I'm Not Sure I Want to do That…
Philemon 1:1-25
St. James', Grosse Ile
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May the God who creates us, redeems us, and sustains us, be with us this day, and remain with us always.

Please be seated.

Good Morning!

"I'm not sure I really want to do that…Yeah, ah, I'm not sure I want to do that…"

Keep that in mind and let's go back in time.

Let's go on a journey to that period when the early church was forming, the apostle Paul was wandering, preaching and not infrequently cooling his heels in a prison cell. Let's go to a time when Christianity was more of a movement, less of an institution. A time when communities were forming, doing a bit of storming and not quite at the time where they were norming. You get the idea, people were coming together, communities sharing a faith in Christ were coalescing and as we all do in community they were all trying to figure out how to live out their faith in Christ Jesus.

Paul is in prison, probably in Rome. While in prison, by providence, dumb luck, or the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul meets a runaway slave from the city of Colossae, who also is under arrest. They spend time together and the runaway enslaved man, named Onesimus through Paul's witness and care, becomes a Christian. And he and Paul become dear friends. Paul says he feels as if he is Onesimus' father (Phil 1:10) and that Onesimus now has a portion of his heart. (Phil: 1:12).

That is the background for Paul's short, personal, yet public letter to his fellow believer Philemon in whose home the Colossians meet.

Years ago, Philemon, came to faith in Jesus through Paul's teaching. Paul matters to Philemon. And now—Paul has sent his dear friend Onesimus back to his former master Philemon. Paul sends him back with a letter asking Philemon, to receive his former slave as he would receive a brother. And Paul says, "you know I am your senior in the faith, and I could command you to receive him with love, but because I know you are amazing, I'm just going to ask you to be your awesome self." (Phil 1:9-16 paraphrased)

Paul offers Philemon, all sorts of ways he could receive Onesimus. Paul suggests, "maybe Philemon you could send him back to me, maybe you could free him from his servitude, maybe you could treat him like what he is, a brother in Christ.

"And if Onesimus has wronged you in anyway," writes Paul, "know that I myself will make restoration to you. I will repay you; I will not remind you that you came to Christ through me. I know I won't need to do that…" (Philemon 1:19)

Please, Paul says, "Do this kindness for me, refresh my heart. And I know as I write that you will do even more than I ask." (Philemon 1:21).

Well then….

I imagine a public reading of this private letter, because Paul has addressed it to lots of people in the community, I imagine a public reading of this letter with Onesimus looking on, wondering about his fate, and Philemon, hearing the words and maybe thinking to himself, "Well, I'm not really sure I want to do that."

And isn't that the way? Isn't that what it sometimes means to someone who claims to believe in Jesus of Nazareth. If we say we follow Jesus, if we say, we are Christians, well then doesn't it mean that sometimes, more than we'd like to admit and probably more than we do, doesn't it mean that as a Christian we are called, invited, cajoled, or coaxed into doing something we might not want to do.

Philemon might be peeved that Onesimus ran away. He might be mad that Onesimus stole food or money so he could survive while on the run. But now, because of his faith in Christ and his friendship with Paul he is being asked publicly to reconcile with Onesimus, befriend him, free him, but more importantly receive him as family with love and care.

Friends, many of you today are making mature professions of faith, you are saying I want to follow Jesus. I want to be like Jesus. I want to love and care and welcome like Jesus. Know that if that is what we want, then there will be many a day when we let go of what we want and instead, do and give and care for someone else.

If we aren't making sacrifices for Jesus, then I'm not sure we are hearing his call. Alone it's hard to do. But if there is a crowd gathered, a loving community convened, then together we can pull off way more than we ever could alone. If for no other reason than a bunch of people were with us when we heard the call.

I'm not really sure I want to do that….and yet we've heard the call and here we are. Let's live our beliefs, so that other lives will be healed and changed. Because then we will never be the same.

And that is the point. Following Jesus is supposed to make us different. Let's risk it. Whether we want to or not.

Amen.