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Series: Some Sermons Pastor Mike Wants to Preach Before He Leaves!

Sermon: Your Life is Scripture

The Book of Philemon

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon, our dear friend and fellow worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ. Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.

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. I then, as Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus - I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced. 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.

So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. 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. I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask. And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers.

Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Sermon

Anybody have any idea how many books there are in the Bible? There are 66 books in what we call the canonical Bible, which means there are 66 books which scholars and theologians have decided are the true, inspired word of God. These are the books that we believe God inspired people to write so that his truths may be passed on from generation to generation. Now some of you may be kind of new to this whole “church thing,” so let me be very basic with you: God...is a pretty important part of what we do here. We honor him, we worship him, we revere him. And when your God, the creator of the universe, speaks to us, we listen, right? We don't put God on hold or ignore what he has to say.

And today I want to start with one of the shortest and hardest to pronounce books in the New Testament. That is the book of Philemon. It is right after Titus – like we know where that is – and before Hebrews. Hebrews is a bigger book and hard to miss. Philemon is tied for the third shortest book in all of the New Testament with Jude, and it has only 25 verses to the whole book. The only two that are shorter are II and III John. But what I want to do with you today is give you a little background about Philemon and why it matters to your life.

So let me begin by setting up the background for you a little bit. Paul is writing this letter from prison, probably from Rome. And he is writing to a man named Philemon. He is mentioned nowhere else in the Bible. He probably is living in the city of Colosse, which we know because of the man who is at the center of this letter, a man named Onesimus. We find out in the book of Colossians that Onesimus is traveling back to Colosse, and in the book of Philemon, we find out why. It seems that Onesimus was once a slave owned by Philemon. For whatever reason, Onesimus ran away from Philemon's house, and upon doing so, he eventually met Paul and became a Christian and a good friend of Paul's. However, Philemon was a friend of Paul's as well, and more than that, Philemon had been converted by Paul himself while Paul was in Colosse. He knew that Onesimus had to go back. He had to go back to Philemon's home in Colosse, because he was his slave, and it would be wrong for Paul to keep him.

Paul also knew that run away slaves that were caught and returned were often times killed for their insubordination. And so we have the occasion for Paul to write this letter, carried by Onesimus to Philemon. A letter that is urging lenience towards Onesimus, but ever more than that, encourages Philemon to accept Onesimus, who was once his slave, as his new brother in Christ.

Let's look at the book of Philemon. Now you might have just heard that letter and thought, "That's just basically correspondence between two friends. How did that become a book of the Bible?" Philemon is important precisely because it IS so different. We aren't hearing Paul give a lecture or a sermon like he is in the other books. Instead, we are seeing how Paul acts when no one else is looking. This man who wrote so many of the books of the New Testament. I'll guarantee that while he was sitting in prison writing this letter, he wasn't thinking, "Man, this is good enough to be scripture!" His heart and his mind were totally focused on his two good friends, Onesimus and Philemon, and how he could help them, through God's love, to repair their broken relationship.

So what has Paul's strategy been? First, he let Philemon know that he believes that he is a strong Christian and a good man. And I think it was more than just flattery, it was exhortation. It was a true compliment. Did it sound like sucking up at the beginning? I hear of your love. I hear of your great service. What a great and awesome guy you are! But Paul also recognizes that with increased spiritual maturity comes increased responsibility to act like a Christian, with mercy and compassion and grace. Even when it's tough. Even when it is inconvenient. With Great Power comes great responsibilities. That's what Paul is reminding Philemon of, and that's what God is in turn reminding us of. Both Philemon and Onesimus, because of their love for Christ and their commitment to live a Christ-like life, are going to have to do hard and uncomfortable things. Onesimus is going to have to return to the man who owns him as a slave, from whom he ran away. A man that, should he choose to, can have him killed for insubordination. And Philemon is going to have to show mercy and grace to a man who is no longer just a runaway slave, but a fellow believer.

