

Oh the riches available to me in today's reading choices! It's one of those rare times I would like to be a pastor who can preach for 45 minutes, just to say everything I want to about all these readings...okay, everybody relax, I'm not going to preach for that long. I have to make a choice about what I want to say.

That's a theme in today's readings. In each one, someone is pushed to make a choice, a decision about how to move forward. The potter has to decide to keep the imperfect pot he's been working on—and risk it exploding when he puts it in the kiln—or mush the clay back down and start over. I think the last time these readings came around, I told you about unraveling a sweater I had been knitting because I knew it wasn't going to be useful. Have to admit, I've done my share of "frogging" (that's what taking knitting out is called) since then. It's just part of creativity. We start a project, discover the flaws along the way, and have to decide how much imperfection we can live with. Sometimes, in order to become what we are supposed to be, we have to "un-become" what we are. I think the phrase I used earlier this week was that this is not terminal destructiveness. It's undoing in order to do better.

But it can be pretty painful in the middle of the mushing, or the frogging, or the undoing or unbecoming. No one likes to admit that they were wrong, that they made a

mistake—or even worse, did something with the full knowledge that it was wrong.

On occasion I have been told I don't preach enough about "sin." But I think I do—I just don't use the word, because it's loaded, and it shuts people's ears down so that they can't hear the *good* news that comes after the bad news. Yes, every single person on this planet sins. But as Christians we are promised that **sinner** is not our core identity. **Redeemed** is our core identity. We have been reclaimed by God, put to new use.

This comes into play in the reading from Philemon. I want to give you some of the background story so that you can appreciate everything that is going on.

Paul is writing from prison. We don't know where, or for how long. In that society, one was in prison in the time leading up to one's trial, not after conviction. (There were different consequences for being convicted of a crime—not least of which was execution.) Paul is writing to Philemon, an important person in one of the churches, probably Colossae, about Philemon's runaway slave, Onesimus, asking Philemon to forgive him and take him back. What I found interesting this time around is that usually, when a wealthy man converted to Christianity in that time, he *and all his household* would be baptized—including slaves. But we are told that Onesimus only came to faith once he had run away. Was it his choice not to become a follower of Jesus, or did Philemon fail to offer him the chance?

I want to take just a second to address the issue of slavery here. We have a lot of emotional baggage around that word, and we make a lot of assumptions based on our cultural experience of slavery in the United States.

In the Roman Empire, a person was not usually born into slavery, and race did not play a part. As with most empires, the economy was dependent upon essentially free labor. People became slaves because they were taken captive after the defeat of their homeland, or because they owed more than they could repay. They sold themselves or more often their children into slavery in order to pay off the debt. There was at least theoretically the possibility that the slave would be able to purchase his or his family member's freedom, and the Roman Empire eventually allowed such freed slaves to become citizens themselves.

But it was still slavery. It was still a system which believed a human being could be treated as property.

Philemon may have embraced the freedom that comes from being a follower of Christ—but he hadn't quite come to the understanding that such freedom should be extended to all. If we needed any further proof that he hadn't quite come to see the value of every human life, we need only consider the name Philemon gave this man. He called the slave Onesimus, which means *useful*, but Paul later makes a reference to Philemon

considering him ‘useless.’ I don’t know if that is just a play on words by Paul, or if the escaped slave had heard it from his master. Imagine living in a household where your worth is determined only by what you do, instead of who you are. I think would be hesitant to put much stock in this religion my owner claims to follow now, when I’m still being judged for what I can produce.

Useless. I think I might run away too.

Paul writes this letter to Philemon, with these clever puns and this not-so-subtle manipulation, to teach Philemon something important about our lives in Christ. It’s not just about second chances, getting a do-over when our clay pot goes misshapen on the wheel. Membership in the Body of Christ changes how we relate to each other. Ideally, that extends beyond just other Christians, but to the wider world. We are expected to love our neighbor—not just our Christian neighbor, not just our neighbor who looks and thinks and speaks and acts and prays like us. We are expected to love even those who, in our secret hearts, we consider useless. “A waste of space” as some might say.

It’s all about sharing the love.

So this is the point where one of you is supposed to raise your hand and say, “Okaaaay...so what’s the thing Jesus says about hating our father/mother/brother/sister, then?!”

Well, it's not hate in the way we read it. It is, once again, about making the right choice. Remember that Jesus is talking to people whose entire social structure is shaped around family relationships, which could be a blessing or a curse. I have explained before about the role of honor and shame in that society. People's ability to move up economically was tied to their social standing, and who you were related to played a big role in that.

Jesus isn't calling for ill will towards the people who share our genetic material. But he is calling on us to let go of the benefits that come from being related to the "right" people. He is calling on us to see each other as brothers and sisters, co-workers in the kingdom of God, not objects we can designate as useful or useless. We have to see every person we encounter as part of God's family, and therefore ours.

That's where Paul goes, in his challenge to Philemon. He reminds Philemon that we all become servants—literally slaves—to each other when we become disciples of Jesus. We let go of the things that allow us to set ourselves apart, to think we are somehow better or more important or more valuable, and instead see that we share a common purpose. He wants Philemon to choose a new relationship with Onesimus, a more equal one. Yes, there will be cultural consequences if he receives a runaway slave back into his household and starts treating him like an equal. His friends and acquaintances, the people who have shown him honor

in the past, may treat him differently or even reject him. He may lose his privilege and position and influence.

That's what taking up his cross would look like. There's a cost. Salvation is free, but discipleship—living *this* life like a follower of Jesus—makes demands of us. It's going to change us into something new and kingdom-ready. That is the call for which God shapes and reshapes us—to offer hope to those in despair, to bring light to those stumbling in the dark, to give a new name to those who are sure they are just useless sinners. The name Redeemed, Free, Beloved Child of God.

Amen.