

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost • September 4, 2016

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Philemon 1-21

“Useful”

I broke the mug.

I'm not entirely sure how it happened. I was emptying the dishwasher when, out of the blue, the mug and its handle decided to part ways while in my hands. I suppose this could have been caused by my herculean strength clashing with the bonds of gravity – or maybe it there was just a matter of how the mug had been put together in the first place. Either way, the mug was done for. What use is a coffee mug without a handle? What use is a coffee mug handle without a mug? Not wanting to let the mug go, I pulled out the super glue. Special super glue, even, one that works on cups and plates and the like. I patched up the mug and reattached the handle. And it worked great – for a day or two. But the handle fell off. So both the handle and mug went into the trash. Useless.

Our nation is now observing Labor Day by enjoying a three-day weekend. According to what I've read, Labor Day in the United States is a “tribute to the contributions workers have made to the strength, prosperity, and well-being of our country.”¹ I suppose that most human beings like to be useful, though, even as people in America might put more attention on a person's usefulness and the contributions they make than they do in other corners of the world.

Have *you* ever felt useless? It's as if you're no good to the people around you; you're not up to the challenge before you. You might have heard someone say something discouraging about you (or to you) and believed it to be true. Or maybe you just thought it yourself when you failed at a task time and again, no matter how much effort you put into it. Uselessness isn't good. Not for a coffee mug, not for a person.

If you're like me, you might try to fix it. That fix might be super glue for a broken handle, but it'll take more than super glue to fix the feeling of uselessness in life. You might try to patch up your brokenness with something that seems like it'll fix the cracks, or at least cover them over, filling yourself with food, with drink, with entertainment. Those temporary fixes don't stick, though. They might last for a while, but they're not doing anything to repair the broken state that made use useless in the first place.

Are you on the run from uselessness?

In today's reading from Paul's epistle to Philemon, you heard about someone who truly had been useless. This weekend, we're breaking from our journey through Luke's Gospel account to read one of Paul's epistles. (And near the whole thing, too! How often can you say that you heard almost an entire book of the Bible during a service?) This epistle is a bit different from the others that you'll see in the New Testament, as it's a personal letter; more like ones that we might see written between friends today. In this letter, Paul makes an appeal to his friend Philemon on behalf of a man named Onesimus.

Onesimus was a runaway slave – and an ironically named one, at that: **Onesimus means “useful” in ancient Greek.** But instead of being useful, Onesimus fled from Philemon's household in the town of Colossae. Somehow, he managed the long and fairly risky journey over to Rome. We don't know for sure, but he likely stole some of Philemon's possessions in order to pay for his travels. He probably hoped to avoid detection in the great city of Rome, because if he were to be caught as a runaway slave, the punishment would be severe. Yet, amazingly, Onesimus comes to know the Apostle Paul, who is under house arrest in Rome. Through Paul, Onesimus comes to hear the good news of Jesus and becomes a Christian. And it just gets better from there.

Paul is writing this letter to Philemon (and the church in Colossae) because he's sending the runaway slave back to his master. At some point in the week ahead, take the time to read through this epistle to see how masterfully Paul does so. Not only does Paul appeal to Philemon's good nature; he also asks that Onesimus' escape and debt (and, presumably, theft) be completely forgiven. As a fellow Christian – one who came to know Christ through Paul, as well – Philemon should receive Onesimus back as not just a slave but as a brother. Paul's argument might even open the possibility that Philemon would even free Onesimus from slavery. But however Onesimus' return might work out, Paul makes it clear that his life in Philemon's household is now transformed: the name “Useful” now truly applies!

¹ <https://www.dol.gov/general/laborday/history>

In His grace, God took the bad situation of a seemingly useless person and turned it completely around. While it was beyond improbable that the runaway slave of one of Paul's converts in Asia Minor should find his way to the Apostle under arrest in Rome, God gave that divine provision. God gave Onesimus faith to believe that he was indeed useful and valued in the Lord's sight. God provided for Paul in his time of captivity by giving him a helper and a friend. And in faith, the runaway slave was even willing to return to household from which he'd run and the master whom he'd wronged.

That's the power of the gospel, the good news of life with God through Christ. It transforms lives like Onesimus' and Philemon's, reshaping human relationships. A master and a slave are made into brothers. Lives that have been broken and useless are made to be something more.

You and I have been like runaway slaves – slaves to self – trying to make an escape with all of God's riches. But as Paul pledged to cover Onesimus' debt to Philemon by having any debt charged to his account, Jesus does the same for you before his Father and our Father. God charges your debt to Jesus on the cross and, in so doing, wipes it out. Jesus sets you free from slavery to sin and slavery to self. This isn't super glue. This isn't a temporary fix that merely joins broken parts together. Jesus gives himself to heal your brokenness and repair the cracks and damage that sin has done in your standing before God and neighbor. Your life and your relationships are transformed at the foot of the cross.

Though Jesus, God removed the irony of Onesimus' name: as Paul wrote, "but now he is indeed useful to you [Philemon] and to me." When God claimed you as His own child in the water of Baptism, He applied Jesus' name to you without any irony. You are, in His sight, a little Christ. You are a member of the household of God. You are a Christian. The person who was once dead in sin, useless, has been made alive and useful by God's grace.

There's something else that you and I can take away from Paul's letter to Philemon, especially in this time where people in America seem to be increasingly put into so many separate categories and classes. As Onesimus went back to Philemon "*no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother[...] both in the flesh and in the Lord,*" consider how you look at other people, whether they're on the television or on your street. As Christians, you and I must always view our fellow Christians "in Christ." Our common identity in Christ overrides all other categories or classes, anything that would pull us apart.

Going out this Labor Day weekend, consider the way you look at and treat other people, especially your brothers and sisters in Christ. Would you think that any of them are useless? Remember Philemon. Remember Onesimus. Because we're united in Jesus' name, we can forgive each other's debts as we have been forgiven. Because we're united in Jesus' name, we can treat each other with love as God loves us. Because we're united in Jesus' name, we are all useful.

Amen.