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When Landmarks Move: The Challenge of Abolition

Philemon 8-16

One of the oldest human institutions is slavery. As far back as we have historical records, powerful tribes and cities and nations and empires have been conquering weaker ones, and when that happens, the victor gets to take everything of value. That means gold, cattle, and humans. Warring nomadic tribes took slaves from their conquered rivals. The earliest inscriptions and carvings from Mesopotamia and Egypt describe their slaves and the slave labor that built their monuments and cities. Even the great enlightened nations of classical civilization – the Greeks and the Romans – had slaves. Some estimate that *most* of the humans who lived in the Roman empire were slaves. In European history, again, there were always slaves, usually drawn from whatever ethnic group was least able to defend themselves. In the 10th through the 12th centuries, most slaves were from Eastern Europe. (That’s where we get the word “slave”: from the time when they tended to be Slavic people.) The great trading states of the late Middle Ages – Venice and Genoa – made much of their wealth selling Christian slaves to Muslim North Africa and vice versa. In the 15th century, Spain and Portugal began importing black slaves from farther south in Africa, and Spain started using African slaves on plantations in the Canary Islands. That plantation thing seemed to catch on.

Then there’s America. Late in the 15th century, the Genoan sailor Christopher Columbus discovered the “West Indies,” where he had expected to find China or Japan or India or someplace with lots of gold to take back to his Spanish patrons. There wasn’t much gold in the Caribbean, so he made do. Over the course of his four voyages to the New World he sent back loads of slaves. Eventually, settlers from Europe began to make homes in the New World, and many followed that Spanish “plantation” idea, and brought in African slaves to work them. Much of the American economy – and nearly all of it in the southern colonies – was based on slavery. When the United States was formed, slavery was written right into its constitution. That gets us right up into the 18th century. In other words, for nearly all human history, slavery has been a fact of life, an accepted and generally unquestioned part of society.

Now let’s turn to the Bible. The Bible seems to be pretty OK with it all. There is not one place in all scripture that clearly and explicitly condemns slavery. Sure, you can point out that God freed the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt, but just three or four chapters after that happened, we find the Law of Moses laying down rules regulating slavery among the Israelites. If you’re interested, those rules say that you can keep foreign slaves as long as you want, but you have to set Israelite slaves free after seven years. There are slaves all the way through the Hebrew Bible, although modern translations fudge it a bit and tend to render the Hebrew word for “slave” as “servant.” But that’s Old Testament, right? What does the New Testament say? Well, Jesus says nothing. Paul, however, like the Law of Moses, accepts that slaves are part of life and gives instructions on how to treat them. The implication is that there’s nothing wrong with slavery *per se*, but Christians shouldn’t be awful about it. There’s even one book in the New Testament where Paul converts a runaway slave named Onesimus, whom he met in prison, finds out that Onesimus had run away from a Christian slave owner that Paul knows, and sends the runaway slave back to his master, Philemon.

So I have a question for you. Slavery has been a part of human civilization as far back as we can discern, and slavery is taken for granted by our own Bible, and yet every person in this room thinks of human slavery as an abhorrence, an abomination. Why is that? Where did that come from?

Think about that for a moment while we turn to today's scripture. We're going to read a brief passage from that letter I just mentioned, in which Paul returns the runaway slave Onesimus to his master Philemon. We read Philemon verses 8-16:

⁸For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, ⁹yet 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. ¹⁰I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. ¹¹Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. ¹²I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. ¹³I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; ¹⁴but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. ¹⁵Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, ¹⁶no longer as a slave but as more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

I love this letter. Paul thinks he's being subtle, but bless his heart, he's not good at it. He wants Philemon to forgive Onesimus for running away and to set him free, but he also wants it to be Philemon's own choice. So Paul hints. Look at how Paul refers to Onesimus: he is Paul's child, he is Paul's own heart. And he wants Philemon to see Onesimus the same way, not as a slave but as a beloved brother. Unspoken, but still very loud, is the message, You don't enslave your brother. Paul tells Philemon, "You and Onesimus and I are brothers, equally children of God. Now, you do what you think is right." So in this letter Paul does *not* say that slavery is wrong. But he does cut the ground out from beneath it. If you don't enslave brothers and Christ loves all of us as his children ...

