirit and made a member of the family of God. Three brothers in Christ are now faced with the challenge of reconciliation over a serious offense.

The first of our three people, is the author of our epistle reading for today, Paul. Paul when he was younger, was called Saul had his life was changed by the Gospel, when he encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus. Saul, a pharisee and a member of the tribe of Benjamin, sought to destroy this budding Christian church the people following Jesus. While Saul was ravaging the church, he was struck blind at the appearance of Christ. Saul, Saul why do you persecute me, Jesus asks. Upon seeing this great vision, Saul is renamed Paul, he is baptized and Christ turns this once great weapon against the people of God into a powerful missionary to the gentiles. Jesus sends the now apostle Paul into much of the known world at the time to witness to the world the good news of Christ.

Through these evangelistic missionary journeys, many hear the good news of Christ and are brought to faith by the power of the Holy Spirit. The faith comes to the sleepy town of Colossae and it is heard by a wealthy man in the area by the name of Philemon. Philemon upon hearing the Gospel is brought to faith by the working of the Holy Spirit and like Paul is changed. He opens up His large house to the church that they might gather and meet in his home. Doing what we do here on Sunday's together in a room of his house. Gathering together the brothers and sisters in Christ, eating together, worshipping God and receiving God's gifts together as His people. Paul even tells us that Philemon's faith is refreshing to those who meet him. Philemon's changed heart brings peace to the family of God that gathers at his house. Philemon a wealthy gentile is brought into the family of God and made a fellow brother in the adopted family of God.

As a wealthy man, Philemon owned a large house and in order to keep such a large household running had an unknown number of slaves. It can be hard for us to imagine any Christian owning a slave with our country's history of slavery and the ramifications for it still today, but in the first century it was common place. Slavery was an institution

in Roman Law that could be as harsh as forced labor up to someone who manages a house's day to day activities. In Philemon's house lived one slave named Onesimus. Onesimus' name literally translates as "helpful". This pagan slave worked in the house of Philemon filling any number of different tasks, which are not recorded for us in this epistle. Onesimus serves in this house, a place of gathering Christians until something awful something happens. We do not know exactly what Onesimus did, but he wronged Philemon in some way. Maybe he stole something, said something out of line or damaged Philemon's property, Whatever it was, he sinned in some way against Philemon and the only option Onesimus sees is to run away. He leaves Philemon's household and gets as far away as possible from the damage he has caused.

Through His travels as he runs from his master's home, Onesimus is brought by God to see an Apostle Paul in prison. Out of everyone in the entire world at the time, God leads Onesimus to the old apostle in his twilight years. It is here that Onesimus has his encounter with God. Like Paul on the Damascus road, like Philemon through years of missionary effort, Onesimus hears God's word and by the power of the Holy Spirit is brought to faith. Onesimus' life is changed, he becomes a brother in Christ in the church.

What is amazing about this family of God is that these three men have absolutely nothing in common. Paul is a member of the tribe of Benjamin, a pharisee turned Christian, turned apostle for Christ. His life experience is completely different than Philemon. Who is a rich gentile that Christ called to faith through Paul's missionary journeys. Who opens his house to the church that they might have a place to gather. Onesimus is a runaway slave. The lowest of the low in society, a far cry from Paul or the rich Philemon. This pagan, fugitive slave becomes a Christian. The Gospel does it work and changes their lives. It brings into the family of God. All three enter into baptism on unequal footing in the eyes of society. Rich, poor, Jew or gentile, slave or free they

enter in unequal footing, yet in Christ, in their baptisms they are equal. They are adopted as Sons of God, made brothers in the body of Christ.

As Brothers in Christ Onesimus' sin against Philemon is even more unacceptable. So Paul is stuck in the middle. On the one hand He is grateful to God for Onesimus serving and visiting him while he is in prison and more so grateful to God that Onesimus has been received by Christ into the family. That he has been brought into the body of Christ. What a great and wonderful thing to celebrate. Yet this past sin still looms. Onesimus hurt Philemon in some way and became a fugitive slave. Philemon has every right to discipline Onesimus for his actions. What should Paul do? Paul could keep Onesimus at his side to help him while He is in prison. Paul could send Onesimus back to be punished as a runaway slave, to receive the just consequences for his actions. Paul is stuck in the middle of this broken relationship between brothers.

Paul does something different though. He writes. He writes a short letter to Philemon to be delivered by Onesimus. In this short letter Paul asks for something radical. He asks that Onesimus not be treated as he deserves. Paul is pleading on behalf of Onesimus that he would not be seen as a fugitive slave, but rather one who he has been by Christ. That Philemon would receive the one who hurt him, not as someone to discipline, but rather to receive him as he would Paul – a brother in Christ. Paul then says that he will do whatever it takes to make the relationship right between brothers. That whatever debt Onesimus would owe that Paul himself would pay to make all things right.

The same Gospel that has transformed sinners like Saul, Philemon and Onesimus into brothers in Christ, also transforms relationships. Paul has been so transformed by the love of Christ first shown to him that he lives out this love in his other relationships. As Jesus took on Paul's own sin, Paul takes on the debt of someone who deserves punishment, he pleads for Onesimus, that he might not be viewed as the sinner he is,

but rather as a beloved brother in Christ. He asks Philemon not to give the punishment fit for the sin he committed, but instead to have mercy.

