

Sermon 9-7-25

Paul Purdue preaching

I want to invite you to take out a Pew Bible and open it about two pages and look at the Table of Contents. Peruse the titles. Maybe, you are noticing that 24 of the 39 Old Testament or Hebrew Bible Books are named after people: Jeremiah, Ester, Ruth! The New Testament is even more personal with 24/27 named after a person or a church: Matthew, Mark, Romans, and Corinthians. If you are a math person you might notice how The Psalms takes up 75 pages and Philemon takes up just one. You might wonder why we call a one page letter a “book”? At first glance Psalms at 75 pages seems to be the longest Bible “book”, but actually Genesis and Jeremiah use more words, despite being 25 pages shorter. If you thumbed through Genesis and the Psalms you would spot differences right away. Flip over to somewhere between pages 415 to 490 and you will notice how the Psalms are laid out like poetry: stanzas by stanza. Even though some of the meter and rhyme is lost in translation we can notice the use of poetic couplets, ...

*“Praise the Lord!*

*Praise the Lord, O my soul!*

*I will praise the Lord as long as I live;*

*I will sing praises to my God all my life long.*

*Sing to the Lord,*

*Sing praises to God’s name” (Psalm 146)*

In Hebrew Psalm 119 and 145 verses form an acrostic moving through the Hebrew ABCs. The Psalms are not arranged like law journals, histories, biographies, or science books, but in the form and style of poetry, art and love.

Why does this matter? Frankly, I think many people have given up finding Good News in the Bible and stopped reading it because they have been told there is only one way to understand the Bible. I was raised to read the Bible with a binary, wooden, almost concrete understanding of Biblical truth: that the Bible was without error, literally true, the very Words of God to not be questioned. There was little nuance, grey-area, or room for human ideas inside the Bible. Which is strange when 39 of the 66 books of the Bible are named after people. During college, I almost walked away from my faith because my church only gave me one literal lens to understand the Bible. I am not sure we fall into binary notions of true or false when reading the Bible. Despite the claims of Psalm 135, Psalm 104 and Proverbs 3 I know of no Christian astronauts searching for the earth’s foundations or the storehouse where God keeps the wind. When we leave no room for poetry, art, parable or the power of story we may miss the deepest Biblical truths. Maybe 15 years ago, my kids gave me this “World’s Greatest Dad” T-shirt. This truth claim has never been verified. In fact, I was saddened to learn that Wal-mart sells these shirts. Despite the possibility of another dad deserving the title, I just can’t quite toss my shirt in the Goodwill bin! The T-shirt may not be factually accurate, but for me at least, it holds a deep truth.

What makes the Bible a Word from God? Why did we name these 66 books sacred? Hebrews 4:12 tells us that “*God’s word is living and active...searching the depths of our souls*”. Maybe things are sacred when they stir our souls, when they show us what is right, when they inspire us to live more holy lives? Jesus tells us in John 16 that the Holy Spirit is still *guiding us into all truth* (John 16:13). The Risen Christ is found not just in the words of Gospels and the letters but is “*with us to the end of the earth*”. (Matthew 28). Paul talks of “*Christ in you*” over 200 times! As Methodists we understand that the Bible “*reveals the Word of God ... (and is) received through the Holy Spirit.*” (EUB Confession of Faith Article 4) Perhaps the Bible becomes Holy when the Holy Spirit inspires us to do something beautiful, lovely, just or holy?

If you flip over to page 912 in your pew Bible you will find Philemon, the shortest book in the Bible, more of an email than a book. Why is Philemon holy or set apart? Philemon never mentions an angel giving Paul the words, God’s finger writing on a wall or parchment, Paul falling into prophetic trance like King Saul; or even Paul writing “*the word of God came to me*” as did Jeremiah. (Luke 2, 1 Samuel 10, Daniel 5, Jeremiah 1) Paul does not even claim God inspired the note! So what inspired the church to put this little email alongside Matthew, Mark, and Corinthians on the Bible bookshelf? How does a Philemon, a personal letter, reveal the word of God to us?

Paul is an old man when he writes to Philemon. For 30 years Paul has walked as many as 9,000 miles around the Mediterranean Sea starting some 14 churches. Paul, the Apostle of Full Inclusion, writes from prison arrested for his fearless declaration of Jesus as Lord instead of Caesar. So when the delegation walked up to Philemon’s house carrying a letter from the most important Christian in the world surely Philemon was excited.