Of course, just to spend a moment on slavery in the Bible. Why does Paul ask a slaver to go back to his master? Does Paul condone slavery? Paul's action stand on their own, but at that time, slavery was a time honored practice and in Roman society - it would have been inconceivable to imagine a world without it. Just a fact of life. Not to let him off the hook, but remember Christians were at first an insignificant group in the Empire. Their religion was itself still unlawful, and they were politically powerless. Paul is working within a horrible framework and fact of Ancient civilization. Slavery exists. But what Paul is proposing to the both of them is, in a way, trying to dismantle that horrible institution in a small bites size bit.

Being a Christian means doing what's right even when it is uncomfortable and messy. Being a Christian mean treating others with respect, kindness, and compassion regardless of their social status and regardless of your past. For too long we as Christians have ignored the people who live on the wrong side of the tracks. Or too long we have secluded others because they dress weird or listen to the wrong kind of music or work minimum wage. Or those who are the outcasts. That is exactly the opposite of who Jesus hung out with. Each of the

disciples were dirty, rotten scoundrels, ignored by the religious society, but embraced by Christ. We have to stop looking down on others as if we're better than they are. I've learned this: when it comes to sinners, there are only two categories: those who are sinners, and those who aren't, and I've learned that there ain't anybody in that second category.

Folks, we have to learn to be forgiving, and we have to learn some compassion. We have to learn to treat others, those who look and act and talk different from us, as if they truly have been crafted in the image of God. Have you gone the extra mile yet this week? Have you gone beyond normal expectations and crossed over into true, agape love? Have you loved someone who doesn't deserve it? Verse 22 in Philemon says this, "One thing more – prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you." Paul was coming to visit. Why? Because he wasn't about to let Philemon or Onesimus off the hook. He was going to come and see if they were truly acting in Christian love. That's called accountability. We have to have some accountability among ourselves when it comes to loving others the way that Christ loved. What does accountability look like?

Years ago, on a trip with one kiddo in the backseat, we went through a drive thru. And we see a guy out on the median with a cardboard sign. Food. Our son Christian noticed him, but couldn't quite read yet, so I had a pass. But then he had to ask me. What's that guy doing? I told him that he was hungry and was asking for some food. How do you explain to a four year old the nuances of begging and beggars, of con men and swindlers? We went through the drive-thru with our grub for the families back at the hotel. We were pulling out, and Christian said something like, "Hey, now we have food!" I could feel his glare burning a hole in my head, and I knew he was right. So you know what happened next. We pulled over and gave him a sandwich. Maybe he was hungry, maybe he wasn't. Maybe he just wanted money to buy other things. I don't know. I don't have any control over his actions. BUT I have control over my actions. I can choose to love and be compassionate, or I can choose to avoid eye contact and act like I don't see him. Hopefully more often than not, I choose agape love. But when I don't, I thank God every day for a loving, Christian family who is willing to hold me accountable before God. We have got to hold one another accountable. You holding one another accountable, me holding you accountable, you holding me accountable.

Put yourself in Philemon's shoes, or Onesimus. Maybe there's someone you need to go back and beg forgiveness from, even if you think there's no way they'll give it to you. Or maybe you need to offer mercy and compassion to someone you don't really feel like being merciful and compassionate to. I'm asking you to do it anyways. I'm asking you to love with that agape love for the sake of Christ. Maybe it will work out, or maybe it will blow up in your face, I don't know. But you can only control your actions. You can't control someone else. Which action will you choose? The easy way out? Or the hard way, the way that follows agape love by means of compassion, mercy, and grace? My prayer for us is that we choose love.

