



Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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September 16, 2007
16th Sunday after Pentecost
Philemon 1, 10-21
Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Proverbs 9:8-12
Psalm of the Day: Psalm 19
Second Lesson: Philemon 1, 10-21
Gospel: Luke 14:25-33

Christian Love Acts

It never amazes me the vast number of things that you can learn at Bible Study. For instance, this morning our friends that used to live in Texas informed me what the saying actually means when a person is “all hat and no cattle.” All hat and no cattle—have you ever heard that saying? Well, this is Wisconsin, not Texas, right? All hat and no cattle—someone that dresses the part but doesn’t do the work, someone that is all talk and no action. You know people like that don’t you? If I’m looking at you right now, I don’t mean that is you. But you certainly know people that talk a good game but when it comes to carrying it out, they just don’t get it done. Tell me—what do you think of those people? If they promise you help that you desperately need, do you go and try to find someone else also? Sure you do, because they are “all hat and no cattle,” right?

What about us in our life of faith? People around us know that we profess to love Jesus Christ, right? What they see about Jesus they will see in us. Are we all talk, no action—all hat and no cattle—or do we do what God’s plan is for us. God’s plan for us is that Christian love acts. It does. It doesn’t just talk. It does, even when it’s in chains.

Even when, as you try to write, there is a chain keeping you connected to a Roman soldier—that’s where we find Paul this morning. We see him while he is in chains, not writing “woe is me” or some other country song—instead writing a letter to Philemon because he is very concerned about a man named Onesimus, a former slave of Philemon. We see Paul’s Christian love in action in what we don’t see in the text. We see how he had reached out to the lost. Both of these were his children in the faith and evidently he must have shared the gospel with them and the Lord brought them to faith through the Word he shared. But we also see Christian love in action as he encourages other Christians to act, not just talking about the faith, but doing the faith.

Paul wrote to Philemon, who is a member of the church in Colossi, and the letter was delivered at the same time the letter to the Colossians was delivered there to the congregation. It was specifically given to Philemon. In the beginning, it greets the church that meets at Philemon’s home. That is the prominent person that he was in the congregation. It appears that his son was the pastor of the congregation. But Philemon had a runaway slave named Onesimus. Slavery was a fact of life at the time that Paul wrote his letters.

They actually spoke of three different kinds of tools. There were lifeless tools. That would be your hammer, and sometimes your children. There were also mute tools. That would be your animals and fairly never your children, right? Then there were living

tools. That was your slaves—speaking tools. There were three different kinds of tools. So you were known as a speaking tool if you were a slave. That was Onesimus' lot in life. In fact, his very name means literally "profitable" or "useful," and Paul plays off the meaning of that name when he says, "before he was useless to you because he ran away, now he is useful to you in a whole new way—not because he is just a money maker or profitable. Now he is useful to you because now he is a brother in the Lord." So Paul pleads with Philemon to take him back and to receive him, and take him back as a slave. He doesn't say to set him free. He says to take him back, but don't inflict on him the punishment that you could.

The first time a slave would runaway, they would get branded on the forehead so that people would know that this is a slave who has run away before and an iron collar would be put around their neck that was inscribed with directions of who to return the slave to and the offer of a reward. The second time they could be beaten or crucified. So a runaway slave was serious business and they could be punished.

But evidently when Paul ministered in Ephesus he had come into contact with Philemon and Philemon was touched by the gospel of Jesus Christ and led to believe that Jesus took away his sins and that this now changed him, and it did lead him to act, didn't it? The congregation met at his house. His own son seems to have been the pastor of that congregation mentioned in the book of the letter to the Colossians, mentioned earlier on in the letter to Philemon. Philemon seems to have been a dear fellow worker, as Paul puts it, who had opened his heart not only to love for Paul but showed his love for the Lord in what he was doing. The gospel had changed him.

