

“The Guest Room” (Philemon 1:1-22)
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September 5, 2010
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Letter writing is almost a lost art in today’s world of e-mail, Facebook, and Twitter. Yet, we have in this short book, Philemon, a beautiful example of the art and power of the written word. As is the custom in most letters, Paul begins with a salutation: “Grace to you and peace....” The commonly used salutation in an ancient letters was “greetings.” Paul changes ever so slightly the Greek word for “greetings” to a similar Greek word that means “grace” or “free gift.” The “peace” (“grace and peace”) is the traditional Jewish greeting *shalom*. Paul’s artful shift from “greetings” to “grace and peace” is highly significant.

The reader is moved from the ordinary Roman salutation of “greetings” to the extraordinary announcement of God’s gift of grace freely given *and* the peace of a world in which God reigns. That peace, *shalom*, is to the reader’s ear a stark contrast between keeping peace by means of the Roman military machine to the state of *shalom* which is a much larger encompassing peace that comes about when God’s justice is present. So we see that Paul’s not interested in a mere “greeting” in his letter; he is communicating God’s gift of grace, given freely to all, and linked to God’s justice for the world. A lot is communicated in just a few words. But the readers of this letter would notice!

In their book, *In Search of Paul*, John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan Reed explains the overwhelming magnitude of Rome’s dominance in Paul’s 1st-century world. I thought I understood this; I knew that Jesus’ teaching and Paul’s further proclamations were set over and against the standard theology and culture of imperial Rome. But I didn’t get the extent of it described in this book. Everywhere one looked, everything one saw and touched, every cultural norm and custom, all that surrounded first century people forced them to experience Rome, its emperors, its worship of the gods including those emperors who the senate proclaimed as divine sons of god. *Pax Romana*, peace through military victory, and all things Roman defined the 1st-century world. So Paul’s teachings would have stood out in stark contrast to what was both “normal” and “acceptable.” This new message Paul preached would have been heard as radical and even dangerous.

Part of the “normal” in this time of history was the institution of slavery. A runaway slave such as Onesimus would have been punished severely, likely executed, *unless* he was seeking asylum from an abusive master by appealing to his master’s superior. Onesimus goes to Paul, Philemon’s superior, and he becomes, Paul says, “my own heart.” Paul does not ignore Roman law by keeping Onesimus with him, but in returning Onesimus to his master, he appeals to Philemon to accept his once slave now as a brother and an equal. This appeal is a radical departure from the acceptable cultural norm. But Paul is teaching a message of God’s new reality that *is* in radical contrast to what’s normal in the Roman world.

Paul’s words may appear at times to be manipulative. Paul gives effusive compliments about all the good things Philemon is doing. But then he asks for more; he asks that Onesimus be received with grace and as an equal. Paul probably had the authority just to tell Philemon what to do, but he resist this use of *power over*. He does not threaten Philemon with excommunication; he doesn’t belittle Philemon; he appeals to the radical equality that God’s justice dictates. Paul uses persuasion and his message is not one of force but transformation. While Rome brought

peace to the world through crushing any adversary, Paul brings the peace of Christ to the Christian community through appealing to the heart.

It is interesting to note that this letter is addressed to the church because the problem is a community problem--not just one between Paul and Philemon. It addresses an issue that the early church as a whole had to face. How were they to treat each other given the radical message of Jesus? Paul is asking Philemon, and by extension the church community, to give up any economic benefits and to recognize how they were part of a system of domination, and to reorient their relationships so that each person is held in high esteem as an equal brother or sister in Christ.

We don't know how the story ends: we can only speculate. What we do know is that Paul does not give Philemon an ultimatum that if he refuses to accept Onesimus as a brother and equal than Paul won't be friends with him anymore. Paul values sustaining the relationship, and he expresses this in verses 22 when he tells Philemon to prepare a guest room because he hopes to come for a visit. One could speculate that this was just added pressure on Philemon to "do the right thing because I'm going to come and see." Or one could assume that Paul wanted Philemon to understand that their relationship would not be severed whatever he decided. I prefer the latter explanation.

This letter is a wonderful description of how we are to be church. We as church accept the grace of God freely given to all; it is not our grace to give; it is the grace of the Creator. We as church are to be the radical message of God's justice that brings peace when the well being of all creation is cared for.

We as church are to be strong in our convictions which we voice through words of persuasion that appeal to our highest calling, not words of threat or condemnation. This radical behavior as people of faith is different than what we often see in the world; yet, we come together not for the sake of our own egos and individual agendas but because we seek the will of God on earth.

What caught my attention with this last verse about "the guest room" is the symbol of hospitality and openness to relationship. To have a guest room implies one expects to have visitors. The visitors may be old friends or new or rekindled relationships. The guest room implies making space to welcome someone or something to our home. As church the metaphor of "the guest room" means we're always ready and eager to notice the possibility of God visiting us with new people, new ideas, challenges, and radical responsibility as we live out this community of church.

Today we join in the symbol and sacrament of Holy Communion. It is open to everyone because God's grace is given to everyone. We do not judge the worthiness of another at this table of grace. Through our participation here we affirm our relationship with each other and we are saying something more: We are pledging ourselves to the peace, the shalom, the justice work of God in the world. For this table is not only for those we see and touch within this sanctuary today; it is for those outside our walls; it is symbolic of what we as Christians are to do faithfully *every day*--which is to offer God's salutation of grace and peace to a world in need.