***SOMEBODY OPEN A WINDOW, PLEASE***

*a sermon preached by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on September 1, 2024*

*based on Philemon 1-21*

Let me ask if you remember the former King Hussein of Jordan. Small man, trimmed bearded, dark business suit, mostly. Always working for peace between Jews and Arabs. I was in Israel the day he died in 1999. It was remarkable. That day Palestinians and Jews wept openly. Our Zionist tour guide hated Arabs, but even he considered the King of Jordan to be something of a holy man.

Let me open this sermon with a story told by the New Testament scholar, Kenneth Bailey who lived in the middle east for his entire career.

Baily says, *I first heard the following account [of King Hussein] in Lebanon, and two decades later I was able to confirm it from a high ranking American Intelligence office who was serving in Jordan at the time the incident took place.*

*One night in the early 1980s, the king was informed by his security police that a group of about seventy-five Jordanian army officers were at that very moment meeting in a nearby barracks plotting a military overthrow of the kingdom. The security officers requested permission to surround the barracks and arrest the plotters. After a somber pause the king refused and said, ‘Bring me a helicopter.’ A helicopter was brought. The king climbed in with the pilot and he himself flew the copter to the barracks and landed on its flat roof. The king told the pilot, ‘If you hear gun shots, fly away at once without me.’*

*Unarmed, the king then walked down two flights of stairs and suddenly appeared in the room where the plotters were meeting and quietly said to them:  
Gentlemen, it has come to my attention that you are meeting here tonight to finalize your plans to overthrow the government, and install a military dictator. If you do this, the army will break apart and the country will be plunged into civil war. Tens of thousands of innocent people will die.*

*There is no need for this. Here I am! Kill me and proceed. That way only one man will die.*

*After a moment of stunned silence, the rebels as one, rushed forward to kiss the king’s hand and feet and pledge loyalty to him for life.*

Imagine Vladimir Putin choosing that as a way of handling the rebellion that seems inevitable for him oneday. Well, you can’t. Hussein of Jordon was an entirely different breed of man. He put country first, over himself.

I tell that story not just because it is powerful, and somewhat timely -- Donald Trump, never forget, could not believe Joe Biden wouldn’t take over the Democratic National Convention and pronounce himself his party’s candidate for president. He couldn’t even conceive of it. That says, everything.

Anyway, I tell this story because the scripture we just heard read is one that calls for an act of selflessness and integrity that is out of the bounds of the usual. It is the story of a young man named, Onesimus, and he is a runaway slave. You have to read between the lines to understand his story, but its pretty easy to figure out what’s going on here.

Onesimus was owned by a rich man from the town of Colossae. He has been away from his master’s home for a long time. He’s run away. He has, in fact, run ***to***someone. He has run to the famous man, Paul, who once planted a Christian community in his home town.

Why he has run away is not mentioned. Perhaps he has been treated harshly? More likely, from what we can pick up in the letter, he has stolen something. We don’t know for sure. We do know that Paul has convinced him to return home again to face the music, so to speak.

And so we can surmise from the letter that he is to be sent home to his slave master, Philemon, clutching a piece of paper, the very letter we read this morning from the hand of Paul, the apostle.

And now, two thousand years along, amazingly, this letter has become part of the Bible. Every other part of the Bible, you can be sure, has been edited to death, but maybe not this one.

Now, here’s something important to know. Slavery was widespread in the ancient world. At the Roman port of Delos 10,000 slaves were sometimes bought and sold in a single day. It’s also important for us to note that slavery in the 1st Century was not like what we know of slavery in the American South of the 19th century.

Roman slaves were not always laborers, the means to prop up an entire economy. No. Many slaves in Paul’s day were physicians, teachers, scribes, poets, musicians, civil servants. These were the best educated people of their day and they served as key people in every important household. This, of course, is not to say that people stolen from Africa didn’t do equally remarkable work in their native countries before being kidnapped.

