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Date: March 17, 2019

Title: The Urgency of Reconciliation

Text: Philemon 1-25

This morning we are going to look at another one of the one-page letters of the New Testament. It, too, contains an urgent message for the recipient. These letters each talk about a character quality that can't wait; a character quality that we need to put into action ASAP. Two weeks ago the urgent message from the epistle of Jude was RESPONSIBILITY. YOU are responsible for YOU – for what you THINK, what you BELIEVE, WHO you listen to, and HOW you BEHAVE. Last week the urgent message from 3 John was INFLUENCE. We need leadership and we need EXAMPLES to follow. John tells us to choose the best ones possible.

Today we arrive at the book of Philemon. The urgent message today is RECONCILIATION. Philemon is a fascinating book. Though its message is rather clear, the details behind the letter present a challenge for the Biblical scholar. One commentator said that reading Philemon is like coming into a theatre halfway through the movie, and you don't know exactly what's going on, and you watch it for a while to catch part of the plot, and then you have to leave before it's over. That's because Philemon is a personal letter between friends, and it references details that we don't know about. Now the fact is that we don't need to know about these details in order to pick up on the message of the letter, but it does pique our curiosity a bit.

Since this is a sermon (hopefully a message) today and not a seminary course, I'll give you the quick version of the backstory. ONESIMUS was a slave who had become estranged from his owner. His owner was a friend of Paul's named PHILEMON. Philemon lived in COLOSSAE, which is in TURKEY, and Onesimus eventually ended up in ROME. Maybe he had run away. Maybe he had been sent on a journey and decided not to return (AWOL). Either way, he ended up spending time with the Apostle Paul, and Paul led Onesimus to FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST. How did these two meet? Was it a coincidence that this runaway SLAVE happened to connect with a good friend of his master a thousand miles away from home? Or did Onesimus SEEK PAUL out, asking him to intervene with Philemon? We don't know. The details aren't recorded here, but we DO know what Paul did about it, and in this letter he shows us the IMPORTANCE OF RECONCILIATION.

Perhaps you wonder why Paul didn't condemn slavery? Here's some thoughts. Most would consider Paul was a man of his time. Actually, he may have been ahead of his time, but not 19 centuries ahead. It is my understanding that Paul lived in a world in which 40% of the population were slaves – most of the work force. If a man owned a business and had people working for him, in most cases these workers were either his sons or his slaves. The world economy was built on slave labor. Even the most forward thinking people could not imagine a world without slavery. One scholar stated it this way – "It wasn't a question of human rights, it was a question of productivity: Without slaves, who would do the work?" However, Paul did introduce some ideas that were radical for his day. He told slave owners to treat their slaves with gentleness and respect. In a culture in which it was legal to beat or even kill a slave, Paul told slave owners not even to speak harshly to a slave. And in a culture which considered slaves to be the lowest kind of human, Paul said that we are all one and we are all equal in Christ. He was saying things in his day that few, if any, were saying. He would have been considered on the cutting edge of the human rights movement. Just the fact that he was trying to bring these two men to reconciliation shows that Paul was an advanced thinker. The common man of the day would have said, "Runaway slave? Whip him with a cat-o-nine-tails. Teach him a lesson and make him an example for any other slave who might be tempted to flee." Paul didn't say that. Instead, he said, "Let's see if the two of you can reconcile."

The book of Philemon shows us that there will be times when you have the opportunity – and even the OBLIGATION – to stand in the gap between warring parties and bring about peace. The book of Isaiah says, "*You shall be called the repairer of the breach*" (58:12 ESV); Or, in the NIV, "*the repairer of broken walls.*" It is a wonderful thing to repair the breach between people who are at odds with one another. One of the best things you can do is bring together people who once were far apart, to help them resolve their conflict and restore a right relationship. In the book of Philemon, Paul by his example, shows us how to do it. He demonstrates four guidelines to bring about reconciliation. These work if you're the middleman in reconciliation, and I would also think them helpful if you are trying to reconcile with someone yourself.

