

January 14, 2018  
2nd Sunday of Epiphany

# Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“On The Basis Of Love”

The Reverend Amy Starr Redwine  
& The Reverend Melanie Marsh Baum



The Church of the Covenant  
Presbyterian Church (USA)  
11205 Euclid Avenue  
Cleveland, Ohio 44106  
[CovenantWeb.org](http://CovenantWeb.org)

## **James 2:14-26**

14What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?<sup>15</sup>If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food,<sup>16</sup>and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill', and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?<sup>17</sup>So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. 18 But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith without works, and I by my works will show you my faith.<sup>19</sup>You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder.<sup>20</sup>Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith without works is barren?<sup>21</sup>Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?<sup>22</sup>You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works.<sup>23</sup>Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness', and he was called the friend of God.<sup>24</sup>You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.<sup>25</sup>Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road?<sup>26</sup>For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.

## **Philemon**

1Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow-soldier, and to the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 4When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God<sup>5</sup>because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith towards the Lord Jesus.<sup>6</sup>I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ.<sup>7</sup>I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother 8 For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty,<sup>9</sup>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.<sup>10</sup>I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment.<sup>11</sup>Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me.<sup>12</sup>I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you.<sup>13</sup>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;<sup>14</sup>but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced.<sup>15</sup>Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back for ever,<sup>16</sup>no 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.<sup>17</sup> So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.<sup>18</sup> If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.<sup>19</sup> I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self.<sup>20</sup> Yes, brother; let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ.<sup>21</sup> Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.<sup>22</sup> One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you. <sup>23</sup> Epaphras, my fellow-prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you,<sup>24</sup> and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow-workers.<sup>25</sup> The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

*“On The Basis Of Love”*  
*James 2:14-26; Philemon*

[Amy] I’m going to wager that most of you have not heard an entire letter of Paul’s read aloud in worship, and that, if you did, it wasn’t Philemon. Hopefully, having just heard that letter, perhaps for the very first time, you have some questions, like:

- Who was Philemon and what was his relationship to Paul?
- Who was Onesimus and why is Paul so determined to send him back to Philemon?
- Did we just hear a biblical passage – in church and on the day before MLK day, no less – about returning a slave to his owner?

Well, the answer, to the last question at least, is yes. From what we know, Philemon was a wealthy convert to Christianity, who heard the gospel from Paul. Apparently, Philemon now serves as host to a gathering of early Christians – a church of sorts that meets in his home. Onesimus was Philemon’s slave who got to know Paul in prison. Paul is now writing to Philemon on Onesimus’s behalf, begging Philemon not just to take back his slave, but to receive him in light of his new-found Christian faith.

[Mel] There are many reasons why this letter could be seen as problematic. One is the fact that Philemon was one biblical text misused to justify the continued enslavement of our African American ancestors. Christians interested in upholding slavery saw in this text Paul returning a runaway slave to his master, and that interpretation has cast a long shadow over this letter. New Testament Scholar Eric Barreto argues that it is not enough to guess at what Paul might have meant as he wrote this letter in the first century. We must confront how Philemon has actually been read in Christian communities and not that long ago. “Our past is not just our past”, Barreto says, “but our present and our future”. The fact is that some of our sisters and brothers in Christ, in our not too distant past, read this letter as giving them permission to uphold racist systems. We have inherited that legacy. That legacy is reason enough not to use Paul’s letter to Philemon on a day when we honor the work of Martin Luther King, Jr. So what are we to make of this letter? Is there anything valuable we can learn from this text?

[Amy] As difficult as it can be for us, given the sensitivity of these topics, this letter teaches us something that we 21<sup>st</sup> century American Christians desperately need to remember: that our faith, that this gospel, is relevant to the details of our everyday lives. The gospel is not something we can just tune into on Sunday mornings at church. This letter reminds us that our commitment to being Christ's disciples touches every aspect of life, not just within these walls, but also -- and especially -- outside them, out in the world.

This text is an example of what it looks like when the rubber of the gospel hits the road. Although in certain historical moments, as Melanie mentioned, Paul's letter to Philemon was used to justify the return of runaway slaves to their masters, modern scholarship teaches us that Onesimus was probably not a runaway slave, but rather that he had been sent by Philemon to attend to Paul in his imprisonment.

