

News of a potential vaccine for the Coronavirus offers hope for the coming months. Meanwhile, we are in our 8th month of limited travel and movement. Even with limits to where we can go, we can still work to spread the Good News to others as we cautiously guard our movements to limit the spread of the virus. From prison in Rome the Apostle Paul continued to reach beyond the confines of his situation to share the good news and set the captives free.

In the short letter of Paul to Philemon, Paul writes from his prison cell to a slave owner in Colossae. Human slavery was accepted 2000 years ago as an institution. We see it as a moral evil today that is gravely wrong, but there was no great movement for social reform at the time. Thus, Paul's letter asking Philemon to grant freedom to his slave is quite out of the ordinary given the cultural context.

Onesimus had run away from his master and come to Rome. Paul taught him the faith and baptized him as a Christian. With baptism, we often say that we have been freed from slavery to sin and become a new creation in Christ. Paul takes this one step further. He writes to Philemon, the owner of the slave Onesimus, and asks him to physically do what has already happened on a spiritual level. Free Onesimus from the bonds of slavery.

Onesimus probably had friends and family back in Colossae and it would be very natural for him to want to reestablish those ties. But to return home would subject him to both punishment and a return to life as a slave. So, Paul uses persuasion rather than outright ordering Philemon to choose the most honorable thing.

Paul asks Philemon to see Onesimus as a brother Christian who can do more to spread the faith than any mere slave could. I, Paul, treasure his human worth and I would like you Philemon to do the same. If you are worried about suffering economic loss, then I, Paul, will be more than happy to reimburse you for any loss you feel you may suffer.

If we recall Paul's own slavery to sin, we get a sense of history repeating itself. As a zealous Jew, he used to persecute Christians and was blind to his own sin. Saul looked on as Stephen was stoned to death. "Stephen... called out, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he fell to his knees and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them'; and when he said this, he fell asleep" (Acts 7:59-60). Saul was complicit in the murder of Stephen, but Stephen forgave him and all of his persecutors. The one who offered to pay the price for Saul's sin is Jesus Christ. He suffered and died on the cross for each one of us. And let us not forget the actual conversion of Saul. He was struck down, blinded, and questioned by Jesus, "Why are you persecuting me?" (Acts 9:4). Saul was led to Damascus and the Lord asked Ananias to lay hands on him. Hesitant because of Saul's reputation, but trusting in the Lord, Ananias helped Paul to see and then taught him the faith that he might truly see and understand.

Stephen forgave Saul. Ananias healed his blindness and taught him the faith. The two cooperated with Jesus to set Paul free. In the case of Onesimus, Jesus sets him free through baptism. Paul was the teacher and the minister of the sacrament of baptism. Paul asks Philemon to forgive any debt the slave owed him and set him free. If this is an obstacle for the slave owner, then Paul promises to pay the debt.

If we reflect on our own lives, we should be able to acknowledge great sins in our lives that have been forgiven not only by God but by friends and neighbors who have responded to God's love, forgiven us, and taught us a better way. Each of us has been liberated even if we are currently isolated or locked in at home. We all owe a debt to Jesus and ought to be willing to pay it forward by helping others to learn about God and to experience freedom from the sins of their past.