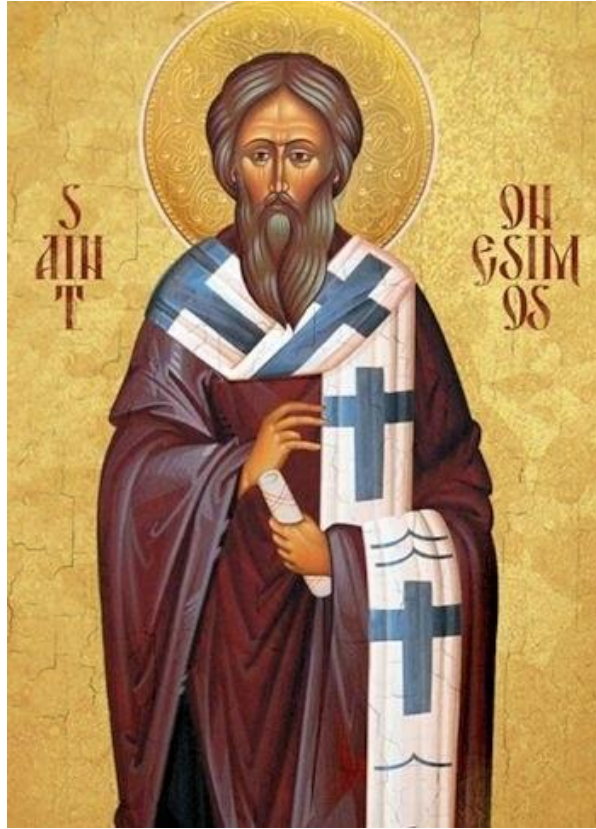


## SLAVERY



Philemon 15: "Perhaps this is the reason (Onesimus) was separated from you for a while, so that you (Philemon) might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother --- especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord."

Interestingly, this is the only time in the three-year Sunday lectionary cycle that we hear from St. Paul's letter to Philemon. And since I am unlikely to be here three years from now when it will appear again, I felt compelled to preach upon it this morning, especially because about one hundred and fifty

years ago, the interpretation of this Scriptural passage was crucial in a theological debate that literally tore apart the Christian Church in this country, separating the Southern Methodists, for example, from their northern counterparts, at least until the 1930s when they rejoined each other as the United Methodist Church. Likewise, the Southern Baptists separated from the northern American Baptist Church, and they have yet to reunite. The theological issue that literally divided the Church in that day, and then eventually divided the nation in violent combat, was of course, slavery. The question in today's reading was what exactly was St. Paul asking of Philemon, the owner of the escaped slave Onesimus? Was Paul asking Philemon to set Onesimus free, or simply not to mistreat or punish him for running away? And why was St. Paul sending Onesimus back to his master at all, especially when the Deuteronomic law forbids the returning of runaway slaves? From Deuteronomy, "You shall not return to their owners, slaves who have escaped to you from their owners. They shall reside with you, in your midst, in any place they choose in any one of your towns, wherever they please; you shall not oppress them." (Dt. 23:15, 16)

The larger question, of course, was whether Christians approved of the institution of slavery, and the answer to that question, upon which we think so little about today, filled the

sermons and writings of American Christians all over this land for a century and a half ago. Throughout most of the American colonial period, opposition to slavery among white Americans was minimal, as our own United States Constitution bears witness, because the Biblical case for slavery was so very strong and impressive, if not conclusive. Slavery, it was argued, was established by God in creation, found in the mark of Cain, Abel's brother, and in the curse of Noah's son, Canaan. Slavery was also endorsed by Mosaic Law, there even in the Ten Commandments, where it reads: "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male or female slave, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's" and again in the Ten Commandments, "The seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates." (Ex. 20.10) The Deuteronomic Law further provided various guidelines about the ownership of slaves, such as famously in Exodus 20, "When a man strikes his slave, male or female, with a rod and the slave dies under his hand, that man shall be punished. But if the slave survives a day or two, the man is not to be punished; for the slave is his property." So that it was okay to beat your slave to death as long as they survived a day or two, according to Mosaic Law! The Levitical

Code is also clear about slavery: "As for your male and female slaves whom you may have: you may buy male and female slaves from among the nations that are round about you. You may also buy from among the strangers who sojourn with you . . . and they may be your property. You may bequeath them to your sons after you, to inherit as a possession for ever."

