

“Make Yourself Useful!”

Sermon: Year C, Pentecost 16, Proper 18, Lectionary 23

Texts: The Letter to Philemon, Deuteronomy 30:15–20, Luke 14:25–33

Preached September 8, 2019 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, Illinois

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

“Here. Make yourself useful!” Those were the words that my first boss, Jack Lane, would bark at me, and at all the employees at Eckerd Drugs, back when I was 15 years old. They were usually accompanied by a dust mop being thrust into your hands, or a roll of paper towels and a bottle of Windex. His other favorite expression, lanced your way as he strode past, glaring at you out of the corner of his eye, was, “You got time to lean, you got time to clean.” Jack was a gruff former Marine drill sergeant, recently returned from Vietnam. He had an East Coast accent, which added to the imperative quality of his communication, and this big, bushy ‘70s moustache. His laser focus was on responding to the needs of the customer. And you know, only rarely did I resent him telling me what to do, because I knew that under that gruff exterior was a man who genuinely loved and cared about people, cared about his customers and his employees, and I knew that those barked commands were coming from someone I admired and loved, and who loved me back, so they didn’t feel harsh or coercive. There was relationship there that made that OK. Plus, he made me actually *feel* useful, even as an awkward teenager, made me feel as though somehow I was contributing to something that I was part of along with him. I took on his perspective of concern for the customer, welcoming them as guests. We all want to feel useful, I suspect. We all want to feel like our lives have purpose, and meaning, and that we’re somehow making a difference in the world, that we’re doing something.

It’s not often we get to say we’ve read an entire book of scripture in worship. In the first reading, we heard almost the entire book of Philemon, except the last three verses in which Paul tells them to have a guest room ready for him when he visits next, and adds several “Oh, so-and-so says hi” greetings. It’s an odd little book, a very personal letter from the Apostle Paul written to a friend and brother in Christ. There’s not much theology in it. When we read it, we’re reading somebody’s old correspondence, as though we’ve come across it in a trunk in the attic and are trying to figure out the circumstances based on clues in the text. Basically, it’s a letter that Paul is writing from prison in Ephesus to a friend and fellow Christian named Philemon, who is a wealthy man in Colossae. Both cities are in what is now modern-day Turkey.

The local church Paul had started in Colossae meets in Philemon’s house. It seems that Philemon has a slave named Onesimus. We don’t really know what has happened, but for some reason Onesimus has run away—maybe he had stolen something, or had gotten sideways with his master for being surly and uncooperative, or had been beaten for not doing his job, or was just fed up with being a slave...we don’t really know. We do know Onesimus had not been a particularly helpful slave, because Paul says to Philemon, “formerly he was useless to you.” And that’s kind of ironic, since the name Onesimus literally *means* “useful.”

Whatever it is that he has done or has not done, Onesimus has fled to Paul for protection—kind of like “Olly, olly, otsen free!” In the Roman Empire, a slave owner had the right to kill a slave who had run away. But slaves would sometimes run to someone who might have influence with their master and ask for their protection until things could get sorted out, and the owner couldn’t do much about it as long as the slave was under someone’s protection, as long as that person had higher status than they did. So here’s Paul, sitting in prison, and this runaway slave has journeyed about 125 miles, and suddenly shows up on his doorstep offering to serve him—and apparently also hoping that Paul can intercede for him with his master Philemon and work things out for him. While he’s there, Paul has become very fond of him, and Onesimus has become a believer in Christ Jesus. And apparently in the process, Onesimus has been dramatically transformed, and has become like a loving son to Paul, serving him out of love, to the point Paul would like him to stay and continue to be Paul’s own servant. In developing that relationship, he has become useful, to match his name.

