

Sermons at Saint Paul's

A Wellspring of spiritual; nourishment; A river of service in Jesus' Name

Pentecost 16

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Today's readings confront us with two scenarios: the first relates to the benefits of keeping the commandments of God, while the second relates to being disobedient to those commandments. There isn't any gray area to support our often waffling selves. Moses in the first reading appeals to the people of Israel to choose life by being obedient to the God who is giving them the land beyond the Jordan. From Moses' point of view, his appeal was a measure towards guaranteeing the life and prosperity which God had promised them. But he did not fail to remind them that failure to keep the commandments of God would lead to death and adversity. This caution was against the potential syncretism in an area which was populated by different gods which served different needs and purposes.

The Psalmist intones Moses' appeal to the people of Israel with the suggestion that those who obey the Word of God are like trees sitting by streams of water. If water is life, as we all acknowledge it to be, then the obedient are so full of life that they never quench in their desire to bear fruits worthy of their relationship with God.

Paul taps into this obedience in his letter to Philemon about his slave Onesimus. Paul is sending Onesimus back to his master Philemon. In a culture where slavery was officially sanctioned and where the slave owner had every right over the slave, even to kill the slave without any punishment, Onesimus was in serious trouble.

Although the circumstances surrounding his departure from his master Philemon isn't clear, Paul no doubt knows that in order to save the life of Onesimus, he had to appeal to the better angels to Philemon. And what better way to appeal to those angels than to invoke the faith they both share with Onesimus the slave. In his letter, Paul doesn't command or coerce Philemon to accept Onesimus back, although he readily accepts that since Philemon owes him for his faith, he could force him to take back Onesimus, he rather appeals to their common brotherhood of faith in Jesus Christ.

That common brotherhood we all share is an invitation to a kind of discipleship which demands that we carry our cross. Paul, like Jesus, understood that being a disciple was not an easy task, but it was worth it, and so for Philemon, maybe, just maybe, the cross he would have to carry was looking at Onesimus in the face and not only forgiving him for what he did but to look at him with the same eyes that Paul demands from him. Paul recognized that Philemon was free enough to reject his request but he also understood that to be free, is to be answerable to something or someone. This means being answerable is part of being free, and that you are not free, if you are not answerable or accountable. And in this case, both Paul and Philemon, and in fact Onesimus, were all answerable to the one who through faith had called them to be his disciples.

But even more important is the radical nature of Paul's letter in which he dared to call Onesimus a brother. The Paul whom Philemon treasured and adored as a father was now calling a his slave his brother. The question for Philemon then was, if Paul considered Onesimus a brother, what then is Onesimus to Philemon? He also was a brother to Philemon. And the brotherhood they shared was not determined by him nor by blood, but by their faith in Jesus. Sounds more like, my brother's brother, is my brother and my sister's sister, is my sister. It is through Christ that this universal brotherhood is made possible, and so for Paul to call Onesimus anything less than a brother would have given legitimacy to the authority and ownership claim that Philemon had over Onesimus.

More broadly, the fact that Paul calls Onesimus brother, undermines any claim of ownership that any one person has over another.

See, the Psalmist was right in his claim that those who delight in the law of the Lord, are like trees planted by the streams of water. They are fed daily, and so they never lack in goodness. They never lack in bearing good fruits. They look at themselves as those who through faith in God have not only lost themselves, but have gained a new status, a new freedom that makes them answerable to God. Paul's appeal to Philemon was based on the latter's new status as one who was answerable to God. St John of the Cross in one of his Spiritual Canticles captures this new status this way:

There he gave me his breast;
there he taught me a sweet and living knowledge;
and I gave myself to him,
keeping nothing back;
there I promised to be his bride.

The disciple who has been imbued with the knowledge of God, and so loves the law of the Lord, cannot hold anything back, because his ability to give up his possessions is indeed the test of discipleship that he or she has to meet. And so although Paul sends the runaway slave Onesimus back to his "master/owner" Philemon, the true test of Philemon's discipleship will be his ability to lose Onesimus as a possession but also to gain him back as a brother. This was more than the re-ordering of the social and religious ethos. This idea is what made Christianity transformational.

The test of discipleship that Jesus shares in the gospel story is indeed difficult for many of us to keep. As enriching as the gospel may be, we do not want to hate those we love nor do we desire to hate life itself for the sake of the gospel. Many of us want to do right. Many of us want to find the right balance between the obedience demanded of us as disciples, and the possessions which often consume our attention and affection. We cannot abandon our faith midway because of the challenge of staying obedient, nor can we abandon our faith midway because of the lure of possessions.

Although there is no comfort in carrying our individual crosses as disciples of Christ Jesus, the reality is that the burden of carrying the cross is freeing. It is freeing because our ability to carry the cross is when and only when we can recognize and appreciate our own sacredness. The flipside, however, is the reality that our rejection of the cross ultimately leads to a life less satisfying and empty.

The human capacity to rise from a less satisfying and empty life to one of fulfillment and sacredness is what led Emile Durkheim, a notable French sociologist to refer to human beings as being homo duplex or the two-level man. He referred to the lower level as the level of the profane, common or ordinary-this is the level where we work to satisfy individual goals, desires or simple pleasures. This is the level where no one else matters but ourselves. That is the level where the ego dwells. The second level is the level of the sacred-the level where we lose all self-interest and subject our interest to that of the community. This is the level where we feel we become nobler, better, more compassionate and simply good. That is the level where true discipleship rest.

In all of our religious experiences, the most profound has been one of finding the means or the ladder through which we can climb from the profane and ordinary to experience life as extraordinarily sacred and full of meaning-the level where we become one with the divine because we share in His nature. The Psalmist will argue that the person who has found the ladder to the second level is the one who is like a tree that sits beside the streams of water brimming with life and goodness.

The cross may be too much for us to bear. The appeal of modern syncretism may be too endearing. The desire to keep ownership over Onesimus may be tempting. But none compares to the delight in finding the ladder that leads us from the level of the ordinary to the level of the sacred. Remember, our capacity for self-transcendence is part of being human, and so to live, to thrive, and to have life is to climb the ladder that leads you to the sacred level where you belong. Amen.