Philemon is a slaveholder. Paul’s note asks Philemon to release Onesimus from the terms and conditions that dehumanized Onesimus treating him as property. But more than asking for Onesimus’s release, Paul appeals for Philemon to welcome Onesimus, not as a freed slave, but as a beloved child of God, a person, and a sibling in Christ. Onesimus is part of the delegation carrying this appeal for freedom to the slaveholder Philemon. The stakes are high, the drama real.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism denounced slavery as “*the cruelest villainy*” for it stole a whole person. Wesley named American slavery as “*the vilest that ever saw the sun.*” (Letter to William Wilberforce). Rome allowed for slavery but it was not racially based and usually arose from economic agreements between parties. Most slaves were trades people, carpenters, cooks, blacksmiths, tanners, farm managers, accountants, and scribes (the copy machines of the ancient world). In Genesis, Joseph rose to become the Egyptian Secretary of State as a slave. I wonder if Onesimus was so useful to Paul’s work because Onesimus was a scribe?

I wish Paul had called fire down on Philemon like the prophets of old, challenging the foundations of slavery and demanding human rights for all people! However, Paul is not writing to the Roman Senate an ocean away, but to a person he knows, who hosts a church in their home. Instead of judgement, Paul appeals to Philemon's relationship to Christ- to the Love of God already inside Philemon. Paul writes *"I have enough confidence in Christ to command you to do the right thing, I would rather appeal to you through love.."* Paul is not above being passive aggressive guilt crafting in his appeal for justice, *"If there is any harm, I will pay you what I owe you, I write this with my own hand, and I won't mention that you own me your very life."* On the whole Paul appeals to Philemon's heart, consciousness, humanity, spirit and Love of God and neighbor. Paul trusts that Philemon will *"do the right thing"*. Interestingly, Paul does lay out exactly what that *"right thing"* is.

Paul appeals to the love of God within Philemon: *"I have great joy and encouragement because of your love... though I have enough confidence in Christ to command you to do the right thing, I would rather appeal to you through love. I appeal to you for my child Onesimus. I became his father in the faith during my time in prison,... sending Philemon back is like sending you my own heart... Welcome Onesimus as if you were welcoming me. Welcome him back no longer as a slave but as a dearly loved brother. He is an especially beloved sibling by me. Onesimus can become a brother to you, personally and spiritually."* Paul appeals for a reconciliation far beyond the power of any commandment or rule. As a reformed fundamentalist Paul almost always trusted the movements of the Holy Spirit more than the letters of the law. (Galatians 2, Romans 8, 2 Corinthians 3)

If you were Onesimus would you go back? If you were Philemon would you release Onesimus? What did Philemon first feel when Onesimus came walking up with Timothy, Aristarchus, Demas, and a letter from Paul? What would you want to say if you were facing a slaveholder? Who, as was the custom, read the letter aloud? What does reconciliation look like? Can forgiveness run deep enough to change estranged people into beloved siblings? Did Philemon's heart melt? We do not know. We have nothing but this letter, no follow up, no outcome, no idea. We do not know exactly what Philemon did, but maybe that is the genius of Scripture. Maybe the power of Scripture is to invite us into the story through the Holy Spirit? Maybe the Bible's dramas, dilemmas, people, parables, and poems do what science, history and law books can not do, because they appeal to the Love of God within us?

Maybe the Bible is always asking us if we will allow God's spirit to poke around in the ugly, lovely, and grey-area of our soul? Maybe the Bible is always appealing to love more than the commandment, to the Spirit more than scientific data, to our living and active God more than dry historical events. Maybe the Bible comes alive in us when we read it trusting the Risen Christ is still with us, the Holy Spirit still guides us, and God is always doing new things around us? ( Isaiah 43 or 2 Corinthians 5) Maybe the Bible reveals The Word of God to us when it inspires us to strive for the right things-right now?

Surely a Word from God is more than some dry history, scientific principle or legal code. Surely a Word from God inspires us, changes us, catalyzes something holy within us! In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul declares *“You are Christ’s letter... weren't written with ink but with the Spirit of the living God. You weren’t written on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.* The Spirit is still writing new letters all around our congregation and world.

May the Words of God be imprinted in our hearts, so that the Spirit of the Living God might open our souls to love more fully. And as we allow God to write words of love, peace and justice into our lives, may the Love of God flow through us into the world. Amen