

Barre Congregational Church

September 4, 2022: A Pastoral Message by Pastor Margaret Keyser

~ **Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost** ~

“Our call to transformational love”

Our services can be found on our website at www.barrechurch.com

Scripture Reading: Philemon 1 v 1-21

I. Introduction:

There is no other feeling, I believe that makes one feels so cared for, as the feeling of love, whether it is that first falling-in-love feeling, you know, right, or the love and care from family and friends, the caring feeling from neighbors and community members. What is even more significant, is when we are being loved by our loved ones, despite having made some bad decisions, or done something shameful. It is wonderful to have a loving and caring community where one does not feel isolated, but rather safe and secure. For many, however, that is not the case. Many people among us feel alone, in despair because of their circumstances, rejected because of their wrongdoings. Judgment of others have become part of our lives, and how often does it only need a word of forgiveness that will redeem someone and make them feel valued and cared for with the feeling that they are important in this life.

II. Philemon and Onesimus: A relationship needing transformational love

Our passage is about Philemon, a leader in the church of Colossae, and Onesimus, his slave, who ran away and found himself in prison with Paul. Paul is writing this letter from prison to Philemon and some of the leaders in the church, but really addressing Philemon personally, letting him know that Onesimus was with him in prison, and that his life has been transformed through his conversion in Christ, and appealed to Philemon to take him back, not as a slave, but as a brother in Christ. According to this letter, Onesimus may have done something wrong or taken money from Philemon, and Paul would be willing to pay anything that was taken from Philemon, if he is open to welcoming him back.

Of importance is Onesimus' complete life transformation, from a life of submission to a slave master, to a free person in Christ. Paul is not addressing the issue of abolishing slavery in his letter, and the early church certainly did not make it its call to deal with the issue either. Runaway slaves under Roman law received very harsh penalties, and sometimes were put to death. In the first century (CE) attitudes toward slavery began to change, and according to J.R. Porter in his book, *The Illustrated Guide to the Bible*, "the emancipation of slaves, which gave them full civil rights and the possibility of Roman citizenship, occurred on a considerable large scale. The early church accepted the institution of slavery and taught that slaves should be obedient to their masters and perform their duties continuously". Then Porter refers to Ephesians 6 v 5-6, and Colossians 3 v 22, where slave masters were to treat their slaves fairly and give them freedom if the opportunity arrives, and slaves to obey their masters. We do see however some attempt to address the issue, for example in 1 Timothy 1 verse 10 how slave traders together with other brutal treatment of people were being denounced.

And so, Paul is explaining to Philemon the process of transformational love of God through Jesus Christ. If he, Philemon believes in God, and had the experience of Christ in his life, then he must understand that this life in Christ comes with accountability, and that is to love the way God loves, irrespective of who the person is. Christ's death and resurrection introduced a new way of being for humanity, and that is to be transformed by the Gospel and treat others the way Christ would treat them. Philemon was now confronted by his own behavior towards his slave, and as a Christian brother he now needs to welcome Onesimus as a brother and not a slave. "He must act consistent with his confession of Christ, the Lord", says David W. Pao in his commentary on the Book Philemon. For Paul this means that there is neither Greek nor Jew, slave nor free, but Christ is all in all. Christ has ushered in a new vision and a new reality and expects the community of faith and its leaders to live according to this new reality. What has happened to Philemon in his own spiritual transformation also happened to Onesimus in prison, so there is no difference any longer. They are two human beings freed from their sins and transformed by the powerful work of Christ in their lives. Paul even suggests that if Philemon does not want Onesimus back, then he would keep him to do the work of the Gospel for him. Philemon is confronted

by this new reality, where he must face his own master-slave relationship with Onesimus, and what he was willing to do with this invitation from Paul.

Paul recognizes Philemon's life and love for all believers. He is a faithful person and does all the right things in his faith community, but now he is confronted with a decision that must demonstrate that faithfulness. Paul recognized the important changes in Onesimus, especially as someone who went through his own transformation. Paul himself led a life of persecuting others, and now shows empathy and compassion for Onesimus, hence the appeal to Philemon to welcome him back into his own care, not as a slave, but as a brother, in the same way God accepted him, Paul and transformed his own life. We do not know what happened after this appeal, but it is out there for Philemon to consider and to act upon, based upon his own spiritual transformation, and leadership in the church in Colossae. Do the right thing, Paul says, because that is what God wants from you. That is transformational love, which is what is expected from you.

III. Conclusion: Our call to transformational love

The history and practice of slavery here in the US and other contexts have had enormous impact on those who have been at the receiving end of it. Being oppressed in whatever form is not an experience any human being should endure. Having grown up under apartheid in South Africa where oppressive laws dictated how we should live and act was an inhumane system, which I personally experienced as a person of color, and could not accept, but participated in its abolishment and transformation. To be enslaved can take many forms in our lives, addiction problems, abusive behaviors towards the vulnerable, bullying in schools that leave children on the receiving end isolated and fearful, and could lead to many other problems as we have seen. Christ saw the unjust treatment of people by the political and religious system of the time. He also saw the personal struggles individuals had, whether it was the transformation of Zacchaeus, the tax collector who was despised by the crowd for the cheating of taxpayers, or the woman at the well, who first was a Samaritan woman discriminated against because of her ethnicity, and also could not hide from Jesus the fact that she had multiple partners in her life. His life and message

demonstrated that there was another way to live, to act, to be as human beings with one another. He also took it upon Him to forgive and save them through His divine power.

While we may not be owning slaves here, like Philemon, we as human beings are not perfect. We all have something in our lives we would like to change. For some it might be an insignificant problem, for others maybe something that is destructive and painful to deal with. Paul's message is relevant for all of us today...accept the invitation to be transformed by the love and power of Christ, which is real, and forgive and welcome back into our spaces those who need help, who need their own redemption, our love and our care. May God help us all to answer to the call of transformational love that changes lives and changes a society. Amen