What is similar, comparing slavery in Paul’s day to 19th century America, is that punishment in both places for running away could be extreme. Runaways could be sold to the slave galleys, severely whipped, even executed, which underscores the critical importance of this letter from Paul.

Paul calls the slave, Onesimus, "a faithful beloved brother." "Restore him," he urges Philemon. Don’t punish him. Don’t make of him an object lesson. Take him back peaceably, and completely.

Now, you need to know that the letter is not a private one. It is meant to be shared among the Christian community that meets in Philemon's house.

Why an open letter? Well, it is meant to pressure Philemon to welcome the slave, Onesimus back. Paul is not above using heavy handed means of leverage.

Paul believes that the issue at hand is more than merely something between a slave master and a slave. Onesimus, a follower of Jesus, is, according to Paul, answerable to the entire house church community.

According to Paul, unique opportunities are presented by this situation:

First, here is an opportunity for the community to show itself to be an entity that is run according to the teachings of Jesus. It is not a secular one. It is a community that is as different from the “world” community as can be.

Secondly, here is an opportunity for the community to show such love and mercy to Onesimus as to ground him in the faith. Here is what I am getting at: Onesimus is not on trial because he has come home on his knees. No, according to Paul, it is the Christians in Philemon's house there in the town of Colossae that are the ones on trial. This is *the* prime issue.

The fate of Onesimus and his brothers and sisters in the church community are linked inextricably for Paul, who once said, "If one member suffers, all suffer together, if one member is honored all rejoice together.”

Finally, and this is just as important, here is an opportunity for Philemon himself as a leader of this community of Christians, to show what he is made of. Paul makes the following appeal to him:

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 . . . I prefer to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced.

Paul shows that he is pretty hopeful that Philemon will do “the right thing.”

I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

“Refreshed.” This is an interesting word, and I want to spend the rest of the sermon focusing on it. The word in Greek literally means, *given shelter*.

It’s akin to the wonderful invitation Jesus gives in Matthew 11:28, *Come unto me, all you that are weary and are heavily laden, and I will give you rest.*

You see, the question hanging in the air in this community is, will Onesimus be given shelter? How merciful are you, Philemon, when push comes to shove? Can you be as gracious to your own runaway slave as to other “important” people who have come to Colossae? Or does your love have boundaries?

Boundaries. This is the acid test. Why? Because Jesus, the founder of the faith, seemed to have none.

Here is what I am getting at: Lutheran pastor, Nadia Bolz-Weber, says that whenever you and I draw a line in the sand, so to speak, Jesus is on the other side of that line. That is to say that when you and I draw a line or build a wall in order to exclude someone, for whatever reason, Jesus is on the other side of that line – Jesus is with the other person we are attempting to exclude, every time.

You want to build a wall between the USA and Mexico? Fine. Just know that Jesus will be on the Juarez side of the Rio Grande, not on the El Paso side.

Well, Paul understands this. Paul is asking Philemon to do some stretching when it comes to boundaries. Paul himself had done some stretching himself. A lot in fact. Paul was once a Pharisee, part of the reformed party of Judaism.

As such, he was someone with massive institutional blinders. But he has given up that way of looking at the world. He has changed. He has not just exchanged one set of religious blinders for another. He has thrown them off completely.

We know this absolutley because of something he says in another of his letters, this one to the church in Galatia --

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28).

You cannot underestimate the radicalness of that statement, coming as it does in the time and place it comes from. There is just something deeply refreshing about it.

Those words could have come from Jesus himself. You know, being blind to gender and culture was essential to everything he ever said or did.

Opening his heart to women and children as he did, he blew people away. He was that big a blast of fresh air. And yet, so few Christians actually recognize this about him. But the apsotle Paul did.

Now, thank heaven, Jesus is not the only means of refreshment available to our hearts. You have to look hard for it sometimes, but history is full of wonderful examples. I mentioned King Hussein of Jordan.

Back in 1958 when Pope Pius XII died, the Cardinals were deadlocked, choosing a new pope. So they picked the oldest among them, Cardinal Guiseppe Roncalli. He was chosen as a kind of benign, vanilla flavored, place-holder.

