

I worked at a camp for a few years, and every year we had a kid who would run away, we'd start a search and find them huddled in a field hidden in the wheat or barley because they didn't realize that home was at least 150 kms away. They'd come back and it was no big deal.

But for Onesimus, a slave who ran away from his master Philemon, running away was not "no big deal".

If you were a runaway slave and you came back, it was acceptable for your master to whip, brand, attach a metal collar to your neck or kill or crucify you. Slaves were considered worthless, nothing, sub-human.

Onesimus ran away, found his way to Paul and begins to follow the way of Christ.

But then Paul sends Onesimus home with this short little letter which was to be read in the presence of the church meeting in Philemon's home.

Most of us would rather avoid situations like this. We imagine if we squirrel things away and pretend nothing went wrong the problem will resolve itself. But when we do this, it's hard to find healing, there is an elephant in the room.

And so Onesimus goes. Letter in hand.

The letter starts out so nice! Philemon! I always give thanks for you! I gain so much joy and encouragement from the great work you're doing! I hope you continue to grow in living out the way of Christ in your life and community. We're amazing partners in this gospel thing! You are in my beloved community!

Once Paul has made sure Philemon knows he loves him and values him, that he's in Philemon's corner, he then brings up Onesimus.

And he says about Onesimus:

Here is my son. I'm like a father to him. He is so useful to me. I am sending you my very own heart. I'd like him back! He is dear to me.

Paul then goes even further to say: he is now you're brother in Christ. The Holy Spirit flows through him and you are family. You are bound to him and he to you.

Which would've been shocking and counter cultural! My slave!
My brother?!?!

Though society says he deserves and allows you to beat and kill this your slave, what will you do with the knowledge that he is your brother? Can you enslave your own family?

Paul is saying: when you Philemon look at Onesimus, you must see him through my eyes. You must see him as you'd see me, treat him as you'd treat me.

NT Wright says it like this:

Paul has one arm around Onesimus and one arm around Philemon. Modelling the message which he has preached—the reconciling love of God in Christ with arms outstretch on the cross to male and female, slave and free. Standing between heaven and earth reconciling us to God. And Paul says: if he owes you anything, put it on my account.

2 Corinthians 5:18-19

¹⁸ ... God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

Paul is trying to help Philemon and the church there work out what Christ's ministry of reconciliation means in their own life and household! what it might mean to live out the reality that in Christ there is no: Greek or Jew, Male or female, slave or free. (Galatians 3:28 and Colossians 3:11). What it means that your enemy is your brother.

Perhaps it would've been nicer for Paul to come out and say: get rid of this unjust thing called slavery. But the whole Roman world was tied to slavery like we are to cars.

And so instead Paul is reframing how the church and Philemon see fellow humans by helping them reframe how they see this one runaway slave Onesimus.

He is:

Reordering their understanding of others: helping them know they cannot see people for the profit they'll gain us and treat them as subhuman. But as brothers, on the same level playing field.

Helping them work through what it means to love the runaway slave rather than treat them with violence and giving them "what they deserve" even if society allows for it.

But instead...they are bound together...brothers, family. Both beloved by God. and if this slave Onesimus is, what of the rest of them? What does the ministry of reconciliation mean for them?

Paul makes Philemon and the church there confront and wrestle with what it means to live out the way of Christ.

You'll notice in all the stories after the resurrection. After humans killed and slaughtered Jesus, it would make the most sense if when he appeared in all those secret rooms, on the road to Emmaus, and on the beach next to the disciples that Jesus would tear right into them, give them what they deserve, or sing "forget you!"

At least that's what the world tells us to expect, but instead Jesus comes and says: PEACE! Don't be afraid. I forgive you. Any debt you have to pay, put it to my account. Here's some food! I am in relationship with you.

What does it mean to receive peace like that from Jesus and then give that same peace to others?

NT Wright says: "Something new is happening. Household by household. Reconciliation happens. A new way of doing things. We've never thought of living like that. When Rome was stamping Christianity out. People were looking after each other, forgiving, and saying: there's a new way to be human. A way of peace, hope and love."¹

¹ NT Wright, Course on Philemon

I pray none of us ever have a slave, or treat someone as if they are subhuman—that's more likely. Or that we value profit more than the well-being and holy treatment of those who work for us or around us.

