



September 9, 2007

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

Philemon 1-21

Matthew 25:31-45

“Do Unto Others”

How old were you when you were taught the “Golden Rule”? I’ll bet you were still a young child: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”—meaning, “treat everyone the way you would want to be treated.”

One family tried to teach the rule verbatim to a little girl—and I think she was confused by the unusual words—“unto” is not something we ordinarily say. So, when her parents asked her to recite the Golden Rule, they were horrified to hear her proclaim proudly, “Do unto others before they do it unto you!”

Though the story makes us chuckle, it’s not very far off the mark. We DO live by that TWISTED “Golden Rule” more than we want to admit. And our society actually encourages us, seeing it as “realistic” wisdom, as opposed to the “idealistic/impossible” wisdom of the true Golden Rule.

Unfortunately, the world is full of hatred, suspicion, hurt and division. These separate us from one another and lead us to destroy and harm each other. Sometimes people manage to overcome that tendency, which gives me hope and encouragement.

A story from the former USSR is an example of this. Two young men had grown up together in the same village near Moscow, where the grandfather of one of them, Leonid Brezhnev, and the father of the other, Andrei Sakharov, had country homes. When Sakharov, a dissident critical of his country’s regime, was sent into exile by Brezhnev, the Soviet leader, Sakharov’s son was thrown out of the

university and ostracized. The only person who offered him help was Brezhnev's grandson. Then, when there was a regime change, Brezhnev's grandson lost his job and reputation—and there was no one to help him out, until Sakharov's son came into the picture.

This may sound like a sweet little story, until you reflect on the kinds of brutality that characterized the times those young men lived through. It's really amazing they maintained the kind of friendship that would take such risks to look out for each other.

The Golden Rule is hard enough to live by, but guess what? Jesus and the Apostle Paul call us to a higher rule than the Golden Rule! We are not merely to “do unto others what you would have them do unto you”—we are supposed to believe that **WHAT** we do to others we **DO** to God himself. As Jesus said, “whatever you do to the least of my brothers and sisters, you do it to me.”

The letter of Paul to Philemon, which is found in our Bible, is an example of Paul following in Jesus' footsteps. He writes to the owner of a slave, Onesimus, who has run away and become close to the imprisoned Paul. Paul's letter is a supreme example of the power of Christ in overcoming division and complicated relationships.

Let me summarize the background to this letter. Paul had been arrested in Jerusalem following several journeys during which he had started a number of churches. After trials spanning close to **TWO YEARS**, he was taken to Rome to await a hearing before Caesar. This was around 57 A.D. While in prison, he shared the gospel with guards and visitors.

At this time there were about 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire. Onesimus was one. Roman law originally provided very little protection for slaves. The caprice of masters prevailed. Ancient historian Pliny recounts how Vedius Pollio threw a slave into a fishpond where lampreys tore him to pieces. His offense? Breaking a crystal goblet.

With this background, let's try to picture Onesimus, who had fled from his master, Philemon. Philemon had become a Christian as a result of Paul's earlier preaching in his region. A Christian congregation met in his home for worship and fellowship. Onesimus may have stolen from his master to finance his travel. At the very least, his leaving cost Philemon the price he originally paid for his slave. So, we have a broken relationship and an unresolved debt.

Somehow Paul and Onesimus had become very close. Onesimus was converted to Christianity and likely served Paul in his imprisonment. Paul knew Onesimus' story, and knew the ancient world's practices and views on slavery.

First, it was seen as DISHONEST to harbor a runaway slave. It was DANGEROUS for Paul to keep the slave with him; for both of them; but it was DANGEROUS to send Onesimus back. Even though Philemon was a Christian, there was still considerable risk to the slave.

What to do? Paul sent a letter—a brilliant, moving letter, which shines for us as an example of a Christian response to one of life's messy situations. It shows us a way to walk in the jungles where evil lurks; where there is potential for wrong, for harm, for injustice and exploitation.

First, Paul does not pull rank. He does not say you must obey me; he gives no orders. He bases his request entirely upon love. "Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love."

Paul shows Philemon what he "ought to do" indirectly, by focusing on the relationships among them. He does not denounce the injustice of slavery. There is no direct statement that Philemon should free Onesimus. But when you hear all he has to say, that surely seems the only option available.

Paul describes himself as a prisoner in the first words of the letter. He mentions his prisoner status more than once. In this way, he allies himself with Onesimus. Paul is not free, his comings and goings, food, sleep, activities are all determined by others, much like a slave. Life or death can be dealt to him at any time.

Paul then reflects on his relationship with Philemon, the master. He identifies Philemon as a Christian, a fellow worker with Paul in the church, a supporter of Paul and others in mission. He tells Philemon that he knows him as a person who loves, who has deep faith, and who has often given joy and comfort to Paul himself.

After talking about his relationship with the master, Paul next establishes his relationship with Onesimus, the slave. He says, "I appeal to you for my SON, Onesimus." He puts those words, "my son" in the sentence before mentioning the slave in any way. Paul says their relationship is a FAMILY relationship. He is KIN. Paul says, "I am sending... my very heart", making vivid the deep bond of love, the closeness between them. Onesimus is also identified as a Christian, alongside Paul and Philemon.

Next Paul paints a picture of Onesimus' return: "I can just see it," he seems to say, "You will welcome this slave as if you were welcoming ME!" Paul overlaps their identities: "Charge anything he owes to me." Onesimus is to be received no longer as a slave, but as a beloved brother----not just in the spiritual sense, but "as a man"—in an earthly relationship, the kind that fill our days. Paul makes it clear that Philemon is completely free to act as he chooses, but he anticipates a response that will "refresh my heart" and show "obedience" to Christ.

Paul's letter is a model for us, in the messy situations we encounter in life. He shows us we're not to FORCE others, COERCE them, BRIBE them, BLACKMAIL them, to do what we want them to. We, like him, can only try to PERSUADE others with the beauty of the gospel, and its claim on their living and behavior. Everything we do should be based on relationships of equal worth and respect. We are to show clear expectations about what's right and wrong, and we're to ALWAYS, ALWAYS, ALWAYS stand with the downtrodden and oppressed.

Paul, in this letter to his friend, did what Christ did in Matthew 25. He tells Philemon, "What you do to Onesimus, you do to me."

Now, think about your world—your daily dealings. Think about what you "Do, and do, and do to others". Would it be possible for us to stand with people we hear mocked or disdained- looked down on? Could we say to those around us, "What you do to them, you do to me, too."? What a radical wonderful gospel we proclaim. What a wonderful Savior and Lord we follow! How do we live and interact with others, treating them as we would treat Jesus himself? And how do we appeal to others around us to do the same thing?

On this, our "Homecoming Sunday" we picture Onesimus returning "home". We don't know what happened during that homecoming but our prayer is that Paul's powerful words were effective in resolving the complicated master-slave relationship of the ancient world.

What about us—What complicated relationships do we bring as we "come home" to God in our time of worship? Trust that God can and will guide you as you grapple with those. God welcomes us here today, no matter what baggage we bring. His help is ours as we gather each Sunday, week by week, offering to guide us through this dangerous and complicated world! May we grow to trust him more and more. Amen.