

(based on the Book of Philemon)

## When Monday Comes

If Sunday is Easter, what happens when *Monday* comes? What do we do after the power of change happens in our lives? What does change look like in our church? Change is happening. New ways of relating and working and reaching out will be challenging. When *Monday* comes, is when the new way of being begins!

In today's scripture, this is *Monday* living for Philemon, Paul and Onesimus.

This tiny book of Philemon was probably written by Paul around 60 A.D. It's a personal letter, really, from Paul to his old friend Philemon (his wife and son), and probably read in the house church started by Paul in their very home. Philemon had a slave, Onesimus, who has evidently run away, and probably stolen something. He has found his way to Paul, who is in prison. Onesimus, over the course of time, becomes so dear to Paul, Paul considers him as his own son. And now the rubber is about to hit the road. Paul is sending him back to his master Philemon, and asking Philemon to accept him now, not as a run away slave, but as a brother in Christ.

So, try to see in your mind's eye each one of these players in this story, and how their role is changing, and how *trust* and *faith* enter into the equation.

Paul: has spend time and prayer with this young man Onesimus, and Paul himself has come to the point of loving him, and being willing to send him back to an angry owner who will either receive him with kindness or retribution. Paul in these past months of deep spiritual friendship with Onesimus, has seen first hand how God works in a heart to change. How easy it would be to keep him - and yet, he is sending him back with no hope except his faith in a higher power working.

Onesimus: A slave, who for whatever reason ran away from his master. Run away slaves in the first century Greco-Roman world were not treated well; usually thrown in prison for the rest of their lives. Imagine this young man, carrying Paul's letter (in which his own fate hung), back to the master from whom he not only ran away, but probably stole as well. He must travel alone

and face this person alone, with no hope except his faith in a higher power working.

Philemon: ... for whom this New Testament book is named. Why was this letter elevated to be included in our New Testament? Could it be that this story represents the profound hope of change (of *Monday* living), that can happen to wronged, wrong-doer, and mediator who find themselves bound in Christian community? Philemon, who has lived every day since his slave ran away knowing he was wronged. He now headed a house church, which meant he headed a community of struggling followers of Jesus. His own slave had run away. What did that say about him: as an owner, a man, a Christian leader? Now this slave had returned with a letter written in his old friend Paul's own hand asking him not only to show mercy, but to accept him as an equal in total forgiveness. Might some things be just too hard, even for a Christian ... except for faith in a higher power working?

We don't know how the story ends. There are some historical hints that both Philemon and Onesimus played roles in the continuing early church. But perhaps WE are what happen! We are the legacy that continues to read Paul's letter as if it were written to us and about us.

The faith community as envisioned by Jesus was beginning to live out the Kingdom of God here on earth with topsy-turvy rules. At every turn, Jesus was challenging the underlying assumptions of the RULES that were defining people's lives under the guise of religion.

As an exercise, go back and read Jesus' words with only this thought in mind: what is the difference he's lifting up? For whom will this be good news? For whom will this be an uncomfortable or downright threatening message?

- Now go back and read Mary's prophetic inspiration when she found out she was pregnant; what is the message?
- Now go to Jesus' first sermon in Nazareth, and what was it about?
- Go to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount? What do you hear?
- Throughout the parables and personal encounters and as he prepares for his last days and hours of his earthly life .. what is the message?

Jesus was utterly consistent in what he held up for how we should live our lives differently from what is the accepted norm. Why has it been so hard for the Church ... for we who call ourselves by his name, to get it?

Could it be that we are more shaped by our culture than by *Christ*?  
We are more shaped by culture than the *cross*?

The church community is the testing and training ground for a new Community. And to live out this counter-intuitive Kingdom paradigm means more than just nice thoughts, and pleasant words.

What does it mean to radically alter our community to conform to Christ, rather than to culture?

Paul had been a Pharisee's Pharisee .. he lived by the letter of the law. But, after he met the living Christ, he had to start over again and rebuild on the rubble of his long-held religious assumptions. It didn't happen all at once. I think that an important classroom of learning took place for both Paul and Onesimus in prison. Paul learned to love someone when everything else was stripped away. He could see Christ at work in reshaping this broken and flawed human being who came as a run away slave, and became as his own son. Paul saw this as THE testing ground for understanding the power of Christian Community. Will it work or won't it? Can we live by a different standard, or can't we?

Each person faced their own struggle and unknown outcome:

**Paul:** He was treading on brand new ground here, asking his friend Philemon to go against his culture and his good sense. Paul could only ask this and recommend this because he now had intimately lived and prayed and shared his very existence with Omnesimus and trusted in a power greater than all of them to do the impossible. *Monday* was coming.

