

Refresh My Heart

Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33

Ute Molitor, First Congregational UCC in Camden, September 8, 2019

“Refresh my heart in Christ,” Paul writes to Philemon. “Refresh my heart in Christ.” It sounds like Paul is saying, “Come on, give me some of that Gospel love and light. Step into your passion. Let the Spirit have its way with you even more, my friend, so that the resurrection Spirit of Christ can be unleashed in and through your life, brother! Go that extra mile, keep going deeper!” What is the opportunity and challenge that Paul is raising specifically to his friend Philemon to go deeper? Philemon is being challenged by Paul to give up his supposed “possession” of another human life. Paul is asking Philemon to release his “slave” Onesimus from bondage and bring his own faith, words, and actions into greater harmony. This letter is a stark reminder that slavery was alive and well during Jesus’ and Paul’s time and it is even today. It is also a powerful invitation to look at where and how we need to be refreshed in Christ and refresh each other!

I am struck by the way Paul is overtly trying to avoid coercing someone to let go of the power of coercion over another human life. His appeal is to Philemon’s heart and conscience and Paul pulls out every rhetorical stop to unleash a greater harmony in Philemon. Paul begins his letter with thanksgiving and praise for the life-giving generosity that is already pouring forth through Philemon. Paul is writing from an actual jail cell because he has once again been put behind bars for preaching the Gospel. Paul knows the intricacies of freedom or the lack thereof. Notice though that Paul does not call himself the prisoner of a secular power but a prisoner of Christ Jesus (9). He is stating clearly that nobody outside of Christ and Christ’s love holds power over him. Paul is modeling in his actions and words that he gladly and freely yields to this greater power and gives himself over to it in complete vulnerability and loyalty. As the poet David

Whyte writes, “Real, undying loyalty can never be legislated or coerced; it is based on a courageous vulnerability that invites others to follow your example to a frontier conversation whose outcome is yet in doubt.”¹

Paul is modeling his own life on Jesus, the Christ, who lived with courageous vulnerability and undying loyalty to love. Christ kept and keeps pouring himself out in love – another term for this is kenosis.² Christ models the inverse logic of saying that we find our lives by giving our lives away. We become free when we bind ourselves. If we are to belong to another, it is to the very force and power that gives itself to all of us with every breath we take. If we are to be possessed by another it is to belong to the one known as the one who always sets the captives free. This is the paradoxical wisdom of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.³ Correspondingly, Cynthia Bourgeault describes our task as Christians in this way, “Our only truly essential human task here, Jesus teaches, is to grow beyond the survival instinct of the animal brain and the egoic operating system into the kenotic [self-giving/ self-emptying] joy and generosity of full human personhood. His mission was to show us this.”⁴

Despite all of his generosity, Philemon is still bound because another human being is bound up as his possession and not yet fully free to live into his own calling. This reflects Philemon’s old operating system. In order to help Philemon transform and go against the grain of his own culture, Paul refers to Onesimus as Paul’s “own heart.” Paul expresses his love for Onesimus as that of a father and calls Philemon his own brother and a partner in their shared work, thereby

¹ David Whyte, *Crossing the Unknown Sea: Work as a Pilgrimage of Identity* (New York: Riverhead Book, 2001) 129.

² In the Christ hymn in Philippians 2:7, we hear that he emptied himself and took on the form of a slave.

³ As Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians, “For freedom Christ has set you free. Stand firm therefore and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery (Gal 5:1).”

⁴ Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom of Jesus* (Boston: Shambhala, 2008), 106.

shifting the imagery and language of relationality from ownership to intimate belonging and collaboration. Only in this new frame of reference can Onesimus as a brother in Christ truly become “useful,” as Paul writes (11). I don’t think Paul is speaking in purely utilitarian terms. Rather, he is referring to what can be unleashed in the human slave Onesimus when he is freed to choose his true loyalties and convictions which belong to Christ and to serve Christ in the world. To this end, Paul calls on Philemon to listen deeply, which is the actual meaning of the word “obedience” (ob-audire, 21). He hopes that Philemon will act freely in a faithful way that will refresh Paul’s heart, and his own heart in the process, by setting Onesimus free.

Onesimus may serve as a kind of archetype of a person who is bound and waiting to be set free because others have been the source of pain and oppression and/or because the roots causes and symptoms of trauma still have a hold on them. I sense in Onesimus’ character this welling up of desire to blossom into his own calling and belonging more fully. With this in mind, I would like to again share a story from David Brooks’ book *The Second Mountain* which represents the desire of one person to transcend negative messages and suffering that have held him bound. In this case, the person who becomes a small part of the story of healing and moving into greater freedom is a stranger. Together, they address oppressive experiences that can have the power to bind a person for their whole life.

Mary Gordon started the *Roots of Empathy* project in Ontario, Canada.⁵ Once a month, a parent takes a baby to a classroom to help the children in the class watch the baby and grow in empathy – the capacity to feel with another and themselves. Together, teacher, parent and

⁵ This story is told in David Brooks, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life* (New York: Random House, 2019), 276.

students observe and talk about what the baby is doing. The baby may be trying to crawl or reach out for a toy. They also watch loving interactions between baby and parent to see what secure and healthy attachment can look like. They learn to watch and name emotions in the baby and in themselves. One of the observing children in a school was Darren who had witnessed terrible violence as a young child and grown up in the foster care system since age 4. Darren was much bigger than anyone else in the class because he had been failing school and was already two grades behind.

One day, Darren asked to hold the baby. The mom was a bit scared for her baby at first because Darren looked so big and even a bit scary to her. She decided to take a risk and went ahead and let him hold her child. As it turned out, Darren was really tender with the baby. He went to a quiet corner of the classroom to a rocking chair. The baby snuggled comfortably into his chest. After a while, Darren returned the baby to the mother and asked quite innocently and sincerely, "If nobody has ever loved you, do you think you could still be a good father?"

What a tender and vulnerable witness. Can you hear how much this young person who probably looks destined for "failure" on paper, and already has seen a life-time of suffering, is trying to break free from debilitating stories? My heart is refreshed by Darren's tenderness, by his capacity to rejoice over, participate in, and grow from another child's fortune of being loved. My heart is refreshed by the fact that he dared to ask to hold the child, that he dared to ask if there was hope for him who had been yearning all his life to be held in the same way. My heart is refreshed by Darren's dreaming of being a father someday who would love and serve his own children, pouring himself out for them. My heart is refreshed by a mother who was

willing to give of her time and put faith in another child to hold her own in order to grow and strengthen the roots of empathy instead of violence and coercion.

I hear in the commitment to this growth a loyalty to a higher vision. Let me repeat the quote from David Whyte: “Real, undying loyalty can never be legislated or coerced; it is based on a courageous vulnerability that invites others to follow your example to a frontier conversation whose outcome is yet in doubt.”⁶ I pray that we may all, as individuals and as a community, grow in courageous vulnerability and dare to ask how our hearts need to be refreshed in Christ even when we cannot know the outcome. May we dare to ask what we must let go of to grow into a deeper harmony with our values and what we can do to help set ourselves and others free by the grace of God. All thanks be to God.

⁶ David Whyte, *Crossing the Unknown Sea: Work as a Pilgrimage of Identity* (New York: Riverhead Book, 2001) 129.