

**A Meditation for Sep 4/22, 'Proper 18' – pg. 1**  
*By the Rev. Warren Ball of Mt. Albert United Church*

Hello and welcome! Come, God is waiting to meet with us now; come, let us prepare to open our hearts, minds, and spirits as we pray together:

**Wellspring of freedom:  
root us in obedience to your love  
and nourish us with your life-giving Spirit,  
that our lives may become fruitful,  
our labour productive,  
and our service useful. Amen.**

⇒ Hymn suggestion: MV1 'All Are Welcome'

Today's Scripture reading: *from* Philemon 1:1-21 'The story of a runaway slave'

From Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy, our brother, to Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ! When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus.

For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love – and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel, but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced.

Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother. So, if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say!

**Sermon: 'Goodbye Chains, Hello Freedom!'**

*Open our hearts and minds in these moments, O God! Cause us to know inwardly what you present to us outwardly. For the sake of your love this we pray, amen.*

Paul's letter to Philemon is quite a remarkable document within the New Testament. After all, how many of Paul's letters can fit on a single page – it's only 335 words! What's more,

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this is the only letter which we now have that's written to an individual. Now, it's certainly not the only letter Paul would have written to an individual, so why was this one saved? Well, legend has it that Onesimus, the run-away slave at the centre of this story, later became a bishop at Ephesus. Could that explain why it's been preserved, when so many other letters would have been lost?

There's also been a great deal of other speculation over the years about what was going on *behind* this text. Why did Paul feel so strongly about Onesimus, and what was the exact nature of their relationship? How did Paul really feel about slavery? After all, the Roman Empire had been built upon it, and Paul was a Roman citizen! Well, I think that we also have to be careful at this point, because surely this letter is NOT a systematic statement about slavery. No, it's simply a beautiful testimony to the liberating power of God's love!

But even though Paul's letter to Philemon is an ancient text, I believe that it serves the liberating power of God's love as much this morning as it ever has! You see, I believe that this ancient document has some very modern questions for you and me. It's asking, are there ways in which we're enslaving others? Now remember something: we don't need chains to do that! And remember that there are psychological, and spiritual, forms of slavery too. Do we ever insinuate that others are not good enough? Do we ever choose not to help carry a burden? Then Paul's letter to Philemon is also asking if there are ways in which we are chained. Are we worried about the state of the global economy, or the state of our personal finances? Are we worried about things at work, or the security of our pension fund? Are we chained to concerns about relationships – difficulties that we're having; difficulties that loved ones are having? And what a world of health issues we have all been through in two and a half years of living in a pandemic! Oh, have no doubt about it – to be alive is to feel the chains of slavery on our skin!

Now then, is that on our skin, or is that under our skin? You see, Dr. Bruce Lipton wrote an amazing book called, The Biology of Belief, which claims that, at a molecular level, deep down beneath the ability of our eyes to see, stress functions as a form of slavery. After all, stress channels energy away from our immune systems. And, thereby, stress can chain us to illness! But just as Paul wrote about so long ago, the fact is that God's love can set us free from those chains – free to be equals, even if we're not free to do as we please. You see, we're equals with unequal 'gifts,' and we all live very different lives, with very different circumstances. The frightening fact is that God probably expects more from some than others as a result! But if Jesus' cross means anything, then surely it means that no one is ever going to be left behind unless, of course, they want to be. In his letter to Philemon, Paul makes the claim that, through Christ, a common slave can become an uncommon partner. Well, through the grace of God, the claim is equally true that all our human distinctions are as nought in the light of how God loves us, and how God's love can lift us into a different way of living and giving. Now then, those two things – living and giving – go hand in glove together. You see, we can never separate living from giving because just

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as life is a gift to us, we have to (we have to!) give our lives in some way if we're ever going to find out what they're really worth!

Back in the 1930's, two momentous developments were taking place at the very same time, developments that still hold sweeping consequences for the way that you and I experience freedom this very day. You see, at that point in time a man in Germany was blending fear and anger, ignorance and low self-esteem, into a toxic concoction of systemic hate. At the same time a minister's son in Atlanta, Ga. was growing up steeped in the stories of Jesus' liberating vision. In Germany, a system of pure hatred put freedom in chains, tortured liberty, and made a mockery of hope. But in Atlanta the idea of God's freedom began to mature the mind that would go on to say this: "Whatever affects one person directly, affects all people indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be." Wow! Meanwhile, in Germany, one person's vision led to death and destruction on a scale that humankind had never seen before, and has never seen since. Oh, let us pray that we never see it again! Meanwhile, the vision of that person from Atlanta led to the destruction of inequality and the devastation of injustice, as a whole new world of glorious freedom was brought to life.

Of course, the man in Germany to whom I am referring was Adolf Hitler [1889-1945] and the man in Atlanta was Martin Luther King Jr. [1929-1968]. Hitler chose to turn to the darkness of hate, while King chose to turn to the light of love. Hitler took his own life in an ultimate gesture of despair, while King's life was tragically taken from him in a gesture of racist despair. And yet, you know, even the despair of King's assassination held the seeds of new life. Listen to what King himself said in anticipation of his own murder, "If physical death is the price that I must pay to free my white brothers and sisters from a permanent death of the spirit, then nothing can be more redemptive."

Hitler and Martin Luther King – what a contrast! Well guess what? You and I have some of the exact same contrasts playing out in our lives each and every day! You see, we all live with the very same choices between truth and falsehood, hope and despair, love and hate. What will we choose to do? Will we choose to close ourselves off in fear, or will we choose to open ourselves to the movement of God's love? Oh, let's choose to say 'goodbye' to all of our chains this morning, because God would break us of their bondage! Let's choose to say 'hello' to a freedom that knows no end! Then, Paul's words to Philemon written so long ago, can become God's own words back to us right now: "Confident of your obedience, I send these words to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask." Thank you, God – thank you for your trust!

Amen.

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Come, let us turn back to God now in prayer; come, let us pray:

Loving God: blow your breath of freedom upon us now! Take us once again as the potter takes clay and remake us in your image so that, with Jesus' ministry before us, and the risen Christ beside us, we may walk this world of wonder, breaking chains of bondage, forging chains of connection with you!

Forgive us, Holy One, for sometimes seeking far more from life than we are prepared to give in return. Instead, help us to subordinate our selfish desires that we may find your grace, the bedrock of all love, and so come to know your infinite source of power, and joy, and hope. Help us to become potters too, God, that we may refresh through your spirit even as we are refreshed, that we may inspire even as we are inspired, that we may unburden even as we are unburdened.

We pray now for all who are facing difficulty this day, and we pray, too, for all the places where there's difficulty. In the silence of the next moments, O God, receive the deep burdens that our spirits bear today: *moment of silence*.

All that I have named with my words, and so much more, we bring to you, God, as we take now those words that Jesus once taught us and pray together the traditional spoken version of Christ's Prayer:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil for thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever, amen.**

⇒ Hymn suggestion: MV88 'Over My Head'

We have been freed to live with God's love! So, let us go to do that now in the love of God, the grace of Jesus, our Christ, and the constant companionship of the Holy Spirit, amen.