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Sermon
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Park Congregational Church
Worcester, Massachusetts

“The Worth of Work”

Scripture Texts: Colossians 3:22-4:1
Philemon 8-22

Dear people of God, Labor Day is one of those fuzzy holidays about which we're not sure how it all got started. The story goes like this.

You may have heard of Pullman cars, those luxurious train cars made by the Pullman Company. Most of the Pullman workers lived in the south side of Chicago that went by the name of Pullman, after the owner of the company, Mr. George Pullman, who also owned the local bank, school, and shops of that section of the city. He even rented or leased the homes. You didn't *have* to live there, but workers caught on rather quickly that it was probably a smart idea.

The stock market had recently crashed, and so, Mr. Pullman decided to cut back on wages and lay off quite a few workers. But he didn't reduce their rents. When the workers complained, they were ignored. Pullman said that he was only making 3% on the planned

community that he tightly controlled. He defended his actions by stating that he had an obligation to his shareholders.

When the workers tried to unionize, Pullman said they could join any union they wanted except for the recently formed American Railway Union. Many of the disgruntled workers decided to join that union anyway, but Pullman refused to recognize them or negotiate with them. And so the American Railway Union called for a strike, which at first was unsuccessful. But then the union's leader, Eugene Debs, who would eventually run for President of the United States on the Socialist ticket, changed strategies and decided to halt the movement of Pullman cars on the railroads. This tactic worked as sympathy strikes managed to stop rail traffic across the country.

This was the first time in this nation that organized labor was able to show any muscle. After President Grover Cleveland called the army in to quash the strike, which resulted in the killing of some union workers and the wounding of many more, the strikers were forced to back down and to once again allow the trains to run freely. Nevertheless in that year, 1894, in an effort to conciliate organized labor after the strike, President Cleveland and Congress designated Labor Day as a federal holiday.

The obvious date for the holiday would have been May 1, International Workers Day or May Day. But that day commemorated another ugly labor strike that took place in Chicago several years earlier, the Haymarket Affair, which also took the lives of people. There were just too many bad memories of that episode, and so, President Cleveland and Congress chose the first Monday in September to honor workers.

The main issue in the Haymarket Affair was the advocacy of an 8-hour work day, which most of us take for granted today. Sounds like a reasonable request, doesn't it? Why is it that those who have had the money and possessed the influence in society have not historically seen it that way? Must these disputes always end in violence?

The apostle Paul 2000 years ago wanted to influence someone more powerful than he was and with a lot more money. His name was Philemon. He was the head of a house church in the city of Colosse. No doubt he was a wealthy and powerful man. He owned a slave, Onesimus, who ran away. Paul is a prisoner in Rome when he meets Onesimus. Onesimus converts to the Christian faith under Paul's guidance. Nevertheless Paul tells Onesimus to return to his master, Philemon, because it's the right thing to do. But Paul at the same time decides to write a letter to Philemon, which basically tells him, with much tact and

diplomacy, to set his slave, Onesimus, free. Wow! That's a big request. If Philemon were to agree, he would suffer a financial, personal, and social cost. If he frees Onesimus, what would his family, friends, and fellow slaveholders think? Will they think he's a pushover, a doormat, a Caspar Milquetoast?

Well, we can learn three things from the great apostle's approach.

First, Paul is appealing to his own character and relationship with Philemon. Paul's reputation quickly spread throughout the Christianized world at that time, and though not everyone approved of the things that he preached and accomplished, no one could call him a phony. Paul was the real deal. He believed with all his heart that God had called him to be the apostle to the Gentiles, and he devoted his entire life to that cause. In fact, when he writes the Letter to Philemon, he's sitting in chains for that cause. It doesn't matter that Philemon is a more powerful person in society. Paul nevertheless speaks to him with authenticity, reminding him that he too has a master in heaven to whom he is accountable. It would have been very easy for Paul to command Philemon directly to release Onesimus from his slavery on the basis of his authority as an apostle. But isn't it better if people come to the right decision by themselves rather than having it forced upon them? Paul sees his task in

writing to Philemon, not to demand that Philemon carry out his order, but rather, to show him why the right thing to do, that thing pleasing to God, is to set Onesimus free.

Second, Paul is wise enough to know that he can't offer Philemon anything of material value. But he can offer him something that money can't buy. Paul is Philemon's spiritual father. He organized the missionary endeavor that founded the church in Colosse, a church largely comprised of Gentiles. All the spiritual growth of that church, and more importantly in Philemon's personal life has its root in Paul's preaching of the Gospel to the Gentiles. Paul knows that he has earned the right to be heard. He's offering his opinion, but it's an opinion that carries a lot of weight because Paul has invested much in his relationship with Philemon.

Finally, Paul knows that he must pick his battles. We must all learn to pick our battles in life. Life is too short. All of us can think of hundreds of things that irritate us or that we think is wrong. We can't spend precious time attempting to alleviate all of them. We must set the issue, the time, and the conditions for victory in order to achieve a realistic goal. In Paul's case, the issue is slavery. The time is after Philemon has had a chance to cool down over the situation of his slave's having run away. And the goal is that Philemon should decide on his own to set

Onesimus free.