The New Testament is less explicit about slavery than the Old Testament, but still neither Jesus nor St. Paul nor any other Biblical figure recorded there says anything in opposition to the institution of slavery, for slavery was very much a part of life in Palestine and in the Roman Empire during New Testament times. Jesus casually mentions slavery, for instance, in the parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Mt. 18.25). And in the parable of the Watchful Slaves (Lk. 12.45), there was a wonderful opportunity for Jesus to condemn the abuses of slavery, but he said nothing. In that parable, Jesus mentions how the "slave says to himself, 'My master is delayed in coming,' and (then) begins to beat the (other) male and female slaves, and to eat and drink and get drunk, the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and (what will the master do, he) will punish him, and put him with the unfaithful. And that slave who knew his master's will, but did not make ready or act according to his will, shall receive a severe beating."

And despite how some might like to have interpreted today's letter to Philemon, elsewhere St. Paul is explicitly supportive of the institution of slavery when, for instance, he writes to the Ephesians: "Slaves, be obedient to those who are your earthly masters, with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart," (Eph. 6.5) or to St. Timothy, "Let all who are under the yoke of slavery regard their masters as worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be defamed. Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful on the ground that they are brethren; rather they must serve all the better since those who benefit by their service are believers and beloved. Teach and urge these duties. If any one teaches otherwise and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching which accords with godliness is conceited and understands nothing" (I Timothy 6.1-3). This despite Paul's more laudable remarks that "In Christ, there is no slave or free" (Gal. 3.28, cf. 1 Cor. 12.13, Col. 3.11).

And early Christian tradition further clearly supported the institution of slavery. The Council of Gangra, around 340, pronounced the church's curse on those who taught the emancipation of slaves. Pope Gregory I, around 600, wrote that "Slaves should be told...not [to] despise their masters and recognize that they are only slaves." Thomas Aquinas in the 13<sup>th</sup> century accepted the teachings of Aristotle that slavery was

"natural." Pope Nicholas V in the 15<sup>th</sup> century granted to the Kings of Spain and Portugal "the right to reduce any Saracens [Muslims] and pagans and any other unbelievers" to perpetual slavery. Pope Paul III in 1548 confirmed that any individual may freely buy, sell and own slaves. Runaway slaves were to be returned to their owners for punishment. Late in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Nicholas Leander, a Roman Catholic theologian, wrote: "It is certainly a matter of faith that this sort of slavery in which a man serves his master as his slave, is altogether lawful. This is proved from Holy Scripture . . . It is also proved from reason for it is not unreasonable that just as things which are captured in a just war pass into the power and ownership of the victors, so persons captured in war pass into the ownership of the captors. . . All theologians are unanimous on this," he writes.

Thus it is not at all surprising that Jefferson Davis could declare in his inaugural address as the President of the new Confederate States of America that "[Slavery] was established by decree of Almighty God . . . it is sanctioned in the Bible, in both Testaments, from Genesis to Revelation . . . it has existed in all ages, has been found among the people of the highest civilization, and in nations of the highest proficiency in the arts." Likewise, a 19<sup>th</sup> century Presbyterian Divine could argue that "There is not one verse in the Bible inhibiting slavery,

but many regulating it. It is not then, we conclude, immoral." Another wrote that "The right of holding slaves is clearly established in the Holy Scriptures, both by precept and example."

Thus, the mostly Quaker Abolitionists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century had to struggle very hard to overcome the long and established arguments for the institution of slavery both from the Bible and from Christian Tradition. Now I am not here to promote slavery. But given today's reading, I think that we as Christians need to be clear about the history and tradition of the Christianity on such matters. The Church has clearly changed its teaching regarding the practice of slavery, and we have done so despite very strong, if not conclusive, Scriptural and historical precedent in support of the institution. That the Church has changed its teaching on such an important matter should perhaps not surprising, because the Christian Church has changed its teaching on many other important and serious aspects of our common life together, beginning with allowing of Gentiles into this community without being circumcised. The Church once clearly also argued from its Scriptures and traditions for the Divine Right of Kings and for the subjugation of woman and against usury and against democracy. Most Christians would find such arguments today abhorrent, if not just silly. We live and learn about the cultural biases and weaknesses of our forebears,

and we change our traditions as we grow in the knowledge and understanding of our faith.

So, I remind you of this history on this Labor Day Weekend so that when other issues rise to the surface in the life of our Church, issues like the ordination of practicing homosexuals or the blessing of same-sex relationships, or the acceptance of transgender individuals, that we remember that Scriptural and Traditional arguments alone are not sufficient to win the day. Beware then of those Christians who would try to argue convincingly about this or that theological position based solely upon clear scriptural warrants and the traditional practices of the Church, for there is obviously a larger guiding principle in the life and teachings of the Church. Perhaps it is "Hear what our Lord Jesus Christ saith: Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

AMEN