

Aligning Faith and the Life we Live

I saw a funny meme this week that gave a general outline for every letter of Paul in the Bible. They all have five parts:

- Grace
- I thank God for you
- Hold fast to the gospel
- For the love of everything holy stop being stupid
- Timothy says hi

In most ways, his letter to Philemon follows this format except Timothy says “HI” at the beginning not the end. But there is one big difference in the middle. In this letter, Paul is not telling Philemon to stop being stupid, he’s not clarifying disputes about whether Gentiles are in or out. He’s asking Philemon (and us) to align the faith we proclaim with the life we live, and in the process he’s putting someone else’s life in the middle of that alignment.

Paul asks Philemon to accept Onesimus, his slave, as a brother in Christ. He asks Philemon, the leader of a house church, to take a hit to his economic status and public face by recognizing his slave as an equal.

There’s a lot we could unpack about this letter and all the social realities of the Roman Empire behind the situation it describes. Paul reminds Philemon of his role in his house church and the encouragement he gives others. We get the picture that Philemon would be going against a lot of social norms to accept Onesimus back, much less free him.

But between these two men - Paul and Philemon - is Onesimus. Paul and Philemon can write and discuss and philosophize all they want, but it is the body of Onesimus that will bear the consequences. Will he receive mercy or cruelty? Keep in mind, a slave leaving an owner was a capital offense. There is a life on the line.

The faith of Paul beholds Onesimus as a beloved family member. The station of Philemon regards him as property. Onesimus’ life is the field on which the battle between the demands of Faith and the demands of Empire are being fought.

What is it like to be that body? To have faith, but also be caught waiting on someone else’s faith to rescue you? We can imagine people who are in that position today...

- There are women in abusive relationships who feel trapped by the expectations of their churches and communities. Their bodies bear the tension between responsibilities to themselves and their children, their economic survival and their physical survival. Whatever move they make will and does offend their friends and families - and in many cases still, their churches.

- In Austin, there are immigrants who have fled for their lives from places of unimaginable violence. Any one of us would have the impulse to do the same, no one chooses to be the target of gangs or armies. And yet their escape causes a new set of fears - will the laws in their new homes view them as worthy of asylum or as freeloaders trying to cheat the system? Are they viewed as sympathetic or threatening?
- In the middle of the 20th century our country experienced a series of nonviolent protests and violent responses as we struggled to end the segregation and oppression of African Americans - a struggle that continues today. Even for Christians who supported the goals of the protests, the reality of them was uncomfortable. The response of the white church was too often, "Can't you wait a little longer? Can't you have patience?"

Responding to the reluctance of the white Church in 1963, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King wrote from his jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama a challenge to those Christians that might give us an inkling of how Onesimus might have felt. Or the battered woman. Or the asylum seeker. Here's a sampling of what he wrote:

I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say "wait." But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize, and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; ...when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son asking in agonizing pathos, "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"; ... — then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over and men are no longer willing to be plunged into an abyss of injustice where they experience the bleakness of corroding despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.

There is a pain in the asking. When you learn the teachings of Jesus and that he endured violence rather than endorse it, it is at the very least confusing when violence is perpetrated against you in his name.

Dr. King went on later in that letter to say:

I have watched white churches stand on the sidelines and merely mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard so many ministers say, "Those are social issues which the gospel has nothing to do with," and I have watched so many churches commit themselves to a completely otherworldly religion which made a strange distinction between bodies and souls, the sacred and the secular.

This is where Onesimus stands. Between the teachings and life of Jesus and his followers.

It is into this space - the space where Onesimus' life hangs in the balance - that Paul makes his appeal, first by reminding Philemon of the faith in Jesus that he proclaims and to which he has dedicated his life:

When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

And he then asks Philemon to welcome Onesimus as a brother in the faith. He asks Philemon to align his faith with the way he lives his life.

We don't know what Philemon does, we are left to imagine. But the letter is addressed to the whole house church, so we know that whatever happens the whole community will know about it. It will affect the way they understand what the church is.

Paul's appeal affects us too. He is, in a way, making the same challenge to us. Will we align our faith with the way we live our lives. It affects more than our own sense of integrity. There are lives on the line.

For some reason - by chance or on purpose - Onesimus ends up with Paul. It isn't clear from the letter whether he was sent there or ran away. In either case, he is more than 1,000 miles from his home and with a man in prison for the crime of being Christian, and in this context he himself comes to be a believer in Jesus Christ - the same faith as his enslaver. Think of what it would take to accept the faith of the one who imprisons you? How powerful would the message of Christ have to be for you to trust it - even though your enslaver has perverted its teachings.

And think what your actions in response to Paul's challenge would tell modern day Onesimus and the whole community about what the church is.

That is our challenge today, sisters and brothers. Paul is holding up for us the commitment we have freely made and asking us to live by that commitment.

We in the church have the option and the challenge to not leave people in peril, not leave them in the middle while we make appeals. Our choices may be costly - as they definitely were for Paul and possibly were for Philemon. That cost is always going to be lower for those of us in power than for Onesimus and all those with no power.

And what the life of Onesimus reminds us is that it is better for us to suffer for our faith than for another person to suffer because we did not live up to it.

This is a big challenge for the church and all her members. It is one we face every day. And we will not always live up to the commitment we have made to Christ - which is why we have scripture to remind us.

On behalf of those who are battered and belittled in all the ways the world can imagine, on behalf of all those who, like Onesimus, turn to us for mercy, may we remember that when Faith and Empire clash, Jesus calls us to chose faith. To extend mercy.

With that in mind, like Paul I say to you:

- Grace
- I thank God for you
- Hold fast to the gospel
- For the love of everything holy align the faith you proclaim with the life you live
- And
- Timothy says hi

Amen