

# Thanksgiving for the Warm Wide Welcome of Home!

Isaiah 43:1-7, 18-19

Philemon 1-25

November 19, 2023      Thanksgiving and 25<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost      Dr. Edwin Gray Hurley

*“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. I will bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth – everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.” Isaiah 1, 6-7*

*“I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. I am sending him, that is my own heart, back to you, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother. Welcome him as you would welcome me.*

Philemon 10,12,15,16,17

I

Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz said it most memorably, “There’s no place like home.” Our National Day of Thanksgiving is before us. A day set aside by the Pilgrims in Plymouth in 1621 inviting the local native American Indians to feast and give thanks to God with them for their first successful harvest after enduring a harsh winter. As President George Washington called for a day of national thanksgiving for November 26, 1789. Other early presidents did the same, but Abraham Lincoln was the first President to make it a national holiday in 1863, amid the Civil War. For many, Thanksgiving is a season of going home, of family reunions and reconnections. Our own family will gather in Nashville at Gayle’s parent’s home, 107 Dunham Springs Lane. We will be blessed to have some twenty gathering together at the table. Gayle’s parents, age 95 and 96, her brother and sister and some of their children, all our children and grandchildren with a second little girl on the way, to Stuart’s wife Tracy’s parents.

Like salmon coming back to the stream where they were born because they know it is a good place to reproduce and ensure the survival of their offspring, like birds migrating South for Winter, we travel across town or across the country to get home, to reconnect, to renew ties, to experience love and express gratitude to God for all life’s blessings, and to thank God for strength to endure hardships. We long to experience home. To go “through” home, even if we do not “move” home. To be among our people.

Home is that place which Robert Frost said, “where when you go there they have to take you in.” Home is a place, yes. But more home is an attitude. Home is as Jerusalem is described in Psalm 22, “a city that is at unity with itself.” Does that describe you today? Do you feel you are a person at unity with yourself? At unity with others? At unity with God? At unity with your family? Are you at home within yourself?

Thanksgiving is sort of the official beginning of the holiday season, leading us next week to Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday of the Christian Year, when we affirm Jesus Christ is our true and eternal King. “Long live the King!” Then comes Advent and our preparation for receiving God’s greatest gift of his own incarnate Son, born in a lowly manger. For our Jewish friends there will come Hanukkah, the season of light, celebrating the rededication of the Jerusalem Temple with the lighting of the 8

branched Menorah after Jerusalem was retaken by the Maccabee's from Greece where one cruse of oil, miraculously lasted eight days.

This time of year, is an opportunity for us to express our gratitude to God and to our loved ones, and to reach out in love to those who may be all alone at Thanksgiving and welcome some to our tables and our homes. For Gayle and me, as we enter into our final holiday holy day season with you as Pastor and First Lady, it is a time for fond remembrance, prompting us to look back with gratitude and to look forward with hope.

Wherever we are on our life's journey, we all are on a search for home, which is what God offers us, a place called home, a relationship called home. As Jesus says, "I go to prepare a place for you."<sup>i</sup> "That where I am, there you will be also." As Isaiah writes, promising the Jewish exiles, God will bring them home,

*"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. I will bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth – everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."*<sup>ii</sup>

As Paul writes his friend Philemon, appealing on behalf the runaway slave Onesimus,

*Welcome him, back to you, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother. Welcome him as you would welcome me."*<sup>iii</sup>

It is hard to be away from home. A long long time ago as a boy of 10, soon to enter the fourth grade, I went to a summer camp down in South West Texas called Camp Stewart for the very first time for four weeks. I had never been away from home before, except for a week at my Grandmother and Great Aunt's in Morrilton, AR. My Dad put me on a train, another first, in Waco, Texas together with other boys traveling to camp. And in no time at all, I felt so terribly homesick. As the camp session began, I literally did not go to any of my camp activities for several days, not swimming, not archery, not riflery, not basketball. None of them. I felt all alone. I did not really know anyone. I did not reach out to anyone. I just started hanging out in the ping pong and pool table campers lounge.

Well, about three days into this newly adopted solitary lifestyle, who should come looking for me but Uncle Bill, the camp owner and director. Uncle Bill James had been the head football coach at Trinity University in San Antonio and ran his camp every summer. He came out looking just for me. He called me by name and invited me to go with him to the dining hall where he got us big bowls of home made rich vanilla ice cream, and we sat down, ate and talked. He helped me appreciate all the fun I was going to have in the various camp activities. He took me around to several of the activities and introduced me to the counselors in charge. From that time, I felt at home. I continued going to that camp for three summers. For I had been fully welcomed as part of the Camp Stewart Family.

## II

In this, his shortest Letter in the New Testament, a letter that is one of Paul's undisputed writings,<sup>iv</sup> the Apostle, goes out on the limb for a slave named Onesimus, had run away from his master Philemon. Onesimus had encountered Paul while he was in prison, likely in Rome or perhaps Ephesus, which was close to Colossae, where Philemon probably lived. There under Paul's influence Onesimus had become a Christian. There he had been useful to Paul. Now Paul is sending him back to Philemon

with a strong imperative recommendation that Philemon receive him back, not as a run-away slave, “no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother. “A member of the family.

We do not know any of the particulars of the rupture in the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus. Had Onesimus been poorly treated? Did he steal from Philemon? Really, even though it has been generally assumed that theirs had been a slave-master relationship, even that is not certain.