Well, the Cardinals had no idea what they had done. Pope John XXIII came in and said, “I am going to open the windows on our church. Windows that haven’t been opened in a thousand years.” And in blew fresh air and fresh ideas and an openness no one could have imagined, and the Vatican is still reverberating from that big bang.

Pope John XXIII knew there would be gargantuan push-back, he’d be hated by many of his peers and for decades, but he knew in his heart it was the right thing to do.

“Refresh my heart,” says Paul to Philemon. The world is dying for examples of genuine egolessness.

The College Football season started Thursday. I’m a Duck, and I bit my nails through the whole fourth quarterr of yesterday’s game against Idaho -- but I am also curious about a former Duck head coach – Chip Kelly.

Chip Kelly, you know, shocked the football world when he left his **head coaching position** at UCLA to join the Ohio State Buckeyes as the team's offensive coordinator.

Head coach of UCLA is a big freaking deal. Offensive coordinator, even for Ohio State? Not-so-much. It was an unprecedented move. Kelly was panned by Los Angeles media as well as some national pundits for his decision. Why did he do it?

Here’s what he said: “I really enjoy coaching. I really enjoy being with the players. I really enjoy the relationships you have when you’re in the meeting room...The opportunity to come here and just coach football and not have to do the things that a head coach is asked to do now in college football appealed to me.”

Wow. I get that. Head coaches today have to spend 90% of their time and energy watching the transfer portal, dealing with the media, the alumni, the college administration, big donors, division politics, the whims of Nike, for goddsake. Chip Kelly loves football. The strategy of it and that’s what he gets to do now, play-making, working with his quarterbacks.

How refreshing for someone at his level to say *that* with his life. Who cares about the money, or the ego. He is right where the fun is, but, as such, he’s one in a million.

One more story, closer to everyday life. I remember when the host of NPR’s *Weekend Edition Saturday,* Scott Simon, interviewed Billy Crystal who is nothing short of an American treasure.

Simon asked him, “Do you ever feel an outcast in Hollywood. You’ve been married to the same woman for 50+ years?”

Billy Crystal laughed and then referred to the awful magazines at the checkout stand at the market that are always featuring, you know, the current Hollywood “Hot Couple.”

Right? Billy Crystal said of himself and his wife, Janis, “We’re never in those magazines. What could be hotter than to be married to the same woman for 50 years?” He went on to describe his marriage. He said,

"I was 18; I knew it when I first met her. It gets better all the time. And we laugh a lot — she's really funny, and one of the few people who really gets a belly laugh outta me.

"You know, I respect her. And I always look forward to being with her. And one of the most important times we had was — the girls were starting to get bigger, I was on the road a lot, and doing very well. But I was working a *lot.* And at one point she said to me, 'Let's make sure you don’t become Uncle Daddy.'

"And ... you know, that was it. I never missed a birthday, I never missed a school play. We carpooled. And the greatest compliment I can ever get is not about my career or performance or anything; it's when people say, 'You know, your girls are great.' That's the real thing for me."

Refreshing? You bet.

We don't know if Philemon took the hint and re-instated Onesimus; we don't know if he might even have freed him and sent him back to Paul But there are at least two good reasons for thinking so. One -- the letter still exists.

Here’s number 2. Years later when Paul was long since dead, another saint was in jail: his name was Ignatius. The bishop of Ephesus had sent some friends to visit him and Ignatius had written a letter to ask this bishop if those friends could possibly stay with him.

Curiously, Ignatius, in his letter, uses some of the same language Paul uses in his letter to Philemon, almost as if he were trying to remind the man of something.

I say that because the name of the bishop Ignatius was writing to was *Onesimus.* There is no proof, of course, that he was the slave boy grown up to become a bishop, but it is deliciously tempting to think so.

But that is the way with acts of love that are rare and beautiful. The refreshment they offer reverberates on and on and on.

Amen