

Pentecost 16B

September 9, 2018

Hymns: 389 - 403 - 102 - 120 v1,4 (#510 in place of Psalm)

*2<sup>nd</sup> in Series: Characteristics of Jesus' Followers – Like God, WE Give Others a Second Chance*

**PHILEMON 1, 10-21**  
**THE GOD OF SECOND CHANCES**

Dear Fellow Servants of Christ,

It is always interesting to get a glimpse into the world of the Bible. When we do, we realize very quickly that these were men and women were very much like ourselves, but they lived in a culture quite different from our own. For one thing, biblical people lived in a society that condoned the owning of slaves. Of course, the same thing could be said of our own society up until 150 years ago. And, as in our own nation, to be a runaway slave was a serious event. Today's Scripture centers on one such slave, a man named "Useful."

That's what his name means--Useful. We know him as Onesimus. St. Paul is writing from prison, probably in Rome. Somehow, under Paul's influence, this runaway slave named Useful, or Onesimus, has become a follower of Christ. It is clear that Paul has grown quite fond of Onesimus. But Paul has a dilemma. Legally Onesimus belongs to a man named Philemon. Ironically, Philemon is a good friend of Paul's in Colossae. And Philemon is a

devout follower of Christ. A house church meets in his home.

So, here's Paul's dilemma: Should he send Onesimus back to Philemon as the law dictates? Runaway slaves could be put to death or, at least suffer harsh punishment. Now, you may think this is no dilemma at all. Philemon is a Christian. Case closed. I wish it were that simple. It ought to be. Unfortunately many Christians through the centuries have been able to rationalize owning slaves. It happened in our land. Many otherwise devout Christians in the South owned slaves and seemingly thought nothing of it. It's amazing how many terrible attitudes and actions can be rationalized in the name of religion. Philemon was part of a society that condoned owning slaves. If he acted kindly toward a runaway slave, how would he be treated by his friends who were probably also slave owners? The issue seems black and white to us, no pun intended, but it was not that black and white to the people of that time.

Even worse, it may be that Onesimus stole something from Philemon before he ran away. Philemon may have had many reasons for not feeling too kindly toward Onesimus. But Paul wants to do the right thing, and to give Philemon the opportunity to do the right thing as well. So Paul sends Onesimus back to Philemon with a letter - this letter, the little book of Philemon. He asks Philemon to welcome Onesimus back not as a slave, but as a brother in Christ. Paul even makes a little play on words with regard to Onesimus' name. He says, "Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me." Again, his name meant "Useful." So Paul is saying,

“Once he was useless, but now he is Onesimus, useful.”

Paul is asking Philemon to give Onesimus a second chance. **Christian faith is the faith of the second chance.** You do understand that, don't you? That is the heart of our theology. That is what the cross is all about. We were all—every one of us--useless at one time or another. But Christ gave His life to make us useful to God. You don't have to be a criminal, a prostitute, or a runaway slave to qualify for a second chance. Sometimes you can be quite well off, educated, cultured--while at the same time being prideful, snobbish, condescending--and qualify for a second chance. Second chances are why Christ came into the world.

Police stopped a teen-age girl in Idaho sometime back. There had been complaints that a car had been seen going around her neighborhood in reverse. The girl told police that her parents had let her use the car, but she had put too much mileage on it. “I was just trying to unwind some of it,” she said. There are parts of our lives that all of us would like to rewind. If driving around the block in reverse would wipe our record clean, we would all go out to the parking lot and rev up our engines. But something more than that was needed.

Christianity is a faith of second chances. Like Onesimus, we sinners have all wronged and run away from our heavenly Master. We deserve nothing but His wrath and condemnation. But, as Paul found and rescued Onesimus, Jesus has found and rescued us. He stood between the Father and us. He identified Himself with us by being born into this world, taking on our nature and becoming our

substitute. He not only offered to pay, but did pay our sin-debt on the cross to satisfy divine justice.

Francis A. Hubbard once served as a chaplain of McLean Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts, the psychiatric wing of Massachusetts General Hospital. During that time he learned that an unusually high percentage of those undergoing treatment for alcoholism had received childhood religious training. However, the vast majority of these alcoholics received this one message in their religious training: "One mistake and you're going to Hell." "Since we're going to Hell anyway," one patient explained to him, "we might as well enjoy the ride." The god they had been given as children was a god without grace, forgiveness and new life.

