“***You Will Do Even More***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, September 8, 2019

**Philemon 14–17, 21**

14I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. 15Perhaps this is the reason Onesimus was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back for ever, 16no longer as a slave but as more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

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

21 Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

**Luke 13:20–21**

20And again he said, “To what should I compare the kingdom of God? 21It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

Paul’s Letter to Philemon is one of the most interesting and neglected letters in the Bible. He is writing to the wealthy Christian, Philemon about Philemon’s runaway slave, Onesimus, who has been ministering to Paul while the apostle is in prison. Paul, through his preaching and his ministry in churches, led both of these men to Christ, so he is like to spiritual godfather to both of them. This means he has some leadership rights. And in the first sentence, although he is being extremely polite, saying “I preferred to do nothing without your consent,” he is actually *heavily* hinting, as though to say “you really should do what I am suggesting.” Verse 16 is where we see *what* he is suggesting: that Philemon should set Onesimus free.

You see, Paul is in a delicate position here. He has benefitted from Onesimus’ service. Perhaps Onesimus brought him food, or maybe letters from various Christians. But Paul now knows that he needs to abide by the civil law. He needs to send this runaway slave back to his master. Since Paul has some spiritual authority over *both* the master and the runaway slave, he sends Onesimus back to Philemon with a letter strongly suggesting that Philemon free Onesimus, and receive him “no longer as a slave but as . . . a beloved brother” (v. 16). This presents Philemon with a serious choice: either to compel Onesimus to bow his head and return to his position as a house slave, or to free him and treat him as a Christian brother.

Paul is using his authority not to compel but to strongly suggest that he give social freedom to Onesimus. See how heavily Paul hints at his desire in verse 17, “So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.” And he adds that he is “confident of” Philemon’s “obedience” (v. 21). Notice that he uses the word obedience, even though he has not overtly *commanded* anything. In fact, “you will do even more than I say.” In other words, you will extend respect and Christian fellowship to Onesimus.

So this letter gives the lie to the very shallow and ignorant comment many people make, that the Bible supposedly supports slavery. Rather, Paul is telling Philemon that if he, Philemon, is a true Christian, he will not allow Onesimus to remain a slave, but will free him and welcome him as an equal. It is a big *ask*, but it is fully consistent with Paul’s Christian ethics, and it is the logical result of Jesus’ teaching that we are all children of God.

We often tend to look at things very superficially and through a modernizing prejudice, overlooking the way that spirituality is *deeper* than politics, and has a gradual, causative effect upon politics. Here the spiritual value of brotherhood and respect underlies Paul’s advice to change the political status of one person. But if that *one* slave should be freed, why might not *every* slave be freed and treated as a beloved brother? It was a spiritual principle, not a political campaign. But such principles have an explosive power, and can transform the political landscape.

How does that happen? It happens gradually, and under the radar, by these values penetrating society. In fact, it happens the way that a lump of dough is leavened. It is like “yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened” (Luke 13:21). In the course of the mixing, the leaven permeates the dough. So also, in the course of personal interactions, the gospel penetrates society as more and more people accept the gospel values. It is a deep and lasting change. Political activity is sometimes very shallow. It can be like if a woman painted the outside of the dough with food coloring, changing its *outward* appearance but not its substance. As soon as the dough is mixed, the superficial painting disappears. Real change has to be change through and through: *internal*.

Well, *some* Christian slave-owners were really changed inwardly, and some slaves were freed, but this process did not spread and become the norm, the way it should have, because it met with the resistance of an upper class that wanted to be Christian in *appearance* and identity, while retaining class hierarchies; in other words, without much spiritual depth. This has been referred to as the re-patriarchalization of Christianity.

Jesus and Paul set forces in motion that would have gradually reduced or eliminated all the extreme hierarchic separations in society, not through a political movement, but through a real leavening of gospel values into society, bringing about a rising tide of transformed individuals making ethical decisions.

Unfortunately, that was halted by the re-assertion of political power and authoritarian customs, including the emergence of an authoritarian priesthood. The power of slaveholders and other authoritarians re-asserted itself within the church not long after Paul’s lifetime, and we even see it written into the text of the New Testament in some of the letters falsely attributed to the Apostle Paul, such as First Timothy and Titus. It is in these deutero-Pauline letters, not written by Paul but attributed to him by church authorities, that we read such things as this: “Slaves, obey your earthly masters” (Eph 6:5 and Col 3:22); “Tell slaves to be submissive to their masters” (Titus 2:9), sentiments that are clearly contrary to Paul’s own recommendations in the letter to Philemon. Parts of the New Testament affirm slavery, but not Paul’s *own* writings. So yes—I value different parts of the New Testament differently. So do most churches, which no longer follow the severe rules of First Timothy, which says “I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent” (1 Tim 2:12). The *real* Paul greeted many women leaders, prophets, and deacons by name, and even one woman *apostle*: Junia (Rom 16:7). You can’t reconcile that with First Timothy’s patriarchal clamp-down. That author even sneers at the “younger widows” having meetings in private homes, “gadding about from house to house” (1 Tim 5:13).

There really are different value systems and theologies in different books of the Bible. You have to be a discerning and thoughtful reader.

Let me sum up my main points regarding change. One is that *real* change is *inward*, like the changing of a whole lump of dough by leavening. When it is baked, the whole thing *rises* and is easy to eat. The other point I was making is that the gospel changes society through moral and spiritual change, not by political activism. Political activity and campaigning are legitimate, but they are not the job of the church. The church’s job is to get a‑hold of the *real* leaven—spiritual value and meaning—and to sprinkle it into people’s lives.

I used the letter to Philemon as an example of a sprinkling of gospel values by Paul, trying to persuade a man to free another man from slavery, which, of course, would be a huge political change, at least for Onesimus. People can begin to heal, even from very severe conflicts, if they remember the gospel values, and extend respect to everyone, whether black, white, brown, yellow, or red. Of course, we also need to be freed from our inward slavery, our addictions, bad habits, suppressed fears—but that’s a sermon for another day. Today’s sermon was to say that Christian values have a deep effect and that, as Christians, we must be ready to receive anyone as a beloved brother.