But we do have relationships in our households, with our employees and coworkers. We have relationships with friends, siblings, in-laws and these ordinary places, our own households of faith, friends and family are the very we learn to extend peace, kindness and forgiveness.

When we meet together on Sundays we usually greet one another. In many churches this is called "Passing the Peace". Some of you will remember how for about a year we invited you to say: The peace of Christ be with you and also with you.

Some of you did it, but many of you found it awkward and either loudly or quietly refused ☺

The reason it's called the passing of the peace is because we're passing the peace of the Great Peacemaker—we're being ambassadors of the ministry of reconciliation in that moment.

We reach over the pews to the people around us and look them in the eye, we shake their hand and extend peace to the one who:

Offended or criticized you,
 you spread rumors about,
 ripped you off on a sale or who you ripped off,
 gets under your skin,
 kid from school who ignores you,
 is going on a vacation you can never afford.

In this moment we're telling the story: When I look into the face of my enemy.....I see my brother, my sister.

We're training as peacemakers so peace, forgiveness and kindness become embedded in our character and it flows out of us naturally in every ordinary moment of our lives.

You may notice that it's easy to speak of loving others when they're far away from us. (different race or country), but it's much harder to love and be

ministers of reconciliation to those who live close to us—many of you are finding this out as you see only your household.

We don't learn to be peacemakers and reconcilers and forgivers from afar, but by practicing it close to home....in our own homes.

The ministry of reconciliation is worked out in our everyday life and ordinary moments—of kindness, love and forgiveness offered in small moments to our coworkers, employees, teachers, friends, parents, in laws, siblings or spouses:

To the one

we resent,
we've offended,
we've created into an enemy because of a passing
remark,
we think owes us more than we got from them,
we fought with because of the piling up of small
annoyances.

In my experience, honestly, offering forgiveness, peace, not holding grievances against each other is hard. "It takes a lot of bravery to lay down the sword first"² and to not give someone what they deserve.

I've found sometimes I need someone else along with the Holy Spirit to help me figure out what it looks like in a complicated or unsafe situation.

When we practice these things in small ways, we're practicing for bigger moments when it might be harder because the hurt is deeper or something's tougher to take responsibility for.

(most of us have heard the story of Anne Frank forgiving (dude). We can't imagine doing the same....but I'm guessing she was first trained on the smaller things—she had a life time to get to the big moment)

² *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life*, Tish Harrison Warren, page 90

“In Christian worship we are reminded that peace [reconciliation] is homegrown, beginning on the smallest scale, in the daily grind, in homes, churches and neighborhoods. Daily habits of peace or habits of discord spill into our city, creating cultures of peace or cultures of discord.”³ (Tish Harrison Warren)

Just as Paul started small, with one household and the church that met there, letting this new way of living and thinking spread throughout the entire Roman Empire.

Just as Wilberforce and slavery...

So too our small actions of peace and forgiveness and reconciliations spill over into the world. Not just to our brother and sisters in Christ.

Over the past 6 weeks of pandemic we've seen how we're bonded to everyone—not just our brothers and sisters in Christ. But also to plight of:

janitors, those experiencing homelessness, temporary foreign workers, the rich and famous, Amazon delivery drivers.

Would we let our brothers and sisters be treated the ways they're being treated??

What if our small ordinary actions of peace and forgiveness could sow a new way of being human together?

What if this new way of being human modelled after the ministry of reconciliation we have in Christ—this way of offering grace, peace, love, kindness and forgiveness to our households, our employees and employers, our families—that could spread just as prolifically as COVID and widespread. What if this became just as catching? What kind of transformation would be possible through the power of the HS and our small actions?

May you know the peace, forgiveness and reconciliation of Christ—our peacemaker—so that out of the deep peace, forgiveness and reconciliation you have received, you may feel the freedom and courage to extend it to everyone you know. Amen.

³ *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life*, Tish Harrison Warren, page 96