Let me close with this: I believe that your life is a story. My life is a story. One of my favorite parts of a funeral, if there can be a favorite part of a funeral, is their life story. Let me make it happier. My favorite part of wedding counseling is their story. How did they meet? Did the guy get down on one knee? Do they like their in-laws? Their story. We all have a story to tell. A friend of mine wants to write an autobiography called, "The complete life and autobiography of an absolute nobody" - thinking they've done nothing with their life. But I believe that everyone has a story to tell. And if scripture is the collection of stories and wisdom of our human experience with God, then our lives, you could say is it's own scripture. With God in your life, your personal story is a scripture. For good or for bad. The Christian life in action. Paul never thought this book of the Bible would ever be read or disseminated like it had. A simple letter to a friend. Likewise, our own story is being written in the book of life. Where future generations of saints will know the kind of people we were. I was reminded of this several years ago. I had met a guy at a grocery store where a previous church of mine did business, and we would chit-chat every time I went in. Nice guy. One day going through the check out, I paid with a large bill, and he did the swipe with the marker to see if it was legit and not counterfeit. We started discussing bogus bills, and he shared a story that a while back the fed had contacted all the stores warning them

of counterfeit bills going through with a certain serial number. He checked their till and sure enough, they had about 600 dollars worth of bogus bills. Luckily he said, it was pay day at a large plant in town, people came in to cash their payroll checks and he was able to pass them along to unknowing wage earners so their store didn't have to eat the loss. Everytime I went in after that, when I'd see the guy, you know what I thought? "Hey, there's that guy who cheated somebody. Check your bills."

Your life is a scripture. A story. A continuation of God's action in the world. Our names are in the book of life. Choose stories that affirm life. Love. Acceptance. Forgiveness. As Paul wrote in this private letter, laid bare for all to see: Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints. Go and do likewise. And the family of God said, AMEN!

Opening: Good morning Oregon City UMC and Online Guests. This morning we are opening up at the Parsonage. Yes, OCUMC, you have a parsonage. And for the past 8 years, our family has been blessed to have lived here. What's a parsonage I hear you ask? This is what Wikipedia says, Clergy houses are typically owned and maintained by a church, as a benefit to its clergy. The practice exists in many denominations because of the tendency of clergy to be transferred from one church to another at relatively frequent intervals; also, in smaller communities housing is not as available and in addition the house is provided in lieu of salary which may not be able to be provided.

You church house is on Setera Circle over by Fred Meyers. Thank you to the Trustees and Staff Parish Team for maintaining the house over these years. Last week, Pastor Tom (your next pastor) and family toured the house with John Ronfeld of the Trusttes and Melissa Quevedo of the Staff Parish Team. Our hope is to leave the house in better condition then when it was offered to us. And over the years, the church has put on a new roof, fixed fencing, refurbished the kitchen, cut down trees, and other odds and ends throughout the years. We just wanted to say thank you for letting us stay in your house - and we pray God's blessings that it will be a benefit to the next pastor - who is looking through the window. YOU DON'T LIVE HERE YET. . Here are this morning's announcements.

Children's Time:

Do you like to go to the mailbox and get the mail? I loved checking the mail box as a kid. I know, I know, it was very very rare that someone would send me a letter - but it was so exciting when it happened.

What types of things come in the mail? [letters, ads, newspapers, packages, etc.]

I enjoy receiving mail! It's always so fun to see what you get!

{Hold up the ads or junk mail.}

These business ads are colorful and at times they can give me interesting information, but these businesses don't love me. They just want me to come into their store, or go to their event. In fact, these ads are sent to EVERYONE in the town, not just to me. They don't really care about me as a person.

Where do most of these ads end up? [In the trash can]

{Hold up the bills.}

These envelopes hold monthly bills. These are businesses to which I owe money. Each month I have to pay for power, water, internet, and more.

Do these businesses care whether or not I pay them? [Yes!]

Yes, they care if I pay them for their services. In fact, if I don't pay them, they can charge me a fee OR even turn off whatever the service is.

Do these businesses care about me as a person? or do they want my money? [They want money for the service they give.]

I'm not the only person who pays for water, or electricity. They send these bills out to thousands of people. I'm just one of the many. There is nothing special about these bill envelopes.

