

Twenty-Three Sunday in Ordinary Time C - Forgive and Forget

September 7, 2025

This Sunday instead of the Gospel I'd like to focus on the second reading, the Letter of Paul to Philemon. This is the shortest of Paul's letters. We only come upon this letter once every three years. Paul's epistles are usually quite theological with practical applications for the entire Church. The Letter to Philemon is close to a personal letter to a friend. It was added to the New Testament, though, because it has an important insight into the Christians way of living.

Many times, people reduce this letter to a discussion of Paul's view of slavery. It really has little to do with slavery, even though the subject of the letter, Onesimus, was a slave who had run away from his master Philemon. Now, as soon as we hear that Philemon was a Christian with a slave, we would immediately question whether Philemon was really a Christian because Christians should not have slaves. We think of slavery as in the story of St. Josephine Bakhita who was kidnaped from her homeland. Slavery in the history of North America involved beatings and tortures, separating parents from their children, and husbands and wives from each other, as well as other atrocities, basically treating the slaves as animals. Slavery like that did exist in the Roman empire, but it was mostly confined to the galleys and mines. Christians could not own that type of slave. But there were also many slaves with quite a different status in society. Some of these slaves were students, teachers, or servants. These slaves could have their own families. They could work side jobs, save up money and even purchase their own freedom.

Onesimus was this type of a slave. Only instead of working for his freedom, he ran away from his master. Onesimus escaped from Colossae in ancient Asia Minor, modern Turkey. He made his way to Rome in about 61-63 AD. There Onesimus heard about Paul and his teaching about Christ. At this time Paul was under house arrest. He could receive people, teach non-Christians about Jesus, help individuals grow in faith. Paul converted Onesimus. When Paul learned that Onesimus' master, Philemon, was also a Christian, Paul sent Onesimus back to him along with a letter, much of which is in today's second reading. He tells Philemon to welcome Onesimus as a fellow Christian while at the same time forgiving him for running away.

The point of the letter is not about slavery. It is about a whole new way of living. In fact, Christianity in its earliest days was called the Way. The Christian Way demands forgiveness for those who have offended the Christian. It is easy for us to forgive someone with whom we have had minor disagreements. There are always squabbles within families. We realize that ultimately there are two sides to every story and that we might very well have a share of the blame. However, it is not so easy to forgive someone who has unjustly offended us or one of our loved ones. In this case, it takes a lot of courage and determination to really be a Christian. Paul's letter is scripture because it calls us to have a different view of life, one that forgives those who have unjustly hurt us. It has an apostolic, community-oriented appeal.

I think all of us have heard about people who are willing to forgive even after being unjustly attacked. Just a week ago there was a shooting at a Catholic school in the US city of Minneapolis, Minnesota. Authorities say the attacker in the Minneapolis school shooting "appeared to hate all of us" and "wanted to watch children suffer" The attacker fired through church windows as people were praying during Mass - two children, aged eight and 10, were killed, and 18 others were injured. A child is still in critical condition. Law enforcement has identified the attacker as **Robin Westman, 23**, from suburban Minneapolis. Westman died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. The two students killed in the Annunciation Catholic School mass shooting were an 8-year-old boy Fletcher Merkel who loved to fish and cook and a 10-year-old girl Harper Moyski known for her laughter and kindness. Fletcher's father urged parents to "give your kids an extra hug" as he remembered his son. The father added, "While the hole in our hearts and lives will never be filled, I hope that in time, our family can find healing. I pray that the other victim's family can find some resemblance of the same."

When I was in elementary school I behaved well with good marks and was selected to be a prefect. One day while I was patrolling, I saw a peach on the playground and picked it up because I didn't want students tripping on it. It fell from a peach tree in the school yard. A student told the teacher on me for picking the peach from the tree. I forgave the student but can't forget the incident. When in high school, each class had a library break after lunch. One day I had a stomach ache and went to the washroom downstairs in a hurry. A good friend of mine told the librarian that I tried to steal a book. Again I can forgive him but can't forget. I am sure that many of you have your own battle stories. I am sure that you also have realized the weight of living the Christian way. This way of ours, this way of Christians, is a way that is still hidden from much of the world including many Christians.

Do we have to forgive and forget? Well, we have to forgive, but prudence tells us not to forget, and certainly not to put ourselves into a situation where we or our loved ones would be attacked. I am not aware of any part of the bible that says "forget," but that does not mean we should refuse to forgive. At its basis, the Letter to Philemon is stating that the way of the Christian is very different than the way of the world. The way of the Christian is the way of love and forgiveness. Paul transforms the relationship between master and slave, and in that culture, that was a revolutionary challenge. Jesus' teaching and his way of living is also revolutionary. It is the way of Jesus Christ who from the cross, being tortured to death, mustered up the strength to say, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." Jesus was the kindest person to ever live. And he said, "Follow me."