

Thursday in the Twenty-fourth Week after Pentecost  
November 12, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Year Two, Proper 27: Philemon 1:1–20\*; Psalm 146; Luke 17:20–25*

Philemon is counted among the seven letters ascribed to Paul himself by most scholars. It's Paul's shortest letter, just 335 words. Its subject is Onesimus, a runaway slave belonging to Philemon. The letter is also addressed to Apphia—perhaps Philemon's wife—and Archip'pus. Paul describes him as a “fellow soldier”—maybe one of the pastoral leaders of the church gathered in Philemon's house.<sup>1</sup>

What's most important about this letter is Paul's conviction that Onesimus is no longer just an enslaved human being. Like Philemon, he's Paul's child. Philemon and Onesimus are brothers. They are part of the new creation in Christ Jesus.<sup>2</sup> One can't help but think of the words from Galatians, another of Paul's letters whose authorship is undisputed: “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 502–03.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 505–06.

all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise."<sup>3</sup>

In a footnote, Father Brown wrote, "The name Onesimus, common for slaves, means "useful" in Greek; Paul plays on that in [verse] 11 in the contrast between 'formerly worthless to you . . . now of good worth to you and to me.' "<sup>4</sup>

Brown, who died in 1998, published *An Introduction to the New Testament* in 1997—twenty-three years ago. One section of his comments on this letter is called "Social Import of Paul's View of Slavery." Paul's words are seen by some as gently introducing something new: baptism changes the relationship of believers. In the background of a sympathetic reading of this letter, one could remember that Paul's understanding of the Good News very much included the words written in Mark, Matthew, and Luke (and I quote Mark): "[Jesus said to his disciples] . . . there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with

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<sup>3</sup> Galatians 3:27–29.

<sup>4</sup> Brown, 505 n.6.

power.”<sup>5</sup> The first Christians did expect Jesus to return soon.

Of course, the other side is that Paul did not already make it clear that Christians, not to mention others, should not own Christians as slaves. Of import for us, today is the question of what does the Gospel require of us today?

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Mark 9:1; Matthew 16:28; Luke 9:27.