And now that it happened, what had once happened to Philemon had now happened to Onesimus. It happened through his running away. He came into contact with Paul when Paul was in Rome. Evidently he had heard of his imprisonment and maybe he remembered Paul from Paul coming to Philemon's household. He had some kind of contact with him. However it happened, we don't know. Philemon came into contact with Paul and Paul shared with him the gospel and that gospel worked in his heart so that now Onesimus was serving Paul as he was there in chains. He could receive visitors and he could do a lot of things under this house arrest, but there are a lot of things that he couldn't do and Onesimus, in essence I suppose, became his hands and his feet to help him out in his desire to spread the gospel as much as he could while he was in Rome. He says he was very dear to him. He would just as soon have him stay there, but Paul encourages Philemon to act in Christian love and not demand it. He doesn't want it to be "you have to do this." He wants it to be "This is what I get to do because I love my Lord. I now want to show my love also, not just for the congregation that meets, but for this runaway slave." This is what Paul wants Philemon to do and to say, "I want to welcome him back as a brother in the faith. Yes, he was useless. Yes, he cost me profits because he ran away. Yes, it messed up my household." But if we want to be serious about what Jesus said in our gospel, "give up everything you have," then those profits aren't that meaningful when it is weighed on a scale next to Onesimus' eternal welfare, his eternal salvation. Paul wanted Philemon to say, "I want to welcome him back. I don't have to because Paul told me to. I want to because this is what Christian love does." Christian love acts. Christian love puts the best interest of other Christians or the kingdom of God ahead of its own kingdom.

That is really hard for you and me, isn't it? When it comes right down to it, you and I are very selfish beasts, aren't we? We want other people to take care of us. It's like we are all men who have a cold and want our wives to wait on us hand and foot, right? Deep inside of us, there is a part of us that wants everyone else to be concerned about how I feel and what I think and what I need and what I think should be done. We are selfish to the very core because we are sinners. It shows itself at times in our relationship to others, doesn't it? We don't always want to put the interest of God's kingdom, let alone the interest of other people, ahead of our own because we want people to serve us.

Think of what you know in the history of various congregations. Think of various people who have had squabbles with other people, various people who were upset with various things that were done. Was it because they were upset because the kingdom wouldn't be served the best or what they wanted to happen or what they wanted to see done or what they wanted for themselves or their idea wasn't done? I'm betting 9 times out of 10 or 99 times out of 100, it's because what "I said should be done didn't get done" or "someone said something that upset or offended me, and I forgot all about the greater good of God's kingdom. And I decided to pout or hold my breath until I got my way." If they didn't get their way, do you know of people that haven't come back?

The next question would be how far are you and I from being that person? How likely are you and I to put our own selfish interest at whatever level they might be, petty disputes, petty jealousies; how willing are we to set that aside to say, "I want to serve the gospel of Jesus Christ. I want to love my fellow believer even if right now I don't like them all that much." How willing are you to do that? How willing am I to do that?

I'll tell you when we are most willing to do it. We are most willing to do it when we are most clearly focused on who God is and what he has done for us. When we focus on just how desperately we need his body and blood to wash away our sins, when we are focused on just how much he had to go through because you and I are sinners and what that means to us—it means that we are forgiven. It means that our sins are washed away. It means when God looks at us, we are perfect. When we are focused on this truth and I see what my God has done for me, I am willing to sacrifice all kinds of things because of my love for the Lord. But when I am focused on my hurt feelings, my injured pride, my discomfort, I'll think you are all a bunch of losers I should get away from, right?

God forgives us for those times when we have those sinful thoughts or say those sinful words or commit those sinful actions because of our selfishness. God now, through his Word and through his Sacrament urges you and me, encourages you and me to love each other as brothers and sisters in Christ and to let that show also to others so that the lost might be found. As we conduct ourselves with each other, we have the opportunity to be salt and light like we spoke of this morning in Bible Study so that others see we don't hold petty jealousies. We don't always just run down our fellow congregation members because we are upset, but we deal with things in a different way. We love and we forgive because Christ has taken away our sins.

That's how Christian love acts and God has given us this gospel so that we can grow so that we can "walk the walk" as much as we "talk the talk".