

Claimed by God-Philemon 1-21

(September 4, 2022-13th Sunday after Pentecost)

One of the defining characteristics of being in a relationship is people feel entitled to make claims on each other. The more intimate the relationship the stronger the claims. Acquaintances expect to acknowledge one another if they see each other on the street. Friends expect to get together regularly, and to share aspects of their lives with one another. Married couples, for the most part, expect that their partners will forsake all others to be faithful to them alone. In relationships we make claims on each other.

But what happens when people fail to fulfill the claims we make on them? What do you do with that? Depending on the depth of the relationship we might feel upset, hurt, resentful or betrayed. That happens, we're human, being in relationship means we make ourselves vulnerable and sometimes it means we'll get hurt. But it's also true that our lives can become consumed with bitterness, resentment and anger from that hurt. If we hold on to the unfulfilled claims we have on others and the feelings that go with those claims long enough we become a slave to those claims. Our world is dominated by a sense of injustice, and it becomes very small, centred on our sense of entitlement.

In Paul's time slavery wasn't just a metaphor but a very real fact of everyday life. His letter to Philemon deals with a conflict over the claims a Christian slave owner can make on a Christian slave. From the letter it is apparent that Paul and Philemon, the slave owner have a close relationship, likely forged by Philemon's conversion to Christianity or the Way, as it was then known. It is also apparent that Paul and Onesimus have a close relationship similarly forged by Paul's spiritual mentoring. It is apparent also that Onesimus was a slave to Philemon who ran away, and that Paul promises to settle accounts with Philemon on Onesimus' behalf.

Paul is well aware that according to the culture and legal codes of the time, Philemon, as a slave owner and the head of a household had certain claims that he was entitled to make of Onesimus. According to Roman law Philemon had the right to put Onesimus to death for running away, legally he had the right to claim Onesimus' life. But Paul says to Philemon; receive Onesimus back not as a slave but as a brother. Once you become a Christian, all your relationships are transformed. According to Paul, God transforms the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus, they are no longer master and slave, in Christ they are siblings, equally loved and cherished. As a devout Christian Philemon's stance toward Onesimus is not first to make claims on his ex-slave, rather it is to ask what claims God makes on him.

Life in Christ calls us to see others not in terms of the claims we can make on them but rather in terms of the claims that a faithful relationship with God makes on us. This changes everything. As scripture says, it is to be in the world but not of the world. It is to be present to the real complexities of life and relationships not to seek advantage, not to build up ego, but to seek healing and communion. Invariably the central claim God makes on us, where possible, is to be in right relationship with others—relationships of

respect, mutuality and reciprocity. This divine claim is so central because it leads us away from illusion into reality, into the truth of our interdependence, our communion as small pieces of a greater whole. As people of faith, we look at our relationships through this lens, asking what claims God is making on us whether as the person wronged, the wrong doer or even if we don't know our role. We let this question drive our discernment.

That's one part of this scripture, the individual dynamics between Philemon and Onesimus. The temptation is to keep this scripture on the personal level, to make it simply about forgiveness and the need to let go of the claims we might feel entitled to make on others in our inter-personal relationships. But that would involve ignoring the power dynamics at play, the larger socio-political-economic forces that are the context, the environment in which the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus takes place. Onesimus is a slave after all, Philemon holds tremendous social, economic and state sanctioned legal power over him. You see, beyond the strictly inter-personal aspects of Philemon and Onesimus' relationship Paul is asking Philemon, for the sake of love, for the sake of the claim made on him by God to surrender the power and privilege afforded him by the state by virtue of his class, his position, his wealth and perhaps his ethnicity.

This scripture holds some challenges for people of power and privilege, whether that power and privilege is rooted in wealth, position, societal status, skin colour, religion, gender, sexuality, gender identity and more. This scripture asks us to confront the question of how, in our individual relationships and our collective relationships with others, we benefit from state and societally sanctioned power and privilege to the extent that that power and privilege separates us from others—to the extent power and privilege perpetuates the lie, allows us to live in the illusion that some of us are better than others, that some are normal and some are deviant, the lie that what separates us is greater than that which unites, the lie that we're not all children of God. Friends, what would it look like in our churches, our workplaces, our community involvement, our government to surrender power and privilege for the sake of healing, for the sake of right relationship, to honour the claims God makes on us?

For example, church properties have tax free status. How could we surrender that state sanctioned privilege for the sake of healing? Consider especially that Parkminster sits on the Haldimand Tract, land legally promised to the Six Nations, yet a promise broken. What are the possibilities there to act faithfully, to live into the claims God makes on us? This summer I read a book called *Wait is this Racist? A Guide to Becoming an Anti-Racist Church*. It turned out to be a challenging book for me, revealing the ways in which we as a church and I as a leader in the church perpetuate the myth of whiteness the way white people of European background do things, as the norm and thus superior. We'll be talking about this at Council and committees, but friends, if we're serious about our faith, if we truly believe that God makes claims on us for the sake of right relationship there is much privilege and power of which we need to divest ourselves.

Let those of us who benefit from power and privilege not count this divestment as loss, for there is grace and it is a paradox—God’s claims on the powerful and privileged are a source of freedom. Freedom from the slavery of false attachments to small gods—our egos, our fears, the sources of status and privilege (skin colour, gender, sexuality). We are freed from those things that separate us from others and we are freed for God’s beloved community, that beautiful realm of God where our differences are not obstacles to relationship but rather something to be valued and celebrated and thus bring us together.¹ In other words, we are freed for love. Love is the ultimate freedom. Love liberates us from the trivial and opens us to the only thing that matters. May we live as those claimed by God. Amen.

¹ Kerry Connelly, *Wait is This Racist: A Guide to Becoming an Anti-Racist Church*, p. 12.