

13th Sunday after Pentecost
September 4, 2022
““Profitable in the Lord” (Philemon 10-11,20)
By Rev. Ed Weber

“Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, today’s text for this 13th Sunday after Pentecost is from Philemon verses 10,11, and 20.

“10 I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains, 11 who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me.”

“20 Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord.”

Paul appeals to Philemon, a fellow believer in the faith in this heartfelt letter to him. He appeals to him as a prisoner of Christ from Rome. There are many circumstances or stations in life that one finds oneself. But, with much joy, Paul considers it a great honor to suffer chains for the sake of the Gospel. Written during his first imprisonment in Rome, Paul also wrote the Epistles to the Ephesians, Colossians and Philippians.

God used Paul’s imprisonment for much good. From Acts 28, we know that people visited with him often and were strengthened.

“30 Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him, 31 preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him.”

And God used Paul’s imprisonment to strengthen believers to be more bold in the faith. So we hear in Philippians 1:12-14,

“But I want you to know, brethren, that the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel, 13 so that it has become evident to the whole [b]palace guard, and to all the rest, that my

chains are in Christ; 14 and most of the brethren in the Lord, having become confident by my chains, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.”

What to many may have seemed a waste of time to be stuck in prison, God used as a very profitable time. Indeed, one of the visitors that came to Paul during his imprisonment was a man named Onesimus. For him, Paul is making an appeal to Philemon. God used this time of imprisonment for something very special in the life of Onesimus. He became a believer. Through Paul’s teaching, he was converted. Paul describes his conversion as begetting his son. Onesimus became a child of God! He became profitable to the Lord!

In fact, that is the very meaning of the name Onesimus. It was a common name given to slaves. And so Paul makes a very special appeal to Philemon to see this new profit, this spiritual blessing that has emancipated Onesimus from spiritual slavery! Philemon is to receive Onesimus as a fellow believer, a brother in the faith, one of us!

This is the greatest of news. Philemon was a strong believer in Christ. He had opened up his home for believers to gather in and worship as we heard in the opening verses of the letter. Paul speaks highly of the faith of Philemon, a laymen, but called by Paul, a fellow laborer in the Gospel.

“I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, 5 hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints, 6 that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. 7 For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.”

And now comes the reason for Paul’s appeal. Philemon is to show this same love to Onesimus. Why would this appeal be necessary? Evidently Onesimus had possibly stolen or defrauded Philemon, his master in some way. Yes, Onesimus was a slave. He had become unprofitable to Philemon in this way and was no longer serving him as a good and faithful servant.

Yet, God used this separation for good. For Onesimus received instruction from Paul, was converted and was a great service to him. Onesimus was profitable to Paul as a fellow believer is with all its joys of seeing God working and changing his life. And Onesimus was profitable to Paul as a helper to him in the work of the Gospel.

But, Paul sends him back to Philemon because Philemon is the rightful master. Yes, God permitted the Israelites to have slaves as we know from Leviticus 25. And Paul says in Ephesians, Philippians, 1 Timothy and Titus how masters and servants are to treat each other.

“5 Bondservants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ; 6 not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, 7 with goodwill doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men, 8 knowing that whatever good anyone does, he will receive the same from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free.

9 And you, masters, do the same things to them, giving up threatening, knowing that your own Master also is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him.”

Masters are to be just and fair because we all serve our Master in heaven who wants all men to be saved. So, we hear these words in Titus 2.

“9 Exhort bondservants to be obedient to their own masters, to be well pleasing in all things, not answering back, 10 not pilfering, but showing all good fidelity, that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in all things. 11 For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men,”

All men! Slaves included! That is the greatest profit – to know Jesus Christ as one’s Savior whether free or slave. All are one in Christ!

Onesimus’ sinful deeds were forgiven him in Christ. What great profit for Onesimus! Our sinful deeds have been forgiven in Christ. What a great profit for us.

What was the cost? Count the cost if you’re going to build a house Jesus says in the Gospel reading so that you have enough to finish it. Jesus built the house of believers, the Holy Christian Church, Himself being the Chief Cornerstone.

What was the cost? His very precious blood that was shed for all people – for Onesimus – for you and all people that you live and work with in your daily lives – whether as an employer, or as a worker, husband, wife, son, daughter, farmer, field hand – all people.

What was the cost? Paul says in **Philippians 3:8**.

“Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ”

Jesus became a bondservant. He humbled Himself to release us from our spiritual slavery.

Romans 6:17

But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered.

Romans 6:22

“But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life.”

Yes! God has also made you profitable, righteous in His sight and now slaves to God using your gifts, talents, and time to service Him as fruit to holiness, sharing your faith, like Philemon for the spreading of the Gospel!

Paul intervened for Onesimus. For Paul like all of us know how God has intervened for us by giving us His Son Jesus for our salvation. He has begotten us by water and the Word. And He feeds us with His very body and blood for our forgiveness. Yes, that makes us precious to God, profitable and profitable to others.

So Paul asks Philemon for a special joy to know that Onesimus would be received as a brother in the faith. He uses a word which is a play on words in the Greek.

“may I receive a profit in the Lord from you.” Vs.20

May I receive a ὀφείλην (Phlm. 1:20 BYZ) benefit, profit, joy. You can hear the word Onesimus. Paul want to see these two brothers joined together in Christian fellowship. This will give Paul much joy, happiness and profit in the Lord. It is a joy see two people reconcile. Refresh my heart.

What great profit you have to be reconciled to Christ and to live in reconciliation with each other.

Christ counted the cost to build the ladder to heaven. He paid the cost with His precious blood. In Christ we are all profitable, useful, rich in grace and mercy. He paid your cost to be His son or daughter. Paul gave these riches to Onesimus by sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And these riches are yours in service to our Master! Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your heart and minds through Christ Jesus.” Amen. (Philippians 4:7)