This change has come about not through fear or coercion, not out of being commanded to shape up, but through Paul’s loving acceptance and welcome of somebody who by the reasoning of that social context did not deserve that kind of treatment. Paul loves Onesimus into becoming a follower of Jesus, treats him like his own son. And in that loving relationship, Onesimus discovers what it means to be useful to others. Onesimus discovers faith, discovers relationship, and in those discoveries learns to be useful. This isn’t about Onesimus learning to be a good boy, to be a docile, obedient slave to his master. It’s about him discovering a new way to

relate to people, and thereby learning to find usefulness in serving. And so Paul sends him back to his master, sends him back to be useful, not as a slave, but as a brother in Christ who will work alongside Philemon, serving not only Philemon, but others as well, in doing the good works that Christ calls us to. Paul reminds Philemon that he, Paul, has the right to command Philemon to receive Onesimus back and not punish him...but instead, Paul chooses to appeal to him in love, avoiding coercion. It's all about responding to relationship, and then finding our usefulness to one another.

This life we share in Christ is about relationship with other people. It's about becoming brothers and sisters, and it's about becoming useful, to one another and to our neighbors in the world. We are Onesimus. There's an important verse in the letter that I want to repeat to you: "I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ." For the Apostle Paul, our faith becomes effective when we begin to figure out the good we can do for Christ and in Christ's name. Faith that just sits around in isolation, unconnected to others, is faith that is really not worth much. We discover our usefulness in developing loving relationship with one another, relationship that makes us desire more than anything to be useful and to serve one another.

In the gospel, when Jesus turns and speaks to that crowd following behind him, he is not delivering those words as a harsh requirement, even though that's how we may hear them. All this talk about "hating" your family, all those dear to you, and giving up all your possessions, is not based in threat and coercion. Those are words of stark honesty, words delivered in the context of relationship. Jesus says to us that we are to look at relationships in a new way, with our primary relationship now being based in our relationship with Christ himself, this Christ who has a passion for the work of the Good News in transforming the world. Our relationship to our belongings, our possessions, our money, has to change, as well. Christ is calling us to come follow him, but lets us know up front that it's going to be a costly path...but it is a path that leads to life and wholeness through service to one another and to the world. In finding that desire to be useful to Christ, to be useful to our neighbor, no matter what the cost, we will be choosing life, and we will live more abundantly. We follow Christ no longer as slaves, but as friends—as sisters and brothers, as heirs of the kingdom.

So, sisters and brothers, how is Christ calling you to be useful? Is it by coming to God's Work, Our Hands this afternoon to do projects to serve others, laboring alongside our Catholic and Lutheran sisters and brothers for the good of our community? Is it by helping with the Farmers Market? Is it by helping make quilts? Is it by cooking or serving or cleaning at Café Immanuel? Is it by helping with the Warming Center we'll be hosting this winter? Is it by leading in worship or in a ministry of the congregation, or by helping to support a ministry? Is it by giving more of your time and possessions to support the work of the kingdom of God? Is it by helping to maintain the building and grounds where this assembly gathers to worship and to do ministry? Is it by calling or sending a card to a shut-in or someone who needs a word of encouragement, or by sending an advocacy post card to promote justice? (Remember, Paul himself in prison couldn't do much except write letters! But those letters changed the world.) Is it by proposing new projects for things the Spirit is laying on your heart, things that will be useful to the life of this assembly and the life of the world around us? Is it by committing to pray daily for the needs of others? What will make you a useful servant to Christ and to your sisters and brothers? How is Christ calling *you* to take up your cross and follow him? This very day, Christ turns to you, looks right at you, calls you by name, and says, "Come and follow me. Make yourself useful!"

Now, I could order you in Christ to do these things, to make yourselves useful, but instead, I will appeal to you on the basis of loving relationship. Please, please, for the love of God's kingdom, for the love of this congregation and of your sisters and brothers in Christ, for the love of the world that God loves so much, for the love of our neighbors, I appeal to you to open yourselves to being changed and transformed by coming to know and love Christ more and more, and by coming to know and love one another more and more, and to make your faith effectual by finding your usefulness in service to Christ and for Christ. Our hands and hearts, transformed and empowered by God's Spirit, are what God asks of us...nothing less than our whole lives. So, make yourself useful! There's so much work to be done! AMEN