

Call to Worship

One: O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

All: You know when I sit down and when I rise up;

(motion for everyone to stand, then continue once they have risen)

One: you discern my thoughts from far away.

**All: You search out my path and my lying down, and
are acquainted with all my ways.**

One: Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you
know it completely.

All: You hem me in, behind and before,

One: and lay your hand upon me.

**All: Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so
high that I cannot attain it.**

One: Remain standing and add your voice to the rest of us
in singing to our “Immortal, invisible, God only
wise,” #70 in your hymnal.

Opening Prayer

Almighty God,

to you all hearts are open,

all desires are known,

and from you no secrets are hidden.

Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts

by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit

that we may perfectly love you

and worthily magnify your holy name,

through Christ, our Lord. AMEN

Hymnal #739
Leonine missal, 7th c.

A letter to Philemon

(Pastor:)

We turn now to a letter the apostle Paul once wrote to a man by the name of Philemon. When our forebearers in the faith were deciding long, long ago what to include in this “New Testament” we have received, Paul’s short letter to Philemon made the cut. You will find it placed after the two personal letters of Paul to his understudy, Timothy. However, it is usually tied to Paul’s letter to the Colossians, since a man central to this Philemon letter, Onesimus, is mentioned as someone Paul sent to the Colossian church with this letter (4:9), as well as to the church in Laodicea (4:16). Both Colossae and Laodicea were located in what is today western Turkey. Perhaps this letter to Philemon was in that same mail bag, and maybe Philemon was a prominent member of the Laodicean church. We really don’t know.

What we do know is that Philemon had a slave named Onesimus, who escaped with some of Philemon’s possessions, and wound up in jail – in Ephesus or Rome – where he met another prisoner named Paul. In prison, Onesimus met Jesus through Paul, and became a truly free man in Christ. In a gutsy move, once Onesimus’ jail term was done, Paul sent him back to Philemon with this letter, an epistle meant for the whole congregation. Now, to read this, I need two persons to stand with me – one to portray “Philemon” (someone who is probably still angry at his run-away slave), and “Onesimus,” this slave Paul is sending back with a request. We already have a “scribe,”
(the worship leader who reads *the letter*) someone who has written

down Paul’s words. Let’s hear them, pretending we are the congregation to which Philemon belongs.

[“Paul” stands in the center between the pulpit and lectern facing congregation. “Philemon” and “Onesimus” sit behind the organ.]

¹ Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker,

[“Paul” motions to “Philemon” to come and stand beside him.]

² to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴ When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God⁵ because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. ⁶ I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. ⁷ I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

⁸ For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, ⁹ yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. ¹⁰ I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus,

[“Paul” motions to “Onesimus” to come and stand on the other side of him from “Philemon.”]

whose father I have become during my imprisonment.

¹¹ Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. ¹² I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. ¹³ I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel;

“Paul” turns “Philemon” and “Onesimus”
to face each other in front of him.

¹⁴ but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. ¹⁵ Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, ¹⁶ no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

“Paul” turns “Philemon” and “Onesimus”
to face each other in front of him.

¹⁷ So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸ If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. ¹⁹ I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. ²⁰ Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. ²¹ Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

“Philemon” and “Onesimus” hug.

²² One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you.

²³ Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, ²⁴ and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.

²⁵ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

(Pastor:)

We don't know if Philemon actually did as Paul requested, whether he set Onesimus free and received him as a brother. The fact, however, that Onesimus is mentioned in the letter to the Colossians might argue for this. Furthermore, the name of Onesimus is lifted up in the early church. In the following century, there is a bishop of Ephesus by that name. Most scholars don't think it was the same person. There remains a practice of taking on a new name when someone is called to a high task, like when Jorge Mario Bergoglio took on the name of St. Francis when he became Pope. To this day, Onesimus reminds us of how God sets persons free and uses them in kingdom work. In fact, in Greek the name, Onesimus, means “useful.”

Giving and Receiving

God makes use of us. However, like Philemon, there may be some preparation work that needs to be done before that happens. What needed to change in Philemon, for instance, in order for him to receive his former slave as a brother? How was God molding him?

Our offering just now will be two-fold. The first plate the ushers will pass is for you to place your tithe or other offering. Right behind it will be a bowls with small balls of Play Doh in it. Take one and start working it with your fingers. As we give and receive these offerings, let's sing together # 504, "Have thine own way."

Jeremiah 18:1-11

1 - Look at this small ball of Play Doh in your hand. Like clay, it can be molded into many different shapes. Roll it between your palms (pause) Squish with your fingers (pause) As you do so, listen for God to speak.

2 - *The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord:*

"Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words." So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel.

1 - Place that ball of Play Doh in the center of the palm of one hand, and smash it, really smash it with the palm of the other. (pause) Roll it into a ball and smash it again. (pause) Imagine a potter's wheel. A flat surface, it spins round and round. When molding a piece of pottery, everything depends on how much the potter

has worked the clay ahead of time, and then how well that clay is "thrown" down on the wheel. It must be "thrown" with enough force to make it adhere to the wheel. It also must be "thrown" in the exact center of the wheel. While you do not have a potter's wheel before you, there is this small ball of Play Doh in your hand. Roll it in your hands and smash it again. (pause) Now, squish with your fingers and continue to listen for God to speak.

2 - *The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him. Then the word of the Lord came to me: "Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the Lord. Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it.*

Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the Lord: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings."

Benediction

1 - In a similar fashion, we are like clay in the potter's hand. Melding and molding precedes filling and using. It is important for us, when we share our joys and concerns, to be aware of God's hands, and not just listen for gossip. Some of us in this room or persons connected to us through this sharing, are going through "potter's wheel" times. Bent out of shape, thrown down, our world rearranged by the things we are facing, we need – somehow, someway, in some fashion – to know that God is part of the equation. We seek God's hands.

Other things we share may involve the end result of the potter's work, as we marvel and rejoice in a piece pottery which is something good happening in our lives or in this world. We need to celebrate such things and recognize how God is filling and using these earthen vessels. Therefore, brothers and sisters in Christ, what would you share this day, as clay in the master potter's hands?

May the Lord who has searched and known your heart;
who has tested you
and known your thoughts,
Now lead you in the way everlasting.
Go in peace!

based upon Psalm 139:23-24

adapted from LGVCOB liturgy - 9/5/2010
scripture text from the *New Revised Standard Version*,
copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the
National Council of the Churches of Christ
in the United States of America.
Used by permission. All rights reserved.

unless otherwise stated, all materials here are ©2016 by Peter L Haynes