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First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC
Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost
September 9, 2007

Philemon 1-25
Luke 14.25-33

Refreshed

I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

–Philemon 7

We are beginning the church school year with an educational bonus for the grown-ups as well: Today you get to hear a reading of, and a sermon on, an entire book of the Bible! The good news (depending on how you look at it!) is that is the shortest book of the Bible. The Letter to Philemon is so short it doesn't have chapters, just verse numbers. In my Oxford study Bible the editor's introduction to the book is longer than the book itself!

Scholars debate lots of things about this letter. There are several different ways of interpreting the letter and, for the most part, the only help in interpretation comes from within the letter itself. In order to avoid getting lost in some of these interpretive "trees" and thus missing the textual "forest," I'm going to gloss over some of these things. But I don't think my reading of the text is compromised in any way by this decision. You'll either have to trust me on that, or catch me at the picnic and we can hash out more of the minutia.

So, here's the basic story: Paul is writing from prison to three leaders of a house church: Philemon, Apphia, and Archippus. Philemon is named first and is generally considered to be the target of the letter's subtle rhetoric. In prison Paul met and converted a slave named Onesimus. Onesimus has been helping Paul in his ministry. (This is where the details get fuzzy...Did Philemon loan Onesimus to Paul?...Did Onesimus run away and get caught?...We're not sure.) But now Paul is sending Onesimus back to his owner, Philemon,

along with this letter. Paul is *asking* Philemon to grant Onesimus his freedom, but he is not *demanding* it. The letter is a well-crafted exercise in persuasion. They have all, according to Paul, experienced spiritual freedom in Christ. Paul asks Philemon to grant Onesimus physical freedom as a testimony to their common faith.

In the history of Christianity, the Letter to Philemon has been a controversial document. Though few have disputed that Paul actually wrote the letter, many have argued that it should not have been included in the Bible when Paul's letters were collected. These critics see it as basically a *personal* letter, with no ongoing significance or message for the church—something along the lines of, “Dear Philemon, Please make sure that we have a spare 9 volt batter for the wireless microphone at tomorrow's service. And, by the way, don't forget to remind people to stay for the picnic. Oh, yeah, I almost forgot to mention this: I like your new haircut. Love, Paul”

But the letter is clearly addressed to church leaders and the context of church is mentioned. Besides that, it follows very closely the formal outline that Paul uses in all of his letters: Greeting, Thanksgiving, Appeal, Closing. Clearly Paul didn't view it as simply an informal memo. And its content is not trivial—freedom and slavery, for example.

It is around the issue of slavery that this letter has been most hotly debated. Some have used the letter to provide Christian support for the institution of slavery. Since Paul sends Onesimus back, so the argument goes, he assumed the validity of slavery as an institution. But clearly the thrust of Paul's efforts is to free Onesimus, so others have argued that this letter is really a treatise against slavery. The true answer is probably that it doesn't work too well as a political argument one way or another. Like Paul's other comments on the subject, it is unclear. In 1 Corinthians he suggests that slaves should stay slaves, since the end times are near. But in Colossians, he says that there is no longer “slave nor free”.¹

But just because Philemon offers no clear trunk for or against slavery, doesn't mean that it has no value as a document that helps us understand social change and transformation. Regardless of the pace of legal and institutional change, real human change needs to take hold at the level of heartfelt conviction. It is at that level that the letter operates. Paul doesn't articulate rules for changing society. Rather, he works on creating a community in which God

works for transformation through relationships. Those relationships do not give people the right to order each other around, but they do give them the right to offer each other persuasive arguments about the gospel way.

Being in relationship with people tends to break down barriers. When rich and poor gather together in a church, it is harder for either group to make blanket assumptions about the other group. Or when people of different races or political parties or sexual orientations come together. It is easier to make pronouncements about abstractions than it is to make them about your brothers and sisters in Christ. An inclusive church becomes a powerful, though slow moving, engine of social change.

One word in this letter jumped out at me in a way that it never had in my previous readings. That word is “refreshed.” In the “Thanksgiving” portion of the letter, Paul writes:

⁴When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God ⁵because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. ⁶I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. ⁷I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother. (Philemon 4-7)

I love the idea that, in church, we refresh one another’s hearts. We come together in worship, in praise, in study, in prayer, in conversation. We get to know each other in new ways and in a different context. Along the way we also get to know Jesus. These relationships change us. The changes isn’t necessarily dramatic or large, sometimes it is incremental. We are “refreshed.”

In our modern times this is a word we use in relationship to technology. Apple is said to “refresh” its line of iPods when it makes a few small changes. When you hit the reload button on your web browser, the page updates to show any recent changes. Sometimes it doesn’t look much different, but a small change may be there—a new headline, a slight change in the weather forecast, whatever it may be.

This image of “refreshing” is a wonderful one for us to take away today, as we celebrate the start of a new church school year with our annual fall picnic. This is a time to renew relationships for another year and to rededicate ourselves to the church. It is a time to reflect on the place that we make for God in our lives—and maybe make some adjustments. It is a time to open ourselves up to new things...new ideas, new practices, new people. In so doing, we can be refreshed. The change may be small or large, incremental or radical. It isn’t the size of the change that matters, but rather that the change is evidence of God at work within us through Christ.

So...when you have that first satisfying taste of soda or that first big bite of burger out at the picnic...let yourself be refreshed. And then stick around, so that “the hearts of the saints may be refreshed through you” my brothers and sisters.

¹ See 1 Corinthians 7.17 ff. and Galatians 3.28.