

## PENTECOST: SHARING NEW LIFE IN THE SPIRIT

**The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**September 5, 2010**

**Deuteronomy 30:15-20**

**Psalm 1**

**Philemon 1-21**

**Luke 14:25-33**

### **Letter of the Law ... or Love?**

My mail brought an advertisement in the form of a letter addressed, "Dear Colleague in Ministry."

"If you've ever struggled composing letters – or wasted valuable time and energy agonizing over words or phrases – here's a solution that will simplify your life...." The deal was a three-ring binder filled with 300 "ready-to-use letters" including: declining a speaking engagement; welcoming a church member home from the hospital; recommending a young person for college admission; and supporting members who have lost a job.

Pity the apostle Paul who had to go through the time-consuming drudgery of composing a letter for *this* particular situation recounted in the Epistle lesson.

Paul is sitting in prison. A runaway slave has found his way to him, and not surprisingly, has surrendered to Paul's gospel and become a Christian. Paul has learned that this man has run away from another person whom Paul had brought to faith. Not only had he run away, but he'd taken some money or property from his master's household. Paul knows that to harbor a runaway slave has serious consequences, to say nothing of the severe punishment due the slave when he or she is captured.

The slave's name is Onesimus, which means "useful," and the man has indeed been useful to Paul. Paul wouldn't mind keeping him around, not as a slave, but as a helpful brother in the faith. Yet, Paul knows that justice will be served best by sending Onesimus back to his rightful master Philemon. How to do that with diplomacy and compassion, justly and safely, is the hard part. How to assure that Onesimus will be welcomed as a brother, rather than punished as a slave, is Paul's concern.

If Paul had a binder of *five* hundred pre-written letters, he wouldn't find one to fit *this* dilemma. His letter to Philemon is a quick study of Paul's universe, and a poignant reminder of the universe in which *we too* live.

No matter our vocations or family ties, our economic level or our political views, we are, *above all*, sisters and brothers of Jesus the Christ, baptized into his family, called to his service. Maybe that message is one reason this brief epistle found its way into the canon of Scripture, to remind us that whoever we are, we belong to one family where distinctions of class, race, and politics not only blur, but dissolve. Here is an epistle of the heart, an appeal to the duty of love.

This week's Reflection was prepared by The Rev. Jeff Kellam, a retired pastor and Media Specialist, now enjoying family, writing, jazz, and life in general, in Owego, NY.

+ + +

**This week we remember to pray for the work of the Bible Societies in: Turkey** – with thanks to God for his protection during difficult times; and with prayers for the bookshop in Adana that has survived two attacks yet is still doing God's work; and with prayers that they will continually gain opportunities to share God's Word through book fairs; for the safety of the small Christian community trying to survive and be witness for the Word of God; and for funding in this time of financial crisis; **Jordan** – with thanks to God for the many book fairs in schools and churches and for summer camps; and with prayers for wisdom for the new General Secretary and board as they continue to build relationships with individuals and various churches and organizations in the country, and for life change among Asian migrant workers as they read and hear the Word of God; **Syria** – with thanks to God for guidance in doing his work, and for the Christian Resources Center in Damascus and the many visitors who use its resources; and with prayers for the children and young people who have interacted with the Word through our programs and activities, our distribution efforts and participation in various book fairs to bless those seeking his Word, and for their church leaders for guidance by the Holy Spirit.

**Activity Corner:** "Letters of Love"

Supplies Needed: Bible, pens/pencils, index cards, markers/crayons,

Gather in a circle and read Philemon 1-21. Consider reading it alternately, designating someone to read each verse until all verses are read. Paul's letter to Philemon reminds us that we should love all our brothers and sisters in Christ equally. This means that we must show love to everyone no matter their social status.

Engage in a discussion on what it means to be a slave, and then link that meaning to discuss the ways in which sin is as type of slavery. In addition, talk about the changes that might occur in someone's life when he/she is freed from slavery, and then compare that with the freedom that comes to all of us when we accept Christ. Invite each person to write the heading: "Before Christ" on side 'A' of their index card, and "After Christ" on side 'B'. Instruct them to list on side 'A' two ways in which sin is a type of slavery, and on side 'B' two ways in which accepting Christ offers freedom. Encourage them to share their responses among themselves.

Examine what Paul says in verse 14, and talk about ways that we can show kindness to others. Discuss how treating others with kindness, according to your faith tradition, demonstrate God's love. Invite each person to write a letter to a brother or sister in Christ about the importance of showing kindness. Be sure to include ideas on how he or she can show kindness to each other. Younger children may also be encouraged to write letters, or draw a picture that expresses how they show kindness to others.

Conclude by reading John 13:35, offering a prayer of thanksgiving for your brothers and sisters in Christ, and singing the hymn "They'll Know We Are Christians" by Peter Scholtes.