

Hope and Dignity

Deuteronomy 30: 15-20

Philemon 1: 1-21

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Rev. Donna Vuilleumier

Deuteronomy 30: 15-20

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Philemon 1: 1-21

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

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Paul is certainly the most prolific writer in the New Testament, yet only one of his writings is a personal letter. This single letter is a love letter, a tender affirmation and bold advocacy about one Christian friend—Onesimus-- to another Christian friend—Philemon- who happens to be the owner of the slave and is the leader of a house church.

Onesimus has been with Paul and now he is being returned to Philemon. Perhaps he had been sent to care for Paul while he was imprisoned, or there is also the possibility that he was a freedom seeker, a fugitive slave, that Paul is now sending back to his master. Whatever the origins of this unique triangle circumstance, Onesimus has become a convert to Jesus Christ and now Paul, who has become as a father to him, whose own heart he is, appeals to Philemon to welcome him ‘back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother.... both in the flesh and in the Lord.’

Paul who is writing this letter while in prison yet again for preaching and teaching the gospel, the good news, of Jesus Christ, can better understand what it is to be bound in chains, to be held against one’s own will, to experience the loss of freedom and independence, to see the loss of hope and dignity. Paul is living out what it is to be rejected and dehumanized by the ways of a society. Paul joins in solidarity, in unity, with one, with those, marginalized. He urges Philemon to remember that Jesus always brought restoration to lives that were broken and hurting—often through random circumstances and arbitrary situations -- and that by faith we have a part to play in that healing, and in the restoration of hope and dignity. Paul encourages Philemon not just to take back a slave but to welcome home a beloved brother.

He has literally set two choices out—life and death. Onesimus can return to the harsh, limiting, life he had before, or he can be known and loved as a brother in Christ. Encouraging in love rather than duty, Paul encourages Philemon---and his house church congregation-- to choose life that they and their faith descendants may live in the spiritual land promised to them, loving and obeying God, and holding fast to God; for that will mean life and length of days.

Professor and author Eric Barreto¹ says that “For Paul, what happens in these Christian communities is a matter of life and death.....Paul is a pastor, remember. He cares for these communities because these communities are seeds of the resurrection, sites where the resurrected life can already flourish, places of resistance to an empire that would place us in rank according to social status.”

Paul’s letter to Philemon plants seeds of resurrection where life, hope and dignity can flourish, despite any social status, circumstances or situation, because we are God’s beloved children choosing life, loving God, and walking in the ways of God. We too are called to perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. It make us mindful that whenever given the chance we are to offer hope, dignity, compassion, solidarity and acceptance, to offer freedom from what binds and holds someone back from living as they are best able, just as Paul has asked Philemon to do for Onesimus, to offer the hope of a new tomorrow and to restore dignity by acknowledging their humanity.

Paul asks us as well to offer the hope of a new tomorrow and to restore dignity by acknowledging their humanity to those in our own time who live marginalized, who know rejection, and the loss of freedom and independence because of their life circumstances.

Where do you meet an Onesimus, someone you know whose life circumstances have left them in need of solidarity and acceptance, in need of renewed hope and dignity?

Where do you meet an Onesimus, someone whose freedom and independence have been lost to them, who are bound by a situation not of their own making and are in need of renewed hope and dignity?

I want to share with you one of the most beautiful and heart-warming answers to those questions, and they are from the experience of a hospice patient and her son.

Ann's passion had been ice skating. From her childhood she had loved skating on ponds and rinks, and so it was no surprise to anyone when she became an ice skating instructor. She especially loved teaching the youngest children, helping them to develop the confidence and skills on the ice so that they too might discover this same passion within themselves. She was gentle, patient and encouraging with her students. Over time she taught the children of some of those who long ago were her young beginners.

Ann developed Alzheimer's and slowly lost her abilities to skate and to teach. Her son Jeff found a loving way to continue her passion. Although she was unable to lace up her skates, or balance on them by herself, and no longer had the capability to work with the children, Jeff created a way for her. At the same skating rink where she had taught for many years, he would place her skates on her feet and help her to stand up against the boards while the beginner skating class was being taught. On her skates, looking at the children on the ice while she was standing on the rubber flooring, Ann would whisper encouraging words when they fell, and cheer on their progress as they moved gingerly across the ice. The children and their teacher never saw Ann, never heard her caring words of guidance, but she saw them. When she was tired, Jeff would take off her skates and tell her what a great skating teacher she was, what a great lesson today had been. She was happy and content in the way she was enabled to teach her skating class through Jeff's idea and act of restored hope and dignity.

Where do you meet an Ann, someone you know whose life circumstances have left them in need of solidarity and acceptance, in need of renewed hope and dignity?

Where do you meet an Ann, someone whose freedom and independence have been lost to them, who are bound by a situation not of their own making and are in need of renewed hope and dignity? Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-23-3/commentary-on-philemon-11-21-2016>