

## Sermon on Philemon, 19.02.2006

*The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God and the Communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.*

### Text:

8)Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, 9)yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you – I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus – 10)I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whose father I have become in my imprisonment. 11)(Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) 12)I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. 13)I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel; 14)but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own free will. 15)Perhaps this is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, 16)no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. 17)So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. 18)If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. 19)I, Paul, write this with my own hand, I will repay it – to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. 20)Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. 21)Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

### Topic: “Free and yet bound.”

Dear Congregation,

I had this letter to Philemon distributed to you all, as I want you to have another look into the text, also during the sermon. You see already that this letter is very short. It fits onto one page. In the Bible, one can easily overlook it. Some people don't even know that this letter actually exists.

Therefore, I take the opportunity to tell you a little about the content and the circumstances surrounding this letter.

What is it about?

Paul writes a letter to Philemon, whose slave Onesimus has run away. Philemon was a Christian. He was wealthy. He owned slaves in his household. One does not know exactly where he lived, but one knows that it must have been in the vicinity of Ephesus, where Paul sat in prison, when he wrote the letter. Onesimus is sent back to his master Philemon together with this letter.

Onesimus has, presumable, also taken the cashbox along when he fled. Paul mentions something in verse 18: *If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.*

He wants to cover the resulting financial loss himself. In spite of this, the matter remains piquant. Viewed in a purely legal stand, it is like this: Slavery was allowed in the Roman Empire at that time. A slave could only become free if his master gave him freedom. Run away slaves were wanted for arrest. As antique documents prove, a description of the run away slave was published and head money was paid as a reward for apprehending the fugitive. Was a slave caught and given back to his master, he could do with him whatever he wanted. As a rule, the slave was thrown to the wild animals as feed in the circus, or he was tortured, beaten or executed.

The risk is great that Onesimus will meet a similar fate. For even though his master Philemon is a Christian (you can read about that in the verses 4 to 6 at the beginning of the letter), he is bound to the

laws of the Roman Empire. How does it look, if he takes his run away slave back without punishment, as Paul suggest? Philemon would have had to justify this conduct before the other free citizens. Neither Paul nor Onesimus know what Philemon will do. For Onesimus not only his freedom, but his life is at stake.

I hope that you notice what tension there is actually in this letter. This is not a simple problem. Paul faces a conflict; if his letter does not convince Philemon, he is sending Onesimus to his death. I can imagine that it took a while, until Paul had convinced Onesimus to take this risk and to return again. On this short, insignificant letter, depends the life of a person.

Paul formulates, therefore, very skillfully:

- He addresses this letter not only to Philemon, but also to Aphia (was this his wife?), to Archippus, some consider him to be a bishop, and to the small Christian congregation in his house. Paul, therefore, does not deal with this problem of the run away slave as a private matter, but he turns the problem from the beginning to a topic within the Christian congregation.
- Paul does not talk about Onesimus as one would have talked about a slave, namely as a thing that one is sending back to his owner. He talks about him as a son. In this way, Onesimus becomes a member of the Christian congregation, a brother in faith. Onesimus, therefore, is no longer someone who is beneath his master, but he becomes a part of the community, which also unites Paul and Philemon.
- Paul risks his friendship with Philemon for the life of Onesimus: *17) So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.*
- He makes the settlement of the financial loss his own business: *18) If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.*
- And then he also adds quite deftly: *If you take him back, then I will say nothing of your owing me even your own self.*
- Paul makes a deft suggestion: “Now, I would actually keep Onesimus with me, but I do not want to forestall your decision. He would be extremely useful to me.” In plain words, this means: “Listen: simply send him back, then you are rid of him, you can still claim he has run away, and I would have a co-worker who would be more useful to me than to you.”

Is that not brilliant? Philemon can actually do nothing but forgive Onesimus and take him back, or he takes Paul’s suggestion and sends him back.

In any case, Paul declares the question of owning slaves a fundamental question of the Christian community. Is a brother allowed to be the master of a fellow brother? This is the real question that is posed here. And the answer, then and now, must be the same: No, no one can be master of another person, because there is only one master, namely Jesus Christ, whose subjects we all are.

The rights of people and the dignity of people are connected to this question, which must be regarded higher by Christians than every other right, which demands the violation of these rights.