Did Paul's strategy work? We need to answer that question in two ways. First, did it work in persuading Philemon to free Onesimus? And second, did it work in the course of history to persuade people that slavery is wrong?

The answer to the first question is, "We don't know for sure." But an answer might be found by studying Ignatius of Antioch. Ignatius was the third bishop of Antioch. He wrote a series of letters that have been preserved as an example of very early Christian theology. He says in his Letter to the Ephesians, "I received, therefore, in the name of God, your whole congregation in the person of your bishop, Onesimus, a man of great love, whom I pray you by Jesus Christ love and imitate. Blessed be the one who gave you such an excellent bishop and made you worthy of him."

Paul writes his Letter to Philemon in the early 60s AD. Ignatius was martyred sometime during the first two decades of the 2nd century. Assuming Onesimus was young when he escaped, he could very well be the Onesimus mentioned as Bishop of Ephesus who visited Ignatius in prison in Rome some 40 or 50 years later.

If true, isn't that a wonderful rags to riches story? The runaway

slave becomes bishop. And all because the apostle Paul used his spiritual skill to persuade Philemon to set Onesimus free.

In regard to the second question, “Did Paul’s Letter to Philemon work in the course of history to persuade people that slavery is wrong?”

Unfortunately the answer to that is, for the most part, “No.” For centuries Christians have claimed that the Bible, and Paul specifically, supports slavery. Does not Paul say clearly in both his letters to the Ephesians and Colossians that slaves should obey their masters? If Paul was so much against slavery, why didn’t he just command Philemon, “I demand that you set Onesimus free”? Many Southern slaveholders in the 18th and 19th centuries said, “Look, Paul meets a runaway slave and sends him back to his master. He never says that his master should set him free. He just says to be good to him.”

This is where we should be very careful how we interpret the Bible. A lot of people are lazy and just want the Bible to tell them what to do in straightforward language. But God would much more prefer that we realize for ourselves why we should obey the directives in the Bible. That’s why attending Bible Study is so important. God’s Word is more meaningful when we realize its truth for ourselves and through our own experiences. It’s more significant to our lives when we don’t impose a

simplistic literal interpretation on all of it.

I don't believe that Paul really is advocating for the institution of slavery. But in order to arrive at that conclusion, it takes a very careful reading of what he says on the subject.

First of all we should notice that in his letters to the Ephesians and Colossians, Paul respects the dignity of the one who has the less power by addressing those persons first; he addresses the slave before the master, the children before their parents, the wives before their husbands. We can't appreciate today how revolutionary that was. People didn't address slaves as humans worthy to think for themselves in biblical times. But Paul does. Their masters simply ordered them to do their daily work. But in his Letter to the Colossians, the revered apostle addresses slaves as humans on the same level as their masters. And in fact Paul expends four times as many verses speaking to the slaves compared to their masters. It's almost as if Paul believes the slaves are more important to address. Paul reminds them that they too are called upon by God to take responsibility for their position in society as meaningful before God. Paul is treating those who have no legal or moral status in their culture as moral agents and decision-makers totally apart from their masters.

It has taken our society a long time to realize this truth that Paul

knew already 2000 years ago. One hundred and fifty years ago, Americans still held slaves. One hundred years ago, women couldn't vote. Fifty years ago, certain lunch counters and rest rooms were for whites only.

Despite the story of the slave Onesimus rising to become Bishop of Ephesus, as recently as 150 years ago many still could not imagine that those born in poverty could aspire to positions of leadership in the church. When he was a young man, Thomas Hardy, one of my favorite novelists, considered going into the priesthood. He was discouraged, in part, because he was a poor young man from a working family. The fact that he wasn't encouraged by the Bishop of Salisbury, because of his inferior social standing, was a basis for Hardy's cynical comment: "To succeed in the Church, people must believe in you, first of all, as a gentleman, secondly as a man of means, thirdly as a scholar, fourthly as a preacher, fifthly, perhaps as a Christian--but always first as a gentleman." Imagine the elegant sermons that the author of *Tess of the D'urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure* could have written? We'll never know because Hardy was demoralized at an early age from pursuing the ministry.

Fifty years from now, what will our descendants be saying about us? What new dream is God trying to cram into our tiny minds?

Perhaps the reason an 8-hour work day had to be decided with clubs and guns and blood is because the church failed to influence wisely and well. It failed to understand what Paul was really saying. The Letter to Philemon is one sustained argument to persuade the rich man, the man with power, to make the right choice.

Did it work? In addition to Ignatius of Antioch's comments about Onesimus becoming a bishop, the fact that we have Paul's Letter to Philemon in our New Testament today is another piece of evidence in favor of Philemon freeing Onesimus. Why do I say that? Remember that this was a personal letter that Paul sent to Philemon. This was not a letter like Romans or 1 Corinthians, or Galatians that Paul wrote to churches and that were to be read in public worship services. The fact that this letter was preserved, as embarrassing as it must have been to Philemon, probably points in the direction that he did indeed free Onesimus. He freed Onesimus because he was convinced that Paul was right. He and Onesimus were now brothers in the Lord. Onesimus must be free to live the life that God had intended for him, that his work also has worth in God's eyes, and must be valued as must be all the work that we do in our own lives. Amen.