Philemon 17 So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.

I will tell you that I had quite a surprise as I began to prepare for this sermon. The first thing I do is get a working copy of the bulletin ready and then from there I begin to work on the sermon for the week, as usual, using one of the texts of our readings for the day. I do a quick exegesis on the text and then I will consult with a sermon study book that I have. Imagine my surprise when the book doesn’t have the same text that I have been working on!

Instead of Philemon, my bulletin says, Philippians. So I look on the pericope chart I have posted right next to my desk. It has the same verse numbers but it doesn’t say Php, rather it says, Phm! Phm is Philemon. Next I go to my computer and find the ILCW pericope readings for year C and then turn to Pentecost 16. It has Philippians. But I check our hymnal and its list of readings, it says Phm. Then I went to our Planning Christian Worship binder and lo and behold it says: Philemon. When I did that I knew that somewhere along the line someone had made a mistake. I didn’t catch it because clearly since we have been using the EHV bible, evidently I haven’t preached on the Epistle for this particular Sunday. As far as I can tell, in my 40 years of ministry I have preached on this text once. So here goes.

Let’s imagine for a minute that someone has wronged you. It doesn’t matter what the wrong is at this time. Let’s just say that the wrong has grieved you and has caused you great pain. Now let’s imagine that this same person comes to you and says they are sorry. What do you do?

What I would suggest that you do is turn to the book of Philemon and read. There are many who wonder just what the purpose of this book of the Bible is. It is a short book containing only 25 verses. It is a personal letter written in a personal style. It contains no doctrinal revelations yet it is still a book that is verbally inspired by the Lord and included in the sacred test. Just what is the purpose of this book?

This book contains an excellent example of how one Christian is to deal with another. Let’s look at the heart of this epistle of Paul and see what lesson we can learn. Our theme will be: **FORGIVENESS IN CHRIST.**

Please not our text speaks to us about a man named Onesimus. Onesimus was the slave, you heard that right, the slave of Philemon a man who lived at Colossae. If we put everything we know about Philemon together we learn that he is a gentleman of wealth, a committed Christian, and a wonderful worker for the Lord. We know that the Colossian congregation met at Philemon’s home. We know that Philemon’s son Archippus is currently the pastor at the congregation. We think that Apphia, the lady mention in the greeting of this book is Philemon’s wife. We know that Philemon is a man that the Apostle Paul treasures and regards as a great friend.

As was the custom of the day Philemon had slaves. Again note a fact of history. Until England and the USA began to work against slavery, work that even brought a war to our nation, the entire world was involved in the practice of slavery. In New Testament days, one of those slaves was Onesimus. Onesimus had run away from his master though there is every indication that Philemon was a good and gentle master. The problem was Onesimus. Paul confesses that Onesimus had been a useless worker. Just as revealing, Paul’s words also imply that Onesimus had stolen from his master when he ran away, making Onesimus a thief.

Now just so you fully understand the situation you need to know that Scripture does not condemn or give approval to slavery. It was simply a part of the social structure of the world and has been around since the beginning in all the world. While Scripture says nothing for or against the social structure of slavery it does address both masters and slaves. God expected, yes, commanded, that masters be fair and loving. God commanded that masters treat their slaves in a humane and caring fashion. God roundly and soundly condemns any evil and wicked handling of slaves.

At the same time God also expected that slaves should be dutiful and respectful of their masters. When given a task the Lord expected the slave to carry out that task to the best of their ability. God simply asks that both slaves and masters be God fearing men. In all other respects, God lets slavery be governed by the social and legal authorities of the land.

As a runaway slave Onesimus was in a great deal of trouble. Just the fact that he had run away could mean that he could lose his life, especially if running away is a habit of his. The fact that he had run away and stolen surely meant by Roman law that he could be put to death for his wrongs. How fortunate it was that the runaway Onesimus ended up in Rome and ended up in contact with Paul.

We don’t know exactly how Onesimus and Paul came into contact with one another. We can surmise that they had been acquaintances from Paul’s days in Ephesus, a town near Colossae. It was probably during those days that Paul had met Philemon and brought him to faith. Perhaps Paul had also met Onesimus then but we don’t know and we don’t know how they came to be together in Rome. At the time Paul was under house arrest awaiting a judgment on the appeal he had made to the Emperor of Rome. While Paul could not leave the house he was in, people were allowed to come and see him as they pleased. So it was clear that Paul’s place of arrest, a house, had actually become a meeting place for Christians. It was here that somehow Paul and Onesimus found one another.

And Onesimus learned. Through the preaching and teaching of Paul, Onesimus became a Christian. As a Christian, Onesimus had a change of heart, he ended up with a new heart and mind in Christ. Onesimus realized the wrongs he had done and he desired to set the record straight. In true Christian fashion Onesimus gave himself over to the work of the Lord serving as the messenger and right hand man of Paul during this time. Then, when the time was right, Onesimus went back to Colossae to his master Philemon to seek forgiveness for his sins.

