

Jeremiah 18: 1-6  
Philemon 1: 1-25  
Luke 14: 27-33

The Useful Disciple  
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I have been doing some “fall cleaning”...actually I do this at all times of the year. Periodically, I discover some stash of my belongings that I realize I don't need, but that someone else might want. So I sort and pack things up, and take them to the rummage sale, or the library book sale, or to the LISTEN center or – my new find: the Sew-Op in White River Junction. This is a place where sewing lessons are given and useable fabric is appreciated. It feels good (and slightly virtuous) to give these things away.

At times, we are quite ready to give away our boxes of too much stuff, or to downsize. We are rarely ready to give away retirement savings or other safety nets that give us security. So when we hear the hard words in today's Gospel reading, we may just tune out. Jesus is speaking in hyperbole again, and surely, he does not know what he is asking. I mean, really! How many of us will choose to hate our families or give up every single possession? But I value this passage because it throws us off balance, and invites us to make some calculations about priorities. With the tower builder, we sit down and estimate the cost. With the king and his army, we weigh the odds. What do I have – in relationships or in possessions – and how do they affect my relationship with God? Can I afford the cost of being a disciple?

If Jesus spoke in “all or nothing” terms about relationships and possessions, we hear Paul's words in the letter to Philemon as a more nuanced understanding of the Christian life. Today we read the shortest of Paul's letters, and the only one that is a personal letter, as opposed to an epistle to a congregation. Paul has indeed obeyed Jesus' instructions and lived a life of service, having left his family of origin, building up no security through possessions, never getting married...and now he is in prison. The next step is execution: he will be martyred by the Romans. While under house arrest, he has converted and befriended a runaway slave named Onesimus or “Useful.” The owner of this slave is Philemon, back in Colossae, in a church that Paul had founded. So - both Philemon and Onesimus are Christians.

To understand this situation, we have to understand that in the ancient world, slavery was quite common: it is estimated that 35% to 40% of the population was enslaved. And people were not made slaves along racial lines. Paul says nothing about the justice or injustice of this institution, much as we might wish he had. He recognizes that, by law, Onesimus is a possession belonging to Philemon, and that this is an economic and legal issue, rather than a human rights issue, as we would frame it. And, according to law, Philemon had the right to get the full economic use of cheap labor. He also had the right to kill a runaway slave.

Paul's writing is, at the same time, bold, skillful, sly, and persuasive. He is sending Onesimus back to his master with this letter, which includes a lot of flattery and references to Paul's imprisonment, old age, and spiritual authority. It also includes puns on whether the slave is useful or useless. Paul expects Philemon to voluntarily forgive Onesimus (who may have stolen some money

on his way out) and to welcome him back as a brother in Christ. I wonder how Onesimus was persuaded to go on this dangerous journey!

Paul had no power to change institutions or compel behavior, and we might fault him for not making a bright red line about slavery. Here we see a master at work, using a relational approach. He wants the slave to be free, and so he acts persuasively rather than unilaterally. He is asking Philemon to change his vision of what this man is: a beloved child of God rather than an object to be owned.

We might think, “Well, of course Philemon will see the virtue of this....especially since a runaway slave is useless to him anyway.” But imagine what is at stake here. If Philemon is to start using the law of love in his household, where will it stop? Is he expected to free all his slaves, or just this protégé of Paul’s? Where does he draw the line on which person in his home is a brother by blood and which is a brother in Christ? There are economic implications, social implications. Talk about being thrown off balance! Philemon is being asked to completely re-imagine the identity of Onesimus, and then of himself, and then of the whole social order. This is the cross which he has to take up and bear: a dissolution of the old certainties of power and position; an acceptance of new relationships...which will lead, who knows where?

Paul uses a curious argument here. He says, “Perhaps this was the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever.” In other words, the self-emancipation of Onesimus was part of Philemon’s spiritual development. This Christian slave was useful indeed, but not as a source of cheap labor. He was the means by which Philemon could learn to re-order his life and his priorities.

Which brings me to wonder: who are the people, and what are the circumstances that will confront me with an opportunity to re-imagine the world? And as I wonder, I realize that this has already happened many times. Through tragedies, like my brother’s death when I was a teenager, through poignant hardships, like caring for my parents as they were aging and dying, through giving birth to babies and launching young adults, in confrontations with people of other faiths – I am being molded like a piece of clay into a vessel of sorts. I do not always like the kneading and poking and prodding that seems to be necessary in this process. It throws me off balance. It forces me to think and pray and reflect on who God wants me to be.

Then I wonder: who are the people, and what are the circumstances that are today confronting the church with an opportunity to re-imagine the world? You will realize with me that this has already happened, to this congregation and to the church at large, many times. Through tragedies like the sudden death of beloved members, through poignant hardships like caring for those with long illnesses, through giving birth to new missions and ministries, through the discernment of the end of ministries, through the writing of an open and affirming resolution, through wrestling with political and social issues – we are being molded into a vessel of sorts. We do not always like the kneading and prodding that seems to be part of the formation process. We are often thrown off balance. It forces us to think and to pray and to reflect and to speak and to act: what does God call the church to be?

It is 2013, and we are not confronted with Philemon’s dilemma: we are not being asked to welcome a runaway slave back into the fold. But other dilemmas, just as difficult and earth-shaking, and re-defining and formative, are before us. We are citizens of a nation considering military action

in Syria. Our response to this will reshape us. We are concerned community members confronted with stories of gun violence in the news. Our response to this will be formative. This is the hard path of discipleship: these are the crosses we bear as we follow that lonely man and his friends on the road to Jerusalem.

Here is what I learned from the Bible this week: God requires more of me than just the stuff I won't use and don't need. Virtuous as recycling is, it is too easy. God requires more of me than the time, talent, substance and influence that is left over at the end of the day. God wants me to come alive to the world's beauty and pain and be changed. It turns out that the circumstances of my life and our nation's life are the tools God can use. This is the way that God the potter grabs us and shapes us and unbalances us and turns things around.

I want you to know that there is joy in this formation work too. It is not all about conflict and tragedy. I find humor in Paul's letter, I find tenderness in the story of Jesus, I find compassion in Jeremiah's God. We have been given some wonderful resources. Douglas John Hall, a Canadian theologian, gave us this definition of the Gospel: "It is the permission and the commandment to enter difficulty with hope."

I rejoice to be part of this community of faith, a body of people who strive to be firm in faith, quickened in hope, and constant in love. I rejoice that we do not need to be alone in the process of re-ordering our relationships and possessions. And I rejoice that God is using a potter's hand with us, forming us into a vessel of purpose and Christian love. Amen.