

Second Hand Preacher

23rd Sunday Ordinary Time

September 4, 2016

Philemon 9-10, 12-17

Sometime in high school English, we had to write a persuasive letter. We had to have a position we believed in and we needed to communicate that position to another person. We were graded on our reason and just how persuaded the teacher felt after reading the letter. This was a very useful skill I use to this day.

St. Paul is writing to persuade Philemon that his slave Onesimus should now be treated as a brother in the Lord rather than a slave. This is a pretty rare occurrence that we have a letter of Paul to an individual rather than to a community. Those in charge of the Canon of Bible must have seen the value and power of this short piece. Even though it is only one chapter, it pulls quite a punch. Paul writes of the conversion of the slave into a man of faith. We don't know how Philemon reacted. Slaves were seen as property, so one doesn't know what the economic impact would be for Philemon. Would Onesimus still do the work Philemon required and would he have to pay him a wage like a free man? These are sticky issues and we would look at it differently now in the 21st century than they did in the 1st. Philemon is pictured as a believer, but at what cost can slaves be free?

One thing I believe we can take away from this is a consideration of the cost of discipleship. Do we ever get put in a position where the values we have conflict with the church. Do we need persuading to do the right thing? Life is rarely black and white. There are often twinges of gray that cause us to really consider our position. This can affect our economic, social, and spiritual issues we face in our lives. We must think about the role of true stewardship in our lives. How do we balance the needs of our individual families, the community of the church, and our spot in the greater world? How does this impact the care of our common home? We are clearly stewards of creation. At what cost do we change our lifestyles to care for our environment. Paul says volumes with few words. Can we speak volumes by having our faith influence the lives we live?