That 'god' is too small. The real God-in-Christ forgave those who crucified Him while He hung on the cross. The real God-in-Christ offered paradise to the thief who repented while on the cross himself--a U-turn at the very last minute . . . The real God, is a God of grace who offers people second chances. And third chances. And fourth. In fact, our God forgives us each and every day. We need a God Who maintains us in a state of His ongoing grace, because we daily sin much and deserve eternal punishment.

In golf it's called a mulligan. The golfers in our congregation are familiar with that term. A mulligan, simply put, is a "do-over." Hit a bad shot? Take a mulligan and replay that stroke. Understand, a mulligan isn't really "legal" under the Rules of Golf. Mulligans are most often

employed during friendly rounds by golf buddies; or during charity tournaments where mulligans are sometimes sold to benefit the charity. If mulligans are for sale, that means the golfer can buy, say, three mulligans for a set price each - which sounds very much like the sale of indulgences in Martin Luther's day. Fortunately you and I do not need to pay God for second chances. That's because of something called grace, amazing grace. Second chances are at the heart of Christian faith.

**Sometimes the biggest obstacle to people receiving a second chance is the attitude of fellow Christians.**

Just because a person bears the name of Christ does not mean that he or she has the heart of Christ. Someone has said that the Christian army is the only army that shoots its wounded. Sometimes the critical, judgmental, unforgiving attitudes of fellow Christians hinder people in need of a second chance. Ambrose Bierce wrote, "*There are two classes of people--righteous and the unrighteous. The classifying is done by the righteous.*" And so often it is true.

Fortunately God doesn't label people except with one label, "Forgiven." Our faith is one of second chances, even if sometimes religious people can be the biggest obstacles to people seeking second chances. **You do understand, don't you, that Philemon is being given a second chance as well as Onesimus?** How did Philemon respond to Paul's request that he be lenient with Onesimus? Did he have his former slave punished? Did he cave in to the peer pressure of his friends and fellow slave owners? Did he grant Onesimus his freedom so that he

might return to help Paul in his ministry? We really don't know. Scripture does not say.

Legend has it that Onesimus later became bishop of Ephesus, but it's just a legend. I would like to think that it is true--not just for the sake of Onesimus, but also for Philemon's sake. This was a test of Philemon's faith, wasn't it? He bore Christ's name – "Christian," but did he bear Christ's heart? That's a question for each of us, too. I suspect that each of us has somebody in our sphere of influence that we are more than a bit hard on. It may be a family member or a neighbor or a co-worker – or a former spouse, from whom you are divorced. At some time or another in the past that person has offended you or hurt you or betrayed you. And you are having a difficult time forgiving. You may act civil perhaps, but deep down you are distrustful, resentful, and you have a hard time keeping it from showing. Maybe it does show. Maybe your temper flares more easily with this person than it does with others.

You think to yourself, that person doesn't deserve another chance. That may be true. But neither did we deserve another chance when Christ forgave and accepted us. Perhaps it is time for you to reconsider and bring that person's situation before God and let God decide – all the while pleading God for that person's forgiveness! It may be the hardest thing that a Christian is called upon to do, to forgive someone who has done us wrong, but we see in the New Testament, that this is exactly what Christ calls upon us to do. Are you strong enough to forgive? Are you strong enough to give someone else a second chance?

This coming Friday night a movie called "Unbroken" comes to theaters across the nation, and I think probably in the Twin Cities area. It is the unbelievable true story of Olympian and World War II hero Louis Zamperini. It was actually after the war that Zamperini's real battle began. From his years of torture as a prisoner of war, he was a victim of post-traumatic stress syndrome. Nightmares of his torment at the hands of one particular guard nicknamed "The Bird" continued to haunt him. Louie's unrequited wish that he could get revenge on his tormenters drove him deeper and deeper into despair and alcoholism.

Finally, his wife Cynthia declares that she is taking their toddler daughter and leaving him. But God intervened and brought her to faith through Billy Graham's 1949 Los Angeles Crusade. Cynthia finds renewed commitment to her marriage and her husband. Now, her most fervent prayer is for God to help Louie find the peace and forgiveness he so desperately needs. Louie himself is drawn to faith by the devoted love of his wife who gives him a second chance. The movie ends with Zamperini returning to US occupied Japan to seek out Japanese war prisoners, and the Bird in particular, to extend to them his forgiveness. It is a movie I hope many of you will go see.

Paul sent a letter by way of a runaway slave. He was asking Philemon to give this man named Useful another chance. Did he? I hope so, and if there is someone here who needs to give another a second chance, I pray that you will reflect on God's forgiveness for you and me, and

that you will be strong enough – to give that person a second chance! Amen.