{Hold up the personal letter or card.}

But THIS envelope! This is a special letter that we received from someone special, someone we know.. She wrote it in her own hand – no computer. In fact, what she wrote in the letter was encouraging to me and I keep it to read when I need to be encouraged.

The person who wrote this card didn't have to. But she thought of me, and my family, when we weren't even around. She took time out of her busy schedule to sit down and write these words. She thought about what she wrote and was motivated to do something nice for me. All of that makes this one letter extremely special.

After Jesus' resurrection and ascended into heaven, many of the apostles wrote letters to new believers. As Peter, the apostles, and Paul preached, more and more people became a part of The Way. The Leaders and Teachers could not be at every church they started. Paul would stay a little while and then move on to the next place because of the prompting of the Lord. He wanted to be sure that the churches were growing in Christ, and to encourage the church leaders, therefore, Paul wrote many letters.

Peter and John, the apostles, also wrote letters. By reading the letters, the new Christians would gain understanding about God, be encouraged, and would receive instructions for how to live a righteous life pleasing unto the Lord. God wants us to allow Him to change our hearts to be more like Jesus.

There are 66 books in the bible. Some are stories, histories, poems, folklore, and some, believe it or not, letters. The New Testament is set up into three sections: historical books, Paul's letters, and additional letters. Most of the New Testament is letters. Written to churches, written to certain individuals. And written to you. So if you ever go to the mailbox and see that its empty, just know that you have letters written to you, through the saints of the past, telling you that God loves you. That's a cool letter to get.

Thanks for stopping by!

Prayer: Lord, in this season of growth, open our hearts to grow in your love. Help us to truly trust in your creative process in our lives. We look around and we see the beauty of your world, the blossoming flowers and plants, the growth of children, the joy of celebrations of graduation and marriage, of receiving new life. And we also see the sadness and sorrow that has invaded the world when systems of injustice and hatred lay claim to people's lives. Prepare us, O Lord, to become ambassadors of peace and hope. Help us to place our trust in you, so that when we are serving others, they may come to know your abiding love and power. Give us courage and great joy as we serve you. In his prayer we say these words...

OUR FATHER WHO ART IN HEAVEN, HALLOWED BE THY NAME.

THY KINGDOM COME. THY WILL BE DONE ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN.

GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD, AND FORGIVE US OUR TRESPASSES,

AS WE FORGIVE THOSE WHO TRESPASS AGAINST US, AND LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION,

BUT DELIVER US FROM EVIL. FOR THINE IS THE KINGDOM,

AND THE POWER, AND THE GLORY, FOR EVER AND EVER AMEN

Offertory:

Welcome to the Offering, our chance to give back. As United Methodists, we support many ministries, within the church, outside the church, at home and abroad. We are a giving people. One place that ministry happens is in this office. Yes, it looks like an office, but it's the front line of our church. All phone calls come through here. All letters, correspondence, all emails are sorted out here. The hub of our church. And this office is run by Christa Palmer - who did not know she was going to be on camera today. Say Hi Christa. Do you want me to leave? Yes. She's also our first line of defense! 8 years ago, right before I was pastor, I drove in the parking lot to check you folks out. I wasn't supposed to be here yet, but I wanted to just see your church. And I snuck in. Walked right past her office into the sanctuary, where the line dancers were doing their thing. Country music blaring, you might remember what the sanctuary looked like, beams and brackets and joists dangling down from the ceiling, storage in every corner, and I thought to myself, What kind of church is this? And right behind me I heard, Excuse Me, can I help you? We had a pleasant talk. All I could say was that we were moving to town and wanted to check out the Methodist church - which was true. But Christa was the first impression that I had of this church - and this office is the first impression that many people have of this church. Many things at our church wouldn't happen, if she didn't do what she does. So, thank you OCUMC, for your support of the main church office. And if you get a chance, tell Christa Thanks!

Closing: Have a wonderful week, OCUMC and God bless!