

Every year during Labor Day weekend, we celebrate our vocations, our work in the world. And we'll be doing that a bit later in the service.

And usually, on this weekend, I preach a sermon about the theology of our laboring in the world.

But I'm going to come at things from a different angle this year because of our Epistle lesson. It's the Epistle to Philemon, one of my favorite letters by Paul.

We often hear about Paul's intellect and his determination. Paul is one of the smartest and most intelligent Christian writers who has ever lived. He had a brilliant mind. He also had a strong will, a determination about him that wouldn't let anything stand in the way of his love for God in Jesus Christ: not prison, not shipwrecks, not being beat up, not the evil forces of the universe. Absolutely nothing could deter him from the work of spreading God's good news. Not even death has stopped him, for he is still proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ to churches around the world, 1,950 years after his death.

But what we often miss when we look at Paul is his tender side. Paul was a good pastor. Paul really had compassion for people. And nowhere is Paul's compassionate heart more evident than it is in the Epistle to Philemon.

Philemon is a very unusual letter. Most of Paul's letters are written to churches. They deal with issues of faith. But Philemon is a personal letter, a very personal letter.

It's extremely short. We read almost the entire letter as our Epistle lesson this morning, skipping only the last 4 verses. It may have seemed like a long lesson, but it was almost an entire book of the Bible.

Philemon is also a masterpiece of subtlety and understatement. In just a few words, Paul deals very pastorally with a sticky situation. And he does it with great love.

Paul is writing to Philemon, asking Philemon to forgive his runaway slave, Onesimus. On the way out the door, Onesimus apparently stole from Philemon.

Now we have to be careful with our idea of slave. When we talk about slavery in the Roman Empire, we're not talking about slavery in the same terms as in the American South a century-and-a-half ago. This is not Uncle Tom's Cabin. Most slaves in Paul's day were fairly well treated. The average slave was economically better off than the vast majority of the free people in the Roman Empire. The average slave was more upwardly mobile than the average Roman, which is a very strange paradox to us. Slaves served as poets, musicians, accountants, even physicians. They would often go off unsupervised on long business trips on behalf of their masters. They often were able to buy their own freedom. Some would even refuse freedom when it was offered, because it was often a step down the socio-economic ladder.

Nevertheless, the slave Onesimus ran away. And he had stolen from his master, and this was a big no-no. Onesimus had betrayed the trust of his master. It would be within Philemon's rights to have Onesimus beaten or even killed.

Paul wants to avoid this. Onesimus has become a Christian. More than that, Onesimus has become very near and dear to Paul. Paul even regards him as a son. And so Paul asks Philemon to do the right thing.

Paul is very sly. He says, 'Of course, I could order you to do it, but I wouldn't dream of it.' He also says, 'I'm not even going to remind you that you owe me everything, your very soul.'

I just smile every time I read that. "I'm not even going to remind you that you owe me everything..." Paul, I think you just did.

The bottom line is that Paul could force Philemon to do the right thing. But instead, Paul asks Philemon to do the right thing just because it's right, not because he's forced into it. Paul doesn't ask for tit for tat, for Philemon to return a favor. He asks him to do it because it's the right thing to do.

A gift is not a gift if it's forced. It's not a gift if it's an exchange of goods or services. It's not a gift if it's given out of a sense of compulsion. A gift is only a gift if it's given freely and joyfully.

Paul could use his power and force Philemon to free Onesimus. Paul could take sides. But instead, Paul chooses to act like Christ Jesus. Paul chooses the path of mediation. Paul chooses the path of servanthood.

And Paul asks Philemon to act in a Christ-like manner as well. Roman society would say, "Punish Onesimus." But Paul is asking Philemon to defy their culture, to defy the way everyone else behaves, and to behave as a Christian. Paul asks Philemon to forgive Onesimus, and to accept him as an equal, as a brother in Christ. 'Welcome him as you would welcome me.' Forgive your brother as you yourself have been forgiven.

And Paul does something else Christ like. He promises to pay Philemon for anything Onesimus owes him. Paul takes Onesimus's debt and makes it his own. Jesus on the cross took on all of our burdens, all of our sins, and paid for them with his own life. Paul is following his Lord.

In the Epistle to Philemon, we can see how in tune Paul is to the mind of Christ. Paul really does walk the walk. He really tries to answer the question, "What would Jesus do?" And then he seeks to do it. He come to Philemon not with power, but with love.

Paul defies the conventions of society on behalf of Onesimus, who is fairly powerless. And he takes on Onesimus's burdens: "If he owes you anything, charge that to my account. I will repay it."

So what happens to Onesimus? How does the story end? We're not sure. Paul tells Philemon, 'I am confident of your obedience, and I know that you will do even more than I say.'

And the fact that this letter still exists after all this time indicates that Philemon probably did what Paul asked. Philemon probably forgave Onesimus, and he probably freed him from slavery. If he didn't, Philemon certainly wouldn't want a letter from Paul floating around that he didn't listen to.

But there's an even more intriguing part of this story. The Epistle to Philemon certainly seems out of place in the New Testament. It's a personal letter in the midst of more formal letters to churches and church leaders. There were many other writings that didn't make the cut. So why was Philemon included in the NT?

A fascinating clue comes from about 50 years after Paul's death. In the early 100's there lived a man by the name of Ignatius. Ignatius was Bishop of Antioch, and one of the great martyrs of the early church. Ignatius is also one of the most important writers we have for information about what was happening in the church in the years following the writing of the books of the NT. Ignatius, at one point in his writings, mentions his meeting with one of his fellow bishops, the important and influential Bishop of Ephesus, who at that time was a very old man. That bishop's name was Onesimus.

While it is not 100% for sure, it is highly likely that the old Bishop Onesimus and the young slave Onesimus from 50 years earlier are one and the same. The Bishop of Ephesus would have had the influence to ask that the old letter from Paul to his former master Philemon be included with Paul's other letters in the collection of scrolls that would eventually become the New Testament.

If this is the case, then Philemon's actions had repercussions that lasted well after his death. Philemon, by doing the right thing, by trying to follow what Christ would have him do, would have an influence on Christians for generations to come.

It is an important reminder to all of us that what we do is important, not only now, but in the future.

Which does bring us back around to Labor Day.

Philemon does something small, and yet it carries a lasting legacy. Every day, at school, at work, we also have interactions, we make decisions, we do things. These things may seem small, and yet can carry great importance.

The way we interact with those we encounter through our work can have a positive influence on their lives. The way we educate and treat our children will have far reaching affects long after we're gone. The good things we do for our brothers and sisters today will have an impact for a long time to come.

The Epistle to Philemon gives us a wonderful window into the heart of Paul. But it also gives us standards for living the Christian life.

Like Paul, we need to remember to act out of a sense of servanthood, rather than a sense of power. Like Paul, we also have to take the burdens that our brothers and sisters carry, and make them our own.

Like Onesimus, we have to be willing to face up to the mistakes which we have made in the past. Like Onesimus, we have to be ready to seek forgiveness and reconciliation with those we have wronged.

And like Philemon, we have to always remember that life in Christ calls us to new standards of living that may differ from the standards of the world. Like Philemon, we must take the grace and love that God has given freely to us, and we must love each other freely and graciously.

May that grace, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, be with us, this day and always.