While under the influence of Paul, the master evangelist, Onesimus heard and believed the gospel -he was transformed. But, in the process, Paul was transformed too, because he can no longer see Onesimus as simply Philemon's slave. Onesimus has been, as Paul writes, reborn; their relationship is now more like a relationship between family members, and so Paul writes this letter to compel Philemon and his community to receive Onesimus home in the same way, no longer as a cog in the wheel of Philemon's household economy, but as a brother in Christ, which is to say, as an equal. Paul invites Philemon, and the Christian community with him, to a radical reorientation of their understanding of Onesimus's identity. Imagine, Paul writes, that when Onesimus walks through the door, it is me you are welcoming home. Like the apostle Paul, Martin Luther King, Jr. had incredible rhetorical skills that he used to invite his fellow citizens and fellow Christians to a radical reorientation of their understanding of what it means to follow Christ, to live as though each encounter we have with another human being is actually an encounter with Christ.

1

[Mel] In his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," MLK offers a scathing, if gracious, critique of white Christian leadership. He writes, "I came to Birmingham with the hope that the white religious leadership of this community would see the justice of our cause and with deep moral concern serve as the channel through which our just grievances could get to the power structure. [Instead] In the

---

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2975](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2975)

midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churches stand on the sidelines and merely mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard so many ministers say, 'Those are social issues which the gospel has nothing to do with,' and I have watched so many churches commit themselves to a completely otherworldly religion which made a strange distinction between bodies and souls, the sacred and the secular."

[Amy] Like Paul, King is not afraid to remind us that the gospel makes no such distinction between bodies and souls, the sacred and the secular. He reminds his readers that, "the early Christians rejoiced when they were deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was the thermostat that transformed the mores of society."

[Mel] Martin Luther King was what we often call in ministry a Rising Star. He was a young and dynamic preacher, with obvious leadership potential, who showed every sign of having a far-reaching and successful career in ministry ahead of him - a future he had been groomed for his entire life.<sup>2</sup>

Dr. King was part of a family dynasty of preachers at going back to the turn of the 20th century. He had been given every privilege of education and upbringing that his family could afford. Graduating from Morehouse College at the age of 19, he was elected President of his Seminary class three years later, and completed his Doctorate by the time he was 26. He was on the executive committee of the NAACP. He was President of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. He had a wife and four children. When he took a leadership role in the Civil Rights Movement, he had everything to lose. He could have easily said no when the call came, as it did many times, asking him to use the power and standing he had to help better the lives of those who were suffering around him. He could have easily said no, but like Christ, like Paul, King counted the cost of discipleship, and knew all that he had meant nothing if he was not willing to use it to bring about God's justice in this world.

---

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles\\_Gen/Letter\\_Birmingham.html](https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html)

[Amy] In other words, although King made significant demands on others to sacrifice for the movement, he wasn't asking anyone to do anything that he wasn't willing to do himself. He was willing to give up what by all evidence promised to be a long and illustrious career. He was willing to give up a life of relative comfort as a respected member of an elite class within the African American community. He was willing to give up his own safety and freedom. He was willing to give up his life. In his letter from the Birmingham jail, he wasn't asking white religious leaders to do the work for him; he was calling on them to join with him - to use their standing in the community to stand with him, whatever the cost.

[Mel] Joy DeGruy is a black woman who is part of a multicultural family. Her Sister-in-law, Kathleen, is half-black and half-white, but she looks white. In fact, Joy says, "she has blue eyes, looks whiter than most white folks." They lived near each other and raised their children together.

[Amy] One day, they went into a Safeway to pick up some groceries. Kathleen checked out first, and the young, white, freckled cashier engaged her in upbeat conversation about the beautiful weather. Kathleen wrote a check to pay for her groceries, and then it was Joy's turn.

[Mel] When the cashier looked up and saw Joy and her ten year-old daughter, she stopped talking, no conversation at all as Joy wrote a check for her groceries. Then the cashier spoke, saying? "I'm going to need to see two pieces of ID." She had asked Kathleen for none. Joy looked at her daughter, who was growing more distraught and embarrassed by the second, and at the two elderly white women behind her in line. Joy knew that if she protested, she was going to become the angry black woman and stir up all kinds of drama. So she handed over the ID cards. But then the cashier took out the bad check book, the book the store kept of all the names of people who had written bad checks. She was clearly looking to see if Joy's name is on the list.