You might find it interesting to note that when Onesimus returned he did so willingly. Not only was Onesimus returning to seek forgiveness, Onesimus was one of two men who carried the letters of Paul to Colossae. You see, at the same time the letter to Philemon was delivered we also know that the epistle we call Colossians was delivered. All of this tells us that because of Jesus Onesimus had changed.

The Epistle to Philemon has been called, *“The most beautiful and intensely human of all of St. Paul’s epistles, full of charm and beauty.”* Others have called this letter, *“The most gentlemanly letter ever written.”* In this letter the Apostle tactfully and lovingly intercedes with Philemon on Onesimus’ behalf. He pleads with Philemon, who is well known in the Christian community for the practice of Christian love, not to treat Onesimus with the harshness and heavy handedness that the law allowed but rather he urges Philemon to show the forgiving spirit that marks those who are followers of Jesus. This is the heart and core of the letter, to practice the forgiveness of Christ. It is the very example of the practice of forgiveness that all Christians are to show to one another.

I chose as the theme of this sermon, **FORGIVENESS IN CHRIST.** As I read and reread this epistle it seems to be the perfect example of what the Fifth petition of the Lord’s Prayer is all about, you know, **“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”** Here is the Fifth petition in action. Here is a plea for forgiveness based upon the forgiveness found in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Listen again to what Paul writes to Philemon. **“I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, 5because I hear about your love and faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints. 6I pray that this fellowship of your faith may become active in understanding every good thing that belongs to us in Christ. 7For I have received great joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother. 8For that reason, even though I have plenty of boldness in Christ to order you to do what is proper, 9I am appealing to you instead, on the basis of love...I am appealing to you on behalf of my child Onesimus…15Perhaps this is why he was separated from you for a while: so that you would have him back forever, 16no longer as a slave, but as more than a slave, as a dear brother. He certainly is dear to me, but he is even more of a dear brother to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. 17So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.**

What gracious words! As we listen to those words we can well imagine that they were combined with the words of the other epistle that went to Colossae. In that letter Paul spoke to the congregation in this way, **“As God’s elect, holy and loved, clothe yourselves with heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with one another and forgive each other if anyone has a complaint against anyone else. Forgive, just as Christ forgave you. And, in addition to all these things, put on love, which ties all things together in perfect unity.”**

What a tremendous lesson of love was being acted out in the Colossian church. The appeal is for Christians to behave like Christians. As the Lord has forgiven us our many sins, so we are to forgive the sins that others commit against us. We do so out of love for the Lord. We do so in imitation of the Lord.

Now, what can we learn from this epistle? Well, we can learn to practice forgiveness.

If you are the party that has committed the sin, the Lord calls upon you to repent. Be sorry for your sins. Amend your ways. Recognize how much God has loved you and how much God has forgiven you in Christ Jesus. In true Christian humility go and confess your sins to the one you have wronged. Confess and seek forgiveness through the love of Christ. James 5:16 says, **“Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.”**

If you are the party that was wronged God calls upon you to forgive the repentant fellow Christian. Remember how much God has loved you and how much God has forgiven you in Christ Jesus! Forgive as you have been forgiven. And when you realize the depth and horror of your sin against our God and Lord, yes, against Christ our Savior, then you will grasp the depth of God’s forgiveness for you. I don’t know about you, but I can easily confess that daily, if not hourly, I wrong the Lord in thought, word or deed! Not just in what I do, but most often in what I fail to do to his glory and honor. The Lord’s forgiveness in Christ in my life is deeper and wider than any ocean, and I’ll bet the same is true in your life too? **“Forgive as the Lord forgave you,”** we are encouraged. You will find that such a practice of forgiveness will cause your faith to increase.

If we understand forgiveness, there should never be any questions in our hearts about willingness to forgive each other. Think of how the quality of our Christian lives could be changed for the better if all of us learned from the heart to repent and to forgive each other…and having forgiven…to forget. Such forgiveness extinguishes quarrels at their source and refuses to allow resentment or hatred to fester and grow. This is the Christian practice of forgiveness. This is God’s love put into action in our lives. Not because we have to, but because God’s love moves us to.

Go then and practice forgiveness. Confess your wrongs to each other. Let the love of Christ cause you to change from the sinful ways of the past to the better way of love in the future. Sincerely and honestly admit your sins to your Lord and to each other as we should.

And forgive. Forgive as you have been forgiven. Forgive with a love such as Jesus has for us. Again, think of what Jesus did for us. He went to the cross. He paid for our sins. He forgave us even when we were lost and condemned and as hardhearted as could be. He forgave and called us with his love to repent and change. And then he changed us. Made us his children and heirs of eternal life. Such is the marvel of Jesus. Forgive and put aside your harsh feelings for the Christian who has wronged you and repents. Forgive yourself for the foolishness of the sins you have done. Recognize the joy and love of this gift of God. Forgive in Jesus name. Amen.