

September 8, 2019 – Philemon 1-21

Addition by subtraction. Have you ever heard that expression before? If you haven't, it might sound like an oxymoron, but it's really not.

You might use it, for example, in reference to an incompetent coworker. “Did you hear so-and-so was fired?” “Yeah. Boy, was that addition by subtraction.” The coworker is gone, but the company is actually better off now.

It gets used in relationships too. “Did you hear so-and-so broke up with such-and-such?” Good for her. Addition by subtraction.” That person's significant other is gone but, in your opinion, they're better off without them.

You get the idea, I think. The removal or departure of one person actually improves the situation of another. They've gained something by subtracting someone.

What I find interesting, though, is that, whether or not we use the phrase itself, the Church often tries to operate in this fashion. Someone in the congregation becomes a nuisance to us. Someone becomes offensive or irritating or downright hurtful. And we start hoping, praying, that they'll just disappear.

That they'll become yet another name in our membership rolls who just stopped showing up to church. Who quietly transferred out and never came back. Who just disappeared for reasons we neither know... nor care about.

And when that happens, we breath a sigh of relief. They're gone. I don't have to deal with them anymore. Addition by subtraction. We're better off without them.

I know, it sounds horrible when I actually describe it in detail like that. But I have feeling most of you, if not all of you, have done it at some point. It's human nature to feel relief when a problem goes away. Even if that “problem” was a person.

St Paul is dealing with this very phenomenon in our Epistle lesson. This is the book of Philemon. And I say book because it is virtually the entire book. Philemon is one of the shortest books of the Bible. Only 335 words long in the original Greek. Just 25 verses in our Bibles. And we've got 21 of them right here.

It's so short and so pragmatic that you might even wonder why it's in the Bible at all. At first glance, it doesn't look like there's much meat and potatoes theology going on here. Just a short letter of St Paul's, mediating a minor dispute in an unknown church. Why bother reading it? Well, the answer, as you might have guessed, is that there's more here than you might realize.

Paul addresses this letter to four different recipients. First and foremost, to a man named Philemon. We don't know much about Philemon. We know he was a Christian and there's an indication later that Paul himself shared the Gospel with Philemon and brought him into the faith. We also know that he was probably fairly wealthy, although we'll get into that in just a second.

Paul also addresses this letter to a woman named Apphia. We know almost nothing about her, but the fact that she's addressed alongside Philemon means she's likely his wife. He also addresses it to a man named Archippus. Archippus is described by Paul as a “fellow soldier,” which is a term he usually reserves for clergy. So Archippus is probably their local pastor.

And finally he addresses it to “the church in your house.” In other words, he's hosting a house church. Which means he has a house large enough to host a house church. Which makes him a really, really important guy in this congregation.

But there's one other person involved in this letter. A slave named Onesimus. And he is really the reason for this letter.

You see, Onesimus has committed a crime against his master, Philemon. What that crime was isn't spelled out for us, but it apparently cost Philemon a fair sum of money. Perhaps he stole from him. Perhaps he damaged some of his master's property, either by neglect or maybe even malice. Whatever the case, he has run away from home and arrived at St Paul's doorstep.

And, at this point, it looks an awful lot like Philemon is ready to wash his hands of him. A slave who damages your property isn't worth much as a slave. A slave you can't trust isn't worth much as a slave. A slave who runs away from his master isn't worth much as a slave. Onesimus has run away and Philemon has simply said, "Good riddance. Addition by subtraction."

What Philemon doesn't know is that Onesimus has run away to St Paul. And in just the short time they've been together, Paul has this slave converted to Christianity. Paul says that he has become a "father" to Onesimus, and Onesimus is his "child," which are terms he usually uses for the people he has personally baptized.

Which changes nothing and everything at the same time. It changes nothing because Onesimus is still guilty of a crime. He still owes Philemon payment for the damage he has caused. And, as distasteful as it is for us to think about, he is still a runaway slave. Which is another crime all on its own.

But in another sense, this changes everything. Because Onesimus is not someone that Philemon can just forget about. He is not someone that Philemon can just angrily write-off from his life and be happy that he's gone. He is not someone about whom Philemon, or the congregation who meets at his home, can simply say, "Good riddance. Addition by subtraction."

No, Onesimus is a brother in Christ. Onesimus is baptized with that same Spirit-filled water that Philemon and his household are baptized with. Onesimus is washed with the same blood that has washed all the saints who meet in Philemon's home.

Which means, no matter what, Onesimus still has value. And Paul can see that value. Paul has experienced that value. He tells Philemon that he would love to keep Onesimus with him. The name "Onesimus" means "useful" in Greek, and Paul plays on that to say how useful Onesimus has become to him.

Paul love Onesimus. He sees value in Onesimus. Christ loves Onesimus. Christ sees value in Onesimus. And that new identity in Christ, experienced through the love of the apostle has changed Onesimus for the better. Before, he may have been a useless slave. But now, he is a very useful brother in Christ.

Which is how Paul wants Philemon to treat him. As a brother. As a beloved brother. He wants Philemon to treat Onesimus like Philemon would treat Paul himself.

And Paul is willing to pay whatever is necessary to see that happen. He is willing to pay whatever damages Onesimus caused, whatever debt Onesimus owes, to see this brother returned to his home. To his family. To his church.

Martin Luther loved the book of Philemon. Because what he saw in it was not just a lesson on compassion and forgiveness. He saw a living parable of the Gospel.

In Luther's words, we are all Onesimus. We have all been disobedient slaves to our Lord. We have hurt ourselves. We have hurt our neighbors. We have stolen from our master. We have run from him in fear. Hidden from him in shame, like Adam and Eve in the Garden. And we owe him a debt we can never repay.

God should have written us off entirely. Condemned us all to hell. Pretended like we never existed. He was better off without us, that's for sure. It would have been addition by subtraction.

But instead, Christ has received us as a friend. He has baptized us in his blood. He has paid our debt. He has said that we are loved and valued far beyond what our sinful lives would indicate. And he wants nothing more than to see us brought home. Brought back into the loving arms of our Creator. Our Master. Our God.

We are all Onesimus. None of us deserve to have our debt paid. None of us deserve the grace we have received. And yet, Christ paid that debt freely. He poured out that grace abundantly.

And he asks us forgive the debts of others as we have been forgiven. He asks us to pour out grace with the same abundance that we have received it. He asks us to never say, "Addition by subtraction."

Especially about a brother or sister in Christ. For they always have value. Value to us. Value to the Lord. And value to his Church. Amen.