[Amy] That's when Kathleen, who had been waiting for Joy off to the side, stepped back in. "Excuse me," she said to the cashier, "why are you doing this? Why are you taking her through all of this?" And the checker said, "Well, this is our policy." Kathleen responded, "No, it's not, because you didn't do that to me." "But I know you," the checker said, "you've been here for years." "No,"

Kathleen replied, “she’s been here for years. I’ve shopped here for three months.”

[Mel] That’s when the two ladies in line took up Joy’s cause. “We can’t believe what’s happening here,” they said. “What’s being done to this woman is totally unacceptable. “At which point the manager came over and said, “Is there a problem here?”

[Amy] And Kathleen says, “Yes, there is a problem here.” And she explained what had happened. In this situation, even though she was half-black and half-white, Kathleen knew that her appearance of being white conferred upon her privilege. And she used that privilege to intervene and stop an injustice, and as a result, she influenced everyone in that space. She used her power and privilege to make right a situation that was wrong<sup>3</sup>.

[Mel] That is the power Paul uses when he writes this letter to Philemon, a letter that compels this wealthy, respected, privileged man to receive Onesimus home not as a slave, but as a brother in Christ. And Paul isn’t asking Philemon to do anything he hasn’t done. Paul makes this demand of Philemon because of who Paul is within the early Church. He uses his power to act on behalf of a slave. He uses his privilege to elevate the status of one who is oppressed. And he calls Philemon and the church to do the same. It turns out that this ancient text is a text about power and privilege. Privilege is not something that we choose. We may not even want it. But once we recognize the privilege we do have, the question becomes, How far will we go to live out the justice of the Gospel? How can we use the power or privilege that we have to lift up those around us who have been beaten down by injustice or oppression of any kind?

[Amy] What would it look like for us all to work to improve our public schools - not just the ones your own children attend?

[Mel] Imagine how great public transit would be for EVERYONE if wealthy people used it and demanded improvements.

[Amy] How quickly could we diminish harassment of all kinds in the workplace if we actively and vocally support those who choose to speak out

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wf9QBnPK6Yg>

against a powerful abuser, and hold such abusers accountable for their behavior?

[Mel] We teach our children to speak up against bullying, to not be passive bystanders when they see someone being mistreated, but are we willing to do the same thing?

[Amy] There are neighborhoods in our cities where it is not safe for children to walk to school. What if we showed up in these neighborhoods to accompany children to school so that they get there safely?

[Mel] How might it change the outcome if, when we see a police officer pull over a driver of color, we stop and stand as a neutral witness to their encounter?

[Amy] We could give up our seats on boards or our academic scholarships so that a person from an unrepresented group can take our place. These are just a few ideas -- there are many more. The only way our world will start to look more like the world Jesus envisioned and the world MLK dreamed about is if each one of us is willing to let our faith transform not just our thinking, but our actions. It will require those of us with power and privilege conferred to us for no better reason than what we look like, where we were born, or what we have, to call out and fight against the injustice visited on our brothers and sisters who happened to be born into different circumstances.

[Mel] It will require those of us who have experienced injustice because of what we look like, or where we were born, or the things we don't have, to radically love and honor ourselves in the face of other people's fear and discomfort, to see ourselves and one another simply and truly for what we are - beloved daughters and sons of God celebrating our own worth, claiming our own power, and standing boldly in our identity as essential members of the body of Christ. Above all, it requires us to trust in God, believing that Spirit of God can move, and does move, to transform the lives of privileged and oppressed alike.

[Amy] Through his radical transformation to become a follower of Jesus Christ, Paul learned, as he writes in another letter, that there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. We are all one in Christ Jesus. Paul knew that we all have power and privilege because we are all God's children, and that to speak or act as if some people are inherently better than others is a lie. Paul knew that

our faith demands that we use our power and privilege to disrupt injustice and oppression whenever and wherever we see it.

[Mel] Every year at this time we pause to reflect on where we are, as a country, in relation to Dr. King's dream... [How do we avoid despair, this week, weeks, years, centuries] Yet perhaps the greatest act of non-violent resistance we can engage in is to act out there as if what we proclaim is true: that every person has inherent, equal worth in God's eyes, no matter what country they are from, no matter the color of their skin, no matter their education or income. We are all children of the living God, sisters and brothers of Jesus Christ. May we use our power and privilege to create a world defined by this truth, seeking justice and equity, love and peace. Amen.