**Sermon 9/22/19**

**Philemon 1:1-21**

Back in the old days, milk was delivered to businesses early in the morning,

          and sat outside the door until the stores opened and the milk taken inside.

One morning, a man was caught stealing milk which had been delivered to a store.

He was arrested and taken before the judge.

The judge asked him, "How do you plead?"

There was only one way he could plead, because he had been caught in the act.

He had to plead guilty.

He asked for leniency because he had two small babies at home

          and nothing to give them to eat.

Instead of seeing them starve, he had resorted to stealing.

He said, "Judge, I plead for the mercy of the court."

The judge answered, "Since you have pleaded guilty,

          I have no alternative but to find you guilty, and there can be no mercy."

The man was assessed a fine of ten dollars.

The man stood silent, discouraged, ashamed, and helpless,

           knowing he was going to jail because he had no money to pay the fine.

After several moments of silence in the courtroom,

          the judge laid down his gavel and rose from the bench.

The judge walked over to the clerk's desk.

He paid the $10 himself, and set the man free.

Then, he turned to the man, and wrote him a check for $100 dollars

         to provide food for his children.

There was no question of guilt, nor of the justice of the sentence.

And yet the one who had to find him guilty,

          was the one who had paid his debt in order that he might go free.

This is our story, also.

We know we have not always lived our lives the way God wants us to live.

We have harmed, hurt, insulted, failed to help, those around us.

When we were discouraged, ashamed, and helpless,

          Jesus took our sin upon himself.

He paid the fine, he paid the penalty, and he set us free.

And then he taught us a new way of life, a new way of living,

          a new way of interacting with one another.

He taught us how to help, and encourage, and forgive one another.

At the time Paul wrote this letter to Philemon, it is estimated that

          Between one-half, and three-quarters of the people in Rome were slaves.

Yet actually, the average Roman free man lived no better than a slave.

Living conditions were about the same for free men and slaves.

In fact, in times of economic difficulty, it was advantageous to be a slave.

If the crops failed, the slaves still had food to eat, clothes to wear, and shelter.

Slavery was often a career choice.

Many sold themselves into slavery to learn a trade, or to go into business.

Others were slaves because of debt problems or theft.

Some couldn't make a living and worked for others in order to survive.

Slavery was a way out of poverty for the average Roman.

Over 60 million slaves were scattered throughout the Empire.

They kept the wheels of this civilization turning.

They were schoolteachers, doctors, gardeners, cooks, farmers, laborers, servants.

And they were all slaves.

The economy of the Empire was built on the backs of the slaves.

Slaves had no rights, the Roman slave owner had absolute power over his slave.

The Master could be kind or cruel, or both, depending on his mood.

Philemon, like many wealthy people of his time, owned slaves.

He had heard Paul's preaching in Ephesus, and trusted his life to Jesus Christ.

Later Philemon hosted a church back in his home in Colossae.

Onesimus was one of Philemon's slaves.

We do not know why, but one day Onesimus took off and became a runaway slave.

He ran away to Rome, probably thinking he couldn't be found in that large

          cosmopolitan capital of the world.

It is most likely that Onesimus also stole from his master Philemon

          in order to eat and start a new life.

This was the debt which Onesimus had incurred, and could not escape.

Onesimus had broken the law, and he would never be able to repay the debt.

Through the providence of God, Onesimus — like his master Philemon —

           met a man named Paul.

Like his abandoned master, Onesimus also became a believer in Jesus Christ.

Paul thought very highly of Onesimus, but Paul was trapped in a dilemma.

He viewed Onesimus as a son in the faith, a brother in Christ.

Once the Gospel message took hold of him Onesimus was willing to face up to his past.

The law required Paul to return this runaway slave to his master.

Having been converted to Christianity, Onesimus’ life was changed.

He was born again, turned around.

He was so changed that he was willing to return to his master Philemon.

Paul helped him by sending with him a personal letter for Philemon,

           imploring this slave master to recognize Onesimus as his brother in Christ,

            and to forgive him of any wrongdoing he had done.

The decision of Onesimus to return to Philemon could not have been an easy one.

He made the choice to do the unthinkable, and return to his master.

He had run away, he had stolen from Philemon,

          he owed a debt he could never pay.

By returning, he risked death, or flogging, or branding.

The laws of the empire were harsh.

If Onesimus did return, his master Philemon had the legal power

            to sentence him to immediate execution.

If Philemon mercifully decided to let him live,

          Onesimus could have the letter F – a fugitive for life–

          seared on his forehead with a red-hot branding iron.

But having been converted, Onesimus knew he couldn't keep running all his life.

He had wronged his legal owner, and, painful as it seemed,

             he needed to make amends, regardless of the outcome.

The journey back to Philemon's house must have been a difficult one.

Yet it led to the potential of a restored relationship, a healthy relationship,

          of brotherly love through a shared faith in Jesus Christ.

We have no evidence about Philemon's welcome of Onesimus.

Philemon is under a certain obligation to Paul,

             because it was through Paul Philemon came to saving faith in Jesus Christ.

Probably Philemon accepted Onesimus as more than a slave.

As a Christian, he more than likely accepted Onesimus as a beloved brother.

This short letter shows the power of the Gospel.

Philemon was changed. Onesimus was changed.

Paul was changed.

Look at Paul. Here is a man who in his early days could watch men die unmoved.

He was a man raised by the rules. He was legalistic, tough, disciplined.

As a younger man he would have turned to

          Onesimus and said: too bad for you, Onesimus, you broke the law.

But Paul had met the living Christ on the Road to Damascus.

The Gospel had changed his thinking.

Paul was far more loving, and forgiving, and merciful than he had ever been.

The harshness was gone. The legalism was gone.

If our faith doesn't have a positive effect in our lives then something is wrong.

When we let faith rule in our lives, it makes all the difference.

The test of what we believe is how we react to God's will.

In many ways, each one of us is Onesimus.

In many ways, each one of us is Philemon.

When we take action to turn wrong to right, punishment to forgiveness,

             we imitate Paul's enthusiasm for the Gospel.

Then, where there could be anger, we discover joy.

One of God's greatest acts of love is shown in how He forgives and welcomes

           the return home of his shameful and disgraceful children

           with open arms and loving gestures.

So what happened between Philemon and Onesimus?

No one knows for sure, but an early bishop named Ignatius,

            wrote a letter to the Ephesian church.

He addressed that letter to their pastor who went by a slave name: Onesimus.

The once runaway slave was now most likely the pastor of the church in Ephesus.

And the good News of Jesus Christ continued to spread throughout the world.

The power of forgiveness can actually change the hearts and lives of people.

**AMEN**