

Looking Through a Different Lens

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Exodus 3:7-11

7 The Lord said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. 8 So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. 9 And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. 10 So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt." 11 But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"

Philemon 8-21

8 Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, 9 yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus— 10 that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. 11 Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. 12 I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. 13 I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. 14 But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary. 15 Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— 16 no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord. 17 So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. 18 If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. 19 I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. 20 I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. 21 Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.

Remember the song, "From a distance"? How beautiful the earth looks! If only it could be that way - be as beautiful in its actions and its people as it appears from a distance. Things look different based on what lens you use. My husband could see very well with the glasses that he had but he had cataract surgery this week, which not only took care of the cataract but also his astigmatism. Now, looking through those same lenses, he cannot see clearly. This of course means he will go back to the eye doctor and as the doctor tries different lenses, he will hear #1 or #2 – which lens will provide clear vision?

We all tend to look at things from our own point of view – our own lens. Our point of view may be as a result of our upbringing, which news channel we watch, what newspapers we read or our life experiences. Our viewpoint may dictate how we handle things.

As we have seen in the past weeks, we do not all look at things the same way, which brings us to the story of Onesimus, Philemon and the Apostle Paul.

Slavery has been around for thousands of years. It was in Mesopotamia in 3,500 BC. In this case, the story is written around A.D.60, which is about the same time Paul wrote the Epistle to the Colossians. In fact, Onesimus is mentioned in Colossians in verse 4. Also, in verse 4, Paul says, "Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven."

Onesimus was a slave belonging to Philemon. Apparently, Onesimus stole either money or property belonging to Philemon so of course, he had to escape. When a slave committed a crime or ran away, under Roman law, the owner had the right to beat or even execute him – all good reasons for Onesimus to run! As Onesimus fled Colossae, he apparently headed to Rome and came in to contact with Paul. Although Paul was imprisoned, he brought Onesimus to faith in Christ. We are not sure how long he stayed in Rome but long enough the Paul felt extremely close to him. In fact, Paul wanted Onesimus to stay with him to help him which is why he refers to Onesimus as "my child" in verse 10.

Okay, so now Paul has a problem. He cannot keep Onesimus because he is Philemon's slave and Paul loves Philemon because Paul brought him to faith. Three different points of view:

1. The slaveowner, Philemon, must have been furious. His slave not only ran away but stole from him. He would be completely justified in beating or killing him. Onesimus (whose name actually meant useful in Greek), belonged to Philemon.
2. The slave, Onesimus, had felt he was a nothing because he was the property of another man. Newly converted now understood about Jesus, and how Jesus handled things and now he understood the depth of his betrayal and his sin. He knew he should make things right but at what cost? His life?
3. What should Paul do? They were all brothers in Christ now. Paul had an obligation to Philemon, whom Paul had brought to Christ. He could not hide this from Philemon, a man who had come to faith and was now a leader who held church in his home. Paul also had an obligation to protect Onesimus, who Paul had come to love because he had become a new person in Christ.

Paul knows he and Onesimus must do the right thing, but Paul can't just say "go home". Paul has to do something, so he writes to Philemon, who obviously has not heard anything about the whereabouts of Onesimus. Let's look at how Paul handles this.

His letter begins with his own situation, "Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother". Paul then calls Philemon "our dear friend and fellow worker", and gives thanks for Philemon saying, "I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers". He goes on to thank him for all the good work he is doing and prays that Philemon's faith is deepening in understanding all the good things they share in Christ. Paul goes on to say that Philemon's love has given Paul great joy and refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people.

Then Paul kicks in an "oh by the way, I have a small favor to ask" – And who is the favor for? Paul asks for his "child" Onesimus, who he is sending back to Philemon. Who? What?

Yup, the same Onesimus who stole from you, ran away and probably turned your household upside down! Yes, that's the one. Paul gently reminds Philemon that he, Paul, as his spiritual leader, could order Philemon to do the right thing, but instead he wants a voluntary favor, not one that is coerced because he knows Philemon will do even more than Paul asks.

Paul advises that Onesimus became his child while Paul was in chains. He also tells Philemon that Onesimus (remember his name meant useful) was previously useless to him (Philemon) but now he is useful to both Philemon and Paul. Paul goes even further and says, "If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me". Paul says he will take care of it. Think about that, Paul is in chains and Philemon is most likely wealthy with a house big enough to host church service and he has slaves. What could Philemon say? Still Paul goes further – really pushing the envelope saying, "So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me". Not just forgive him – the slave who stole from you and ran away – but welcome him!! Then Paul provides an explanation for the events, saying that "perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever – no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother".

Here was a terrible mess but Paul showed love, caring and reform to handle the problem. To most people, Onesimus was a nobody, but Paul took the time to change him and make him a valuable person, both to Philemon and to himself. He followed the teachings of our Lord! He was changing Philemon's heart!

I find myself so frustrated with people today who want to do the blame game. We are all either a hopeless victim or an evil perpetrator. People shout at each other, judge each other but they do not listen to each other – they do however listen to the media

but which media? We are being spoon-fed information with provocative headlines so we will hit share without really educating ourselves. It is noted that the majority of people spend 15 seconds on any article – 15 seconds – they read a couple of paragraphs and that is it – they believe it and they “share” it.

In his book, “Them, Why we hate each other and how to heal”, by Senator Ben Sasse, he talks about the civil rights movement and the 1903 book, *Souls of Black Folk*, written by W.E.B. DuBois, the first black American to earn a Harvard doctorate who said, “There are today no truer exponents of the pure human spirit of the Declaration of Independence than the American Negro.” DuBois outlined the long-term struggle for civil rights in his essays. In the mid 1950’s, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who had been greatly influenced by Ghandi, took up the cause of civil rights and used his voice and his deep faith to further the movement by reaffirming the foundational rights of the First Amendment - religion, speech, press, assembly and protest. Dr. King worked through the churches and published invitations to rallies and boycotts. Dr. King wrote in his famous “Letter from Birmingham Jail”, “*All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. You may well ask: “Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches and so forth? Isn’t negotiation a better path?” You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue.*” Dr. King’s Christianity is clear in his speeches – Good is better than evil, Love is better than hate! The August 1963, March on Washington comprised 200,000 people gathering peacefully under the Lincoln monument. Dr. King said, “Again and again we must rise to the majestic height of meeting physical force with soul force”. Senator Sasse notes, “King aims not merely to secure the rights of African-Americans but also to change the hearts of his opponents, whom he resisted – vigorously but never hated. King was dedicated to the American *we*”.

We have these wonderful examples of Christ’s love from two men writing from jail trying to change hearts! We also have these words from John Wesley, “Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences”.

What lens will you choose - #1 or #2?

Amen.