**Onesimus:** was going back a changed human being; a kind of prodigal son. He didn't have to go back. He could have begged Paul to keep him. He could have run away again. What if his master showed him no mercy? Would he be punished severely or received in forgiveness? What would his attitude be toward this man who abused him so much he ran away in the first place,

stealing from him? It was no secret what he had done. How do you go back to a community that knows you, and begin again as a changed person? What if the community doesn't let you forget? And yet that is what Paul was having Omnesius do. *Monday* was coming.

**Philemon.** He has no idea what happened to his slave. Now, in one instance he faces the slave who betrayed him, and has a letter from his friend and spiritual father. There was no greater spiritual authority than Paul, and now he was asking Philemon to do the impossible: forgive and accept as a brother, an equal, this mere slave who had wronged him, and violated him. What would everyone say? How do you even begin to learn how to treat as an equal someone who has been only an object before. *Monday* was coming.

We don't have slaves today .. or do we? How do we see the gas station attendant .. the person on the corner with the cardboard sign .. the guy who mows our lawn ... the undocumented worker .. the accented voice on the phone a continent away, trying to help us with our complaint?

I want to tell you a story about a woman named Jerry. The time was the early 1970s, and the place was Texas. Jerry was a gorgeous, brilliant economics professor at a Texas university.

Jerry and her friends were vehemently against the Viet Nam war. They wanted to start an underground newspaper to get out the facts, but they had no money. Stupidly they figured they could rob a liquor store for some ready cash. Little did they know that a government infiltrator was amongst them and they were all rounded up and arrested before anything could happen.

But, they literally threw the book at Jerry. She had a black fiancé (very politically incorrect at that time and place). Even though she had no prior record, nothing had actually happened, and she had a young son, the District Attorney prosecuted her to the full extent of the law, the jury concurred, and the judge gave her a stiff sentence of 20 years.

She learned to survive incarcerated. After about five years, she found herself in a season of spiritual searching. She had always relied on her intellect before. But now there was nothing. Only blackness. One night she

found herself praying: "God, who are you? Let me know. Are you Buddha? Mohammed? Krishna? Let me know who you are... only please, don't let it be Jesus!"

But as the days and months went by, she experienced that it was indeed for her Jesus. Her faith grew deep and strong. She still squared off with big, tough, mean women - but Jerry now had a willingness to be vulnerable in love to those around her. She decided if and when she was released from prison, her calling was to work with the poor.

She was paroled. And she went to seminary ... the same seminary I went to, and I learned her story. We all learned her story. After two years, though, she received word from that Texas district attorney. He had never forgotten her or her case. He had gone back over it and had reevaluated it, and was petitioning the governor for a pardon. She was pardoned. She followed her call to work with the poor, and today, Jerry can be found on the Texas - Mexico border, working with those undocumented human beings who are just trying to survive.

So what do *we* do when *Monday* comes? When the page has been turned, and we know we are different, and life needs to be different, and we find we are out of step with those all around us?

We have taken some *Monday* change steps here in this church. Dorita is on board! She will challenge us to get out into the community. But what does that look like for we who follow the Christ who holds up such a counter-intuitive way of relating to each other and the world around us? To have that strength we will need to have a strong base of mutual support here. This is our safe place. This is where we bind our wounds, forgive our errors, and get strengthened for the journey. This is why we gather around the Table of Food and Forgiveness and Family in Christ.

I really believe that in the Body of Christ, everything hinges on relationship. The early church called this sense of community by its Greek word: *Koinonia*. It is this kind of nitty-gritty relationship, where there is complication and involvement and trust and respect, and stretching and learning, and forgiveness, and recovering of a new identity, and letting go of shame. That is the power of the body of Christ ... the family in Christ. We are not just

nice people... we are not just folks on a path trying to do good. We are called to get our hands dirty, even as we hold on to each other.

What does membership mean in such a body of *Monday* mean? We will be taking in members on the last Sunday of this month. What if membership meant a totally different set of rules and challenges? Not like community altruistic groups ... but entrance into a radical community that loves radically, gives radically, forgives radically, lives on the edge radically??

Today, we here gather around this communion table. Visually and physically we are *around* the table... looking at each other; recognizing each other; re-mem-bering each other, and futuring together. We remember Paul saying in Hebrews that we are no longer slave or free, woman or man, Jew or gentile, agnostic or Methodist; Presbyterian or Baptist. We are *one* in Christ - and where better to realize this than around the Table, *this* Table, where the very sign of our community - our Koinonia is the Eucharist, the Body of Christ, which *we* become, and which sustains us and feeds us to live into *Monday*.

Amen.

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