Some scholars point to the possibility that they were blood brothers who had fallen out over something. This is a letter addressed to more than the individual Philemon, but rather is a public letter, written together with Paul’s companion in ministry Timothy, to “Philemon, our dear friend and co-worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house.”<sup>v</sup>

This is a public letter to the church calling for forgiveness and a second chance to be given to a fellow believer. This is a letter addressing the sort of relationships that should be occurring in the faith community.

Over its long history the letter has been interpreted both as a call to free slaves and as a call to maintain slaves. In the 400’s AD the early Christian Preacher John Chrysostom thought the church was being threatened as an institution for freeing slaves within the Roman Empire where slavery was such an integral part of the Roman imperial order. And even though he favored freeing slaves, he yet wrote, “That we ought not to withdraw slaves from their masters.”

In early 19<sup>th</sup> century America pro-slavery advocates referred to Philemon as “the Paulline Mandate”, a Biblical sanction for American Slavery. The Southern Presbyterian Church, of which we were a part, developed the horrendous doctrine of the “spirituality of the Church” maintaining that the Church should stick to spiritual matters and not get involved in issues of justice, thus by their silence maintaining the evil institution of slavery.

The majority of scholars and preachers, however, have looked at Philemon as a radical call to treat one who was previously insignificant, now as a beloved significant brother and member of the family. The very name Onesimus means a “beloved brother – both in the flesh and in the Lord.”

### III

For Paul, whatever Onesimus was previously he is no longer. Onesimus is a new creation in Christ, a new being. Now that he is a Christ-follower, everything is different, and Paul expects his friend Philemon to welcome him home, to respond with generous forgiveness, and to free him from slavery. The Church is to be such a home. I love how Henri Nouwen describes what we are obliged to be and do as a Church.

“In our world full of strangers who are estranged from their culture, from their country, from their neighbors, from their friends, their family, from their deepest self and their God, we witness a painful search for a hospitable place where life can be lived without fear and where community can be found. It is possible for men and women and obligatory for Christians to offer an open and hospitable place where strangers can cast off their strangeness and become our fellow human beings.”

Paul masterfully moves through this letter, building his agreement, first expressing his gratitude to Philemon, thanking him for his love for all the saints and commending his faith in the Lord Jesus, and the joy and encouragement Paul has received from his love. Paul notes that he has authority with which he could make this request as a command, but that he prefers to appeal to Philemon on the basis of love. "I Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus." Therefore, he will be bold to make this request,

"I am appealing to you for my child Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. I am sending him, that is my own heart, back to you. <sup>vi</sup>

Paul is requesting that Philemon welcome Onesimus Home, like Jesus told in the story of the Prodigal Son where the father welcomed both his sons the younger brother and the elder brother back home, back into the banquet and the light and music filled party. Like Joseph, betrayed by his brothers, sold into slavery when he was by God's providence elevated to become Prime Minister of Egypt, and now welcomed these brothers and his whole family to safety in Egypt. Like God welcomes each of us who are estranged, alienated and away from home back home again. "Welcome him as you would welcome me."

Even more, like the Good Samaritan, Jesus described who rescued and cared for the man wounded and dying along the side of the Jericho Road, bandaging his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them, carrying him on his own animal to an inn, and then gave the Innkeeper money for his care and a blank check promising to pay whatever more money is needed for his care when he comes back through. So, Paul guarantees to cover the cost of any debt Onesimus may owe. "If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it."

Paul, again masterfully notes how he will not even bother to mention how much how much more Philemon owes him, even his life! Though he does mention it. Again we do not know the details but we see how far Paul is willing to go in behalf of his child in the faith Onesimus. Concluding,

"Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say." Oh, and by the way, get my guest room ready, for I am hoping to be able to come and be restored to you myself."

I will be following up with you on this Philemon and holding you accountable! I expect you to welcome Onesimus like you welcome me.

#### IV

Friends, here is the mandate for our costly welcoming home of any who have left us, who now come home in repentance. This is how we are to live together in the Lord. This is how Gayle and I and our family have experienced this faith family living together for 22 years. You welcomed us in 2001. You have welcomed all sorts of sinners becoming saints into this family, over the years, knowing that we ourselves are the chief of sinners. The greatest recommendation letter that South Highland makes is not with written letters but with lives which recommend and radiate the Gospel. As Paul writes the Corinthians,

“Surely, we do not need as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you, do we? You yourselves are our letters, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all... a letter of Christ prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the Living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.”<sup>vii</sup>

And catch this!

Onesimus, the runaway slave, the useless one now made useful, is thought to have become a great leader in the early church. Bishop Ignatius of Antioch, in a second century letter to the Church at Ephesus, written in 107 A.D. as he rode under guard to Rome for his own execution, refers to this Onesimus as the Bishop of the Church at Ephesus. Onesimus, the onetime slave, or at least the ostracized brother, had become a bishop and leader in the early church. All because someone believed in him, and stood in the gap for him, and went out on a limb for him, and welcomed him home. To you all - welcome home!

“Gloria In Excelsis” –

“Glory to God in the Highest.”

“Laudamus te, benedicimus te, adoramus te, glorificamus te.

“We praise you, we bless you, we adore you, we glorify you.”<sup>viii</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> John 14:2

<sup>ii</sup> *Isaiah 1, 6-7*

<sup>iii</sup> Philemon 10,12,15,16,17

<sup>iv</sup> Amy Levine, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, p.402

<sup>v</sup> Philemon 1-2

<sup>vi</sup> Philemon 10-12

<sup>vii</sup> 2 Cor. 3:1-3

<sup>viii</sup> Texts from Gloria by Antonio Vivaldi