
Heart and Soul ... A Weekly Meditation

February 16, 2014

Where Transformation Blooms

“Philemon, I thank my God every time I mention you in my prayers because I’ve heard of your love and faithfulness, which you have both for the Lord Jesus and for all God’s people. I pray that your partnership in the faith might become effective by an understanding of all that is good among us in Christ. I have great joy and encouragement because of your love, since the hearts of God’s people are refreshed by your actions, my brother.”

Philemon vv. 4-7 (Common English Bible)

Mikaela Shiffrin, 18, is a “once-in-a-generation talent”, declares Tim Layden in Sports Illustrated. One of the youngest world champions ever, Shiffrin will represent the United States in the Winter Olympics in Sochi as one of the favorites to win the gold medal in slalom and a threat to win a medal in giant slalom. Either will make Shiffrin the youngest U.S. Alpine medalist in history. If there is a single secret to her success Shiffrin credits her parents’ lesson that excellence grows from passion, not from demands.¹

These few sentences from Philemon are Paul’s prayer for Philemon. Absent are any demands upon Philemon. Paul understands that demands have limited value in advancing people in their growth, particularly in spiritual growth. With uncommon wisdom Paul addresses the heart; appeals to the emotional center of Philemon. Philemon’s love and faithfulness for both the Lord Jesus and for all God’s people demonstrates a passionate faith that Paul seeks to leverage for the sake of a runaway slave named Onesimus. Onesimus was in big trouble, for he was guilty of two crimes punishable by death; running away and theft. Yet, something happened while Onesimus was on the run. He became a Christian. More, Onesimus has become useful to Paul in Paul’s ministry. So Paul is making an appeal to Philemon, Onesimus’ owner. Onesimus is “turning himself in” and Paul seeks amnesty for him.

The wonderful Christian thinker and author Dallas Willard writes that the church often gets it wrong. The church seeks to advance spiritual maturity through external conformity to the words of Jesus’ teaching or encouraging faithfulness to the activities of the church. These do not transform the inner self; they do not produce transformation. What the church must do is bring people to the point where they clearly love and constantly delight in the heavenly Father revealed in Jesus Christ. The church must move people from their passion, not through demands. It is a good word for us as well. Our own witness to the Christian faith must be one of humility, joy and love, not from reproach. This approach worked for Paul. Philemon not only forgave Onesimus but returned him to the Christian service of Paul. And history shows that from that forgiveness Onesimus would one day be elected the bishop of Ephesus.

In our own witness to Your love may we demonstrate the lesson of Shiffrin and Paul – to love so extravagantly that hearts are changed. Amen.

Doug Hood

¹ Tim Layden, *So Good, So Young*. Sports Illustrated. February 3, 2014, pages 66-73.