1. Handle the situation with care. Several commentaries note how Paul's letter to Philemon is a masterpiece in diplomacy. He writes about a difficult situation with dignity, sympathy and affection. One scholar [Donald Guthrie] said that it is "one

of the most subtle letters in world history, an expression of Paul's ambassadorial style." For reconciliation to take place, you have to be an ambassador, either on your own behalf or on the behalf of someone else. Paul never refers to Onesimus as a fugitive, even though most would think that to be the case. Fugitive slaves were in serious trouble in this culture, and they often paid very harsh consequences for running away. This put Philemon in a difficult situation: If he was lenient with Onesimus, what kind of message would that send to the other slaves? Did he want them to think that if THEY ran away, there would be NO consequences? When you're trying to bring about reconciliation between two people, or when you're trying to reconcile with someone, there is usually an advantage in being aware of the obstacles involved, and you need to handle them carefully. Imagine a couple trying to patch things up after one party was found to have been unfaithful. Put your feet in the shoes of the one who was cheated on. Wouldn't it be rather normal to feel conflicted and afraid, because they're thinking – "How many other secrets are there in our relationship? How many more times will this happen? Am I setting myself up to be hurt again in the future?" It's easy for an outsider to say, "Forgive your spouse and get over it," or even "Dump your spouse and move on with your life," BUT... It's almost never that cut and dried and it's never that simple. If you want to be an agent of reconciliation, you need to put yourself in their position and see the world from their point of view, so that you can help them find restoration. Paul takes the opportunity to reframe the situation for Philemon so that he can see the good that can come of it. The name Onesimus means "useful," so Paul makes a play on words when he says... *"Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me"* (vs. 11). Then he says... *"Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good – no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord"* (vs. 15-16). What is Paul doing here? Paul was handling the situation with great care, trying to help Philemon develop some perspective on the situation so that he could make a clear headed decision. In order to reconcile, or to be the reconciler, you generally need to approach the situation with kid gloves. Be sympathetic. Be sensitive. Handle it with care.

2. Help both parties come to their own decision to do the right thing. YOU can't make the decision for them. Anyone remember when you were in grade school and you'd get in a scuffle on the playground, then you'd get sent to the principal's office? What did he say to you? Something like – "Now you boys shake hands and start being friends." I've seen parents do this with their children: "You two kiss and make-up." From what I've observed, most kids would rather take a beating than kiss and make-up. Perhaps, if you are fortunate you can strong-arm kids into being friends again, but I can't recall that I've ever seen such a strategy work with grown-ups. I'm aware of a church where there was a conflict between a church member and a staff member. It was one of those situations where it was extremely difficult to choose sides because this particular CHURCH MEMBER was always complaining and always mad about something, and this particular STAFF MEMBER was always making someone mad. Eventually leadership scheduled a meeting with the two men involved, a couple of staff people and a couple of lay leaders. In the course of the meeting, the church member ranted and raved awhile and then the staff member sulked and said what he needed to say in order to keep his job. Then the pastor talked for a while (a really long while), and he told the two men, "I want you to make-up and be friends." Then he prayed a long prayer and adjourned the meeting. Afterward, the pastor got up and hugged the belligerent church member. Then the pastor hugged the staff member. Then the church member hugged one of the lay leaders. And there was a bunch of hugging going on. It seemed everybody hugged everybody EXCEPT the angry church member and the sulking staff member. They didn't hug each other. They didn't speak to each other. They didn't even look at each other. They all left the meeting, but there was no reconciliation. As I understand it, those two men were at it again pretty soon. You can't FORCE people to reconcile. You can only lay out the options and give them the chance to do the right thing. That's what Paul does. He says... *"Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love"* (vs. 8-9). Then he says... *"But I did not want to do anything without your consent..."* (vs. 14). He's talking about the possibility that Onesimus would stay with Paul and assist him while he is in prison. *"But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced."* Paul gave Philemon a pretty STRONG HINT about what he should do, then he left the ball in Philemon's court and left the final decision up to him. It's the same when you're personally trying to reconcile with someone. You can go to them and say, "I want things to be right between us, and I'll do what I can to make things right," but the final decision is up to them. It takes TWO PEOPLE TO RECONCILE! You can't do it all by yourself. You can only do your best to create an atmosphere where reconciliation is possible – after that, everyone makes their own decision.

