

**Philemon Had a Problem**  
The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C  
Philemon 1-21

His name is Philemon.

Philemon.

Over the years, I've heard that name pronounced in many ways. The experts tell me that this New Testament name is pronounced "fuh-LEE-mon."

I've also heard preachers and teacher pronounce it "FILL-a-mon," or "FIGH-LEE-mon."

In fact, one Sunday I preached about the Letter to Philemon, and throughout the sermon I mispronounced the name and kept preaching about "figh-LEE-mon." And after church a little boy told me that he was very excited that I had preached about his "favorite game." I wasn't sure what he meant. And he said, "You know – you preached about Pokemon.

It's not *Pokemon*. It's Philemon. And in today's New Testament passage, Philemon has a problem.

Saint Paul's letter to Philemon is the shortest book in the Bible. It has only 25 verses.

In this short letter, Paul gently but powerfully informs Philemon that Philemon has a problem... and so do *we*.

What's the problem? It's this: If we take Jesus seriously, we'll see that Jesus is at work changing the world – and Jesus wants us to participate in changing the world.

Doing that... is going to be very hard. Because changing the world begins with accepting the reality that, first and foremost, the Lord is going to change us, and change our assumptions, and change everything we thought we could take for granted in this world.

A little background: Paul writes this letter around the year 60 or so. He is in prison for the "crime" of preaching about Jesus. Jesus – who died, and is risen.

Paul has a friend named Pokemon... er, *Philemon*! Paul probably baptized Philemon. So, in a sense, Philemon owes his faith, and his hope for eternal life, to Paul!

Like many people at that time, Philemon owned slaves. One of his slaves, named Onesimus, escaped, and found his way to Paul. What did Paul do? Paul preached to him, and baptized Onesimus, the slave!

A bit later, Paul writes his brief letter to Philemon.

And Paul says: “I am sending Onesimus, your slave, back to you.” Paul says, “I am sending him back to you, not as a *slave*, but more than that – I’m sending him back to you as a beloved *brother in Christ*.” And Paul concludes, “so, welcome Onesimus *as you would welcome me*.”

Are you beginning to see Philemon’s problem?

Philemon and Onesimus – slave owner, slave. Now, they are both baptized brothers in Christ! They worship the same God, they received the same Holy Spirit, they are nourished by the same Eucharist.

In many subtle and not so subtle ways, Paul invites Philemon to understand this point: once Jesus comes into the equation, *everything changes*.

Paul’s message to Philemon is clear: “If you take Jesus seriously, you have to change the way you treat people!”

Jesus has CREATED a problem for Philemon!

How? Well, the whole economic structure of the ancient world was built upon slavery. Almost everyone’s livelihood depended on slavery, one way or another.

Jesus turns this system upside down! Because once a slave and a slave-owner become brothers in Christ, everything *has* to change. Paul said, “Treat him as you would treat me.”

Life was easier before this trouble-making Jesus came along...

As I drive around town, I like to read the electronic signs in front of some Churches. You’ll see signs that say, “Do you have questions? Jesus has answers!” Or, “Are you struggling? Jesus will lift your burden!” From these signs, you get the impression that Jesus came to fix our problems.

But along comes Jesus in this week’s Gospel reading, and he says: “You can’t follow me unless you hate your father and mother, your spouse and children, and your whole life. Oh, and you have to renounce all your possessions.”

Imagine what would happen if I put a big sign out front of my church announcing: “If you want to join St. Mary’s, you must hate your parents, your spouse and your kids, and give us all your money.” What do you think would happen to attendance?

Now, when Jesus says that we have to “hate” our families, we might be hitting a bit of a translation problem. The Greek words Jesus uses can mean, “You have to love me first, love me fully, and then all of your other loves flow from that.”

Some scholars say that the Greek words are about our relationship *priorities*. We must love Christ first. He is our top priority. Then every other love in our life flows from that.

Our love for Jesus must shape our love for everyone else. And that will change how we treat our parents, our spouse, our children. It may create conflicts. It will require that we change how we treat our families, our neighbors, (our slaves), our enemies.

Seems to me that Jesus is creating NEW problems for us!

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus's disciples quickly came to understand – once you take Jesus seriously, he is going to keep causing you problems. And Philemon quickly discovered – once he took Jesus seriously, his whole life, his whole economic and social world, was getting turned around... because now - his slave was his *brother*.

If you go to church hoping that Jesus will *fix* your problems, you may not be paying attention. Each week, the Gospel should create a new problem for you!

Let me give an example. I am a flawed human being. And as a flawed human being, there are, occasionally, members of my congregation who, every time I see them, they get on my last nerve!

Well, if it weren't for Jesus, this wouldn't be a problem! If I were not a Christian and I meet someone I don't like, I can just ignore them, dismiss them, brush them aside. To use our modern term, I could just "cancel" them.

But Jesus has created a problem for me. That parishioner who gets on my nerves: He's a brother in Christ - she's a sister in Christ. And I have to treat them the way I would treat Christ!

Hmm.

How easy life would be if I could just dismiss the people I want to dismiss. Lots of folks do that in our cancel culture.

But Jesus has created a problem. He demands that I treat you the way I would treat Jesus. And that takes work.

When we fail to do what Jesus demands, the world gets fractured. Over 400 years ago the first Africans came to the New World. They arrived on the ironically named "Point Comfort," which we now call "Hampton, Virginia." They came to this New World as slaves.

Think how different our nation's history would be if, from the very beginning, someone had allowed Jesus to give them a problem; if they had stood up 400 years ago and said, "We cannot treat them as slaves – we must treat them as brothers and sisters in Christ."

We still wrestle with the horrible repercussions of our failure to do what the Scriptures demand.

After the Civil War, slavery officially ended, but we got 'creative' in finding new ways to subjugate African Americans. We called them the "Jim Crow" laws. Where were the voices demanding that we treat African Americans like sisters and brothers in Christ?

When Irish immigrants came to this country, they faced violent persecution in the cities of the northeast. When Italians and Poles came here, they faced racial and cultural hatreds.

Today, human trafficking continues. Young people are seized and their lives are stolen.

Doesn't Christ want us to have a problem with that?

Isn't Christ demanding that we treat children in the womb the way that we would treat Christ? Isn't Christ demanding that we treat children at the border the way we would treat Christ? Isn't Christ demanding that we treat the prisoner on death row, the hungry veteran down the street, the family member with dementia, the lonely neighbor, the way we would treat Christ?

If we take him seriously, Jesus and his Gospel will create new problems for us, every time we listen. Oh, and he also creates new opportunities for us to be strengthened to do his work, every time we gather in a community of brothers and sisters who can inspire us to stay faithful. In our church family, we encounter the community where we are nourished for his work through the body and blood of Christ... Christ, whom we should love first and best.

Years ago, a visitor to India saw Mother Teresa cleaning the wounds of a person dying of leprosy. The visitor felt sick to his stomach, and said to Mother Teresa in his Texas accent, "I wouldn't do that for a million dollars."

And Mother Teresa replied, "Neither would I. But I would gladly do it for Christ...."

—*Michael Renninger* © 2022