This type of radical love goes beyond anything we can imagine. The grace and forgiveness Paul experienced that made him a Christian, flows out of him and into his actions as he becomes a peace maker between brothers in Christ. The Gospel that made unequal men equal brothers in Christ, transforms their relationships as well. The once runaway fugitive, becomes one who seeks reconciliation with the man he hurt. Philemon, as He has been sinned against, remembers what Christ has done for Him and greets the one who hurt him like a fellow brother in Christ. Paul the one stuck in the middle, is the image of Christ. He offers of himself to bring reconciliation between beloved brothers in Christ.

Like Paul, Philemon and Onesimus we too have had our lives transformed by the Gospel of Christ. In our baptisms, we people of unequal footing have become a family of God. The rich, the poor, all races, all classes, all people of different backgrounds, of different means and of different histories go into the font unequal in the eyes of society and come out the other side equal as brothers and sisters in the family of God. Our sins have been removed, we have been restored, forgiven and made Children of God.

Yet does this wonderful gift of God, impact our actions? As the family of God do we still hurt one another. Are we like Onesimus, where we hurt neighbor in thought, word or deed and run from the consequences? Do we leave the harm that we have caused our neighbor alone letting it fester and wound the other even more? Do we realize the pain that we cause our brothers and sisters in Christ?

When we find ourselves on the receiving end of sin, when someone hurts us and we find ourselves in the shoes of Philemon. Do we scorn them? Do we want to treat them as they deserve? Do we want to pay them back for the pain and suffering that they

inflicted upon us? Do we forget the great debt forgiven us in Jesus and hold others accountable for the sins against us?

Or when we find ourselves in the shoes of Paul, caught in the middle of two brothers. Do we back down from the opportunity to bring healing and restoration? Do we call it too much effort? Do we reason our way out of it by saying that it really doesn't involve me, or do we roll our eyes in frustration and ignore it? Do we back down from being the image of Christ, the one who we have been baptized into for convenience sake?

In our text Paul points us to Christ through His actions. We are reminded that in our baptisms we have been made a new creation. We are baptized into Christ's death and in His death our sins have been put to death. Our failures to live as brothers and sisters in Christ are taken to the grave. Our sins have been forgiven; they are as far as the east is from the west. We have been redeemed Children of God. In Christ's death our sins have been defeated and in Christ's resurrection we have been given hope for tomorrow! That all things might be made new like Jesus, even our relationships between one another in the body of Christ. That same Jesus is working on your heart through the work of the Holy Spirit that you might live this wonderful Gospel out in your relationships. That where our own sins have divided us at the body of Christ, we would go and seek reconciliation, to restore relationships where we have broken them. Knowing we are forgiven, but out of love for the one that we hurt. That when brother comes to you asking forgiveness for trespasses, they have committed against you. You might not give them what they deserve, instead you remember what Christ has done for you, and you treat him as the brother they are. Receiving them, forgiving them and restoring them in love.. Christ also works in us to bring this reconciliation to the world. That when we find ourselves caught in the middle, that we might be the image of Christ that Paul was. That we would offer of ourselves, our time, treasure and talents to bring

about restoration between each other. Valuing the oneness that Christ has given us in this faith and not letting sin come between us.

So Brothers and sisters in Christ, when we ourselves sin against one another. Let us go with all humility, seeking to restore the oneness that we have broken. Seeking reconciliation and a restoration of the ties between us. When one comes to us because of their own sin, do not receive them like they deserve. Remember the forgiveness Christ has given you and receive them as your equal, as your brother and sister in Christ. Finally ,wherever possible, Be the image of Christ for wayward brothers and sisters. Call them back to love one another as the family they are, and give of yourself to restore what is broken. In all things let us love one another remembering who first loved us, in Jesus precious name, Amen.

Our Sermon today is on what it means to be brothers and sisters in Christ together, but I have a little problem.

I don't have any brothers or sisters in my family. I am an only child so I have no idea what it is like to have brothers and sisters. Real quick for me raise your hand if you have a brother or sister.

Can someone tell me what their favorite part of having a brother or sister is?

In our epistle reading today Paul is trying to help two people to get along. You see one brother did something to the other, we don't know what he did, but it was so bad that He ran away.

Paul reminds them that they are brothers. They are not brothers because they have the same family, they are brothers because they are children of God. They are apart of God's family and brothers in that. He reminds one of them that he should apologize for the hurt that he has caused and go back from running away and try and make things

right. The other brother he reminds him that the one who hurt him is also His brother and to treat him as one. To love him instead of hate him and to forgive.

We too have been made members of the family of God. Jesus loved us so much that he died on the cross to forgive our sins and rose again that we might become a part of His family. In our baptisms we have all been made brothers and sisters in Jesus. We can look to the people we are sitting next to, or the people out there in the seats. They are all our brothers and sisters because of Jesus. Now we get to love them like the brothers and sisters they are.