3. Be willing to give of yourself. Paul asked Philemon to take Onesimus back, and then he said... *"If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back – not to mention that you owe me your very self"* (vs. 18-19). This is the difference between meddling and peacemaking. Meddlers stand

on the outside and tell people what they ought to do. Peacemakers get involved. The phrase “Put your money where your mouth is” comes to mind. That’s what Paul did. He wasn’t merely dispensing advice. He was being an agent of reconciliation. He cared enough about these two men that he was willing to spend his own money to see it happen. Are YOU willing to do that? Are you willing to invest of yourself – your own resources, your own energy, your own time – in order to see two people come together? Are you willing to do this in the conflicts you have with others? Sometimes reconciliation COMES WITH A PRICE. Jesus paid for our reconciliation with God. He paid the price for our sins so that we could have peace with God. The Bible says that even though we were God’s enemies, living in rebellion, separated from him by sin, *“we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son.”* Reconciliation came with a price, and Jesus was willing to stand in the gap between sinful man and a holy God in order to pay for our reconciliation. He loves us that much. To a much lesser extent, WE sometimes must stand in the gap between those who are in conflict with one another. We must be willing to sacrifice part of ourselves in order to make possible their reconciliation. It may be as simple as taking them out to dinner and mediating a conversation. It may involve paying a debt. It may involve a long-term commitment of your time and energy. There’s a sacrifice to be made, but it’s worth it. This is why Jesus said... *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the sons of God”* (Matthew 5:9). To help people come to a point of reconciliation, you must be willing to give of yourself.

4. Follow-up on their progress. *“And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers”* (vs. 22). Paul wrote this letter from prison in Rome. In this situation, the prison was more like being under house arrest. He was able to receive visitors. He was able to write letters. He even conducted ministry to a limited extent, though he was not able to come and go as he pleased. But, he knew that EVENTUALLY he would be released. His plan was, upon his release, to make the thousand-mile journey from Rome to Colossae and spend some time with his friend, Philemon. He was saying, in effect, this brief letter doesn’t end my connection to you and Onesimus and this situation. I plan to come and spend time with you. Reconciliation is often a process. It takes TIME to achieve. Sometimes people will take a couple of steps in the direction of reconciliation, and then they falter. There needs to be accountability. There needs to be follow-up. If you’ve been fortunate enough to have helped two people mend the fence and restore a broken relationship, then keep an eye on them. Keep them under your care – not in an intrusive way; just be willing to be there for them. If you have experienced reconciliation with someone, follow up on the relationship. Check on them. Give them a call. Spend some time with them. Most of the time, reconciliation is not a one-and-done event. It’s a process. It takes time. It takes follow-up. It takes accountability.

CONCLUSION. Paul said in his second letter to the Corinthians... *“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation”* (2 Corinthians 5:18). This means that we help people be reconciled to GOD, and it also means that we help people be reconciled to ONE ANOTHER. Paul said that we should be eager to maintain the bond of unity, and he said... *“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace”* (Colossians 3:15). God wants his people to live together in unity, in harmony, in peace. The SIMPLE TRUTH is that sometimes WE DON’T. Sometimes people find themselves in conflict with one another. When that happens, you have an opportunity to be called one of the sons of God; one of the children of God. You have the opportunity to be a PEACEMAKER. If you enter this situation carefully, and offer your guidance gently, and encourage them both to make their own decision to do what’s right, and if you do it not by meddling, but by offering genuine sacrificial involvement (give of yourself), and you stay involved with follow-up and accountability, you will help people experience the joy of reconciliation, and you will be called the REPAIRER OF THE BREACH.