### **How did the story of Onesimus actually end?**

I like to believe what in church history later on was assumed by the church father Ignatius of Antioch († ca. 107-110), that Onesimus returned to Paul and became Bishop of Ephesus later on. That would mean that Paul’s letter was successful, and Onesimus, as his name says, has been useful to the early Christendom, more useful than a slave to his, presumably, very lenient and nice master.

I have given the sermon the title: “Free and yet bound”. There is nothing about which there was so much talk during the last years than about the topic “Freedom”. Everything happening politically and economically, be that the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan, globalization or world trade, or the life of the individual, everything has to do with our modern understanding of “Freedom”. “Freedom is what is supposed to be exported from North America to the entire world. – Since December 18<sup>th</sup>, 1865, there is, officially, no more slavery on this continent. People from all parts of the world come particularly here, in order to live in freedom. Freedom is a valued property.

But I ask myself whether we truly understand what freedom actually is?

In the letter to Philemon, freedom does not exist herein, that a slave is released in the end. It is not even the case that he, who supports the freedom of Onesimus, is himself free; on the contrary, Paul himself is in prison.

Who, then, is free? – Is a person free, when he does not have to serve a master?

Martin Luther has said in his writings of the “Freedom of a Christian Person” (1520) that a Christian is a free master over all things and no one’s subject. And immediately after, in the next sentence, he wrote: A Christian person is a serving slave of all things and everyone’s subject.

This sounds like a contradiction. But what Luther meant is, that there is only one thing that sets people free, and that is faith. And he develops at great length, that there cannot be anything else but the gospel of Jesus Christ, which makes people free, free of all outward forces and inner conditions. At the same time, he says in the second part of his writings very clearly, that this *freedom from faith* moves the person especially towards wanting to serve God in every respect.

He wrote: “*The entire desire of a Christian person consists therein, that he (the person)... also wants to freely serve God in voluntary love.*”

As free as a person can be of superficiality, as submissively, as dependently, he wants to put himself into the service of God. – On the one side boundless freedom through faith, - Luther quotes Paul here continually- on the other side total dependence of his life on God, whom he wants to serve voluntarily and with great desire.

That also is the topic of the letter to Philemon: Absolute freedom through faith, through which one can violate societal guidelines and even laws, when it is about the dignity of people. Love, charity, forgiveness – these are all things which become possible only through faith. This connection is important, if one wants to truly understand the meaning of “freedom”. For today we confuse freedom with the idea that we do not have to care for anything nor anybody. Main thing: I. There is no longer an outward reference point to life, no moral, no ethics, for many also no God, to question the limitless obsession for self-realization. One wants to be free, but no longer take responsibility for others. ‘Everything has to serve me, I am my own master’ – that is the creed of the people of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, if it is true, that only faith can set free, then it is clear that, ultimately, everything else leads into dependence again. – Instead of being free in God through faith, we rather “believe in our health, our success, our money, our power, our reputation, our progress. Instead of thinking about our neighbour, we think of ourselves. We want to increase our freedom permanently. That we hereby curtail the freedom of others permanently does not interest us.

And as sad as it is, but after we have finally acknowledged human rights internationally after long, painful experiences, brand human rights violations and get upset at dictators somewhere else, we have, through our boundless consumption re-introduced the slavery around the world. Our wealth is based on this that

men, women and often enough children must slave away 14 hours per day for our goods, under the most pitiful conditions, without decent pay and without minimal protection for health and life. In the world today, a person has become a thing again, as 2000 years ago. We do not see the human being in our neighbour, whether near or far, it does not matter! The dignity of a person can again be infringed upon. As in the times of slavery, we use people in our century as we please, without consideration, without love, without feeling responsible and without scruples.

Our world needs a letter to Philemon. We must finally realize that everything that we do, that we want for ourselves, indeed, affects other people, too. People who want to be just as free as we do; who are, in God's eyes, just as worthy as we are; who deserve the same respect as we want for ourselves. We do not live in a world with markets and political systems, but in a world full of brothers and sister. Our world does not obey just any unchangeable legality which we cannot influence; but this world is what we make of it. Let us, therefore, make it into a place where we practice love. Whatever others say to persuade us, we are, as Philemon, free, to do this. Amen.

***And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, may keep our hearts and minds in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.***