So let's go back to that question I asked earlier. Given how history and even scripture seems to accept slavery, where did we get the idea that it's evil? Also from the Bible. The abolition movement of the 18th and 19th centuries was led by men and women who passionately believed that slavery was an abomination, and every one of those early abolitionists came to that conclusion through their Christian faith. You see, despite all the passages in scripture that take slavery for granted, there is another strain running below the surface. It starts in Genesis 1, when God creates all humanity in God's own image. No human being is exempt from that. God is not just the God of one tribe or one nation. Then in the law, while it doesn't dispute the existence of slavery, it undercuts the whole idea by insisting that God is looking out for them, too. Slaves get to rest on the Sabbath, too. Slaves are to be treated as human beings, too, because, "Remember: you were slaves once, too. It wasn't good, was it? Don't treat others that way." In the New Testament, again we have Paul accepting the institution of slavery without question when he tells masters to be fair with their slaves. But then, in the next book he's saying stuff like "in Christ, there is neither slave nor free." But most of all, even though Jesus never mentions slavery at all in the gospels, throughout his life he demonstrate loves for all people, regardless of their position in society, treats all as equals. It is impossible to imagine Jesus Christ owning a slave. Try it, if you like. It doesn't compute.

So on the surface, we have the Bible reflecting the patterns of the society in which it was written, which included slavery, but just beneath the surface, we have a subversive, revolutionary message that makes slavery impossible to support. Deep Christianity is fundamentally opposed to slavery, and always has been. In the 5th century, the Christian theologian Gregory of Nyssa came to the same conclusion. If we really believe what our faith teaches, Gregory says, then we have no choice but to oppose slavery in all its manifestations.

Obviously, Gregory of Nyssa's insight did not take hold on society. Landmarks set by culture do not move easily. It would be more than a thousand years before Christian voices began to call for the abolition of slavery. And how did that go? Well, you know the story. At first, it met fierce resistance from other Christians who just as passionately pointed to the Bible to argue that slavery was all part of God's plan. The book of Philemon was trotted out regularly, not to show that all people are brothers and sisters, but to show that God wants runaway slaves returned to their masters. Eventually our nation went to war over slavery, and to some extent, that war was a battle between two different ways to read the Bible: one that noted the human writers' acceptance of slavery and interpreted that to mean that slavery was God's plan and another that looked beneath those texts, and particularly at Jesus Christ, and saw a message of equality and freedom.

This conflict within Christianity is beautifully illustrated in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In that book, Huck Finn runs away from home and ends up floating down the Mississippi River on a raft with Jim, a runaway slave. Now Huck is no Sunday School boy, but even he knows the clear message of the white church of his time. He knows that in helping a runaway slave, he's committing a mortal sin. At perhaps the key moment in the story, Huck faces his options, which in his understanding of the Christian God are simple: he can either turn Jim in or he can go to hell. So Huck writes out a note, reporting Jim to the authorities, then stares at it. At last, he tears the paper up and says, "All right, then. I'll go to hell." Huck doesn't realize it, but we do: ignoring the culture-bound teachings of the church in favor of loving your friend is *exactly* what Christ would do. Exactly what Christianity is about.

The title of the sermon series I'm working through right now is "When Landmarks Move." Sometimes things that are well-established and accepted as right and just and proper and never-to-be-changed . . . well, sometimes they change. And sometimes they need to, because they should never have been considered landmarks to begin with. Today we look back on previous ages and their casual acceptance of slavery and are horrified, but it took Christian leaders of courage who not only read the Bible but who knew Christ to shake those ancient landmarks and ultimately topple them. Thank God they did.

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The English historian Thomas Holland – who, interestingly, is *not* a confessing Christian – has written a book on how Christianity has changed the world for the better: it's called *Dominion*. I love one of Holland's analogies. He says that what Christianity did was drop depth charges into history: revolutionary ideas whose explosive power was not felt at first, but when the blast finally came to the surface – often centuries after Christ and the Early Church – they changed everything. The abolition of slavery was one of those explosions set into motion by Christ. There are more depth charges to come. Next week, we'll talk about uppity women. (I may have phrased that badly.) See you then.