

USING OUR CHRISTIAN IMAGINATIONS

(Philemon)

There are about 3 things I would like to share with you this morning.

One of them is how I spent the week of August 22-26, and why. With the knowledge, partnership and blessing of the Church Council, I have enrolled in a 3 yr degree program at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago (a seminary of the Presbyterian Church) which will hopefully lead to me receiving a Doctor of Ministry degree—also called the DMin degree—in May of 2019. A Doctor of Ministry is different than a PhD in that the DMin takes a shorter amount of time (3 yrs vs. 5-7 years for a PhD), and is doctoral work that is more contextual and hands-on, geared to deal with the context in which the student does their ministry. So, on your behalf, the Church Council has agreed for Lake Edge to partner with me regarding my DMin studies. The week of August 22-26 was the first week of about 6 wks per year that I will be in

Chicago or in Africa engaged in classes—with much reading, writing and projects to do with YOU in-between.

The title and focus of this 3 yr course of study is ***African-centered Religious Thought and Ministry***. As you take a moment to let that sink in, add to your thought process the fact that the *center* of the religious thought and ministry that we do and share and know together is historically from a *European* perspective, and seen through a *European* lens. And in that historical perspective, and through that historical lens, the African continent, traditions and people have been and still are viewed as objects of history (people whose humanity is dis-counted, and who are therefore seen as entities to be acted *upon*) and not subjects of history (people whose humanity counts and are capable of doing the acting). African-centered religious thought and ministry seeks to see God, spirituality, scripture and religious life from an African perspective, through an African lens, and with Africa and Africans as *active human subjects* of history and not *passive sub-human objects*.

Sounds pretty challenging for a predominantly white mainline congregation huh? Well, I actually believe that our context was one of the reasons I got accepted to the Doctor of Ministry program. Because Lake Edge is not your average predominantly white mainline congregation; and if it was, I probably would not have lasted this long! Lake Edge is actually a predominately white mainline congregation that desires to grow in ways that will enable it to become a more and more inclusive community of faith, whose center is the brotherhood and sisterhood of the human race under the parenthood of God, the justice agenda of Jesus, and the movement of the Holy Spirit in our midst—which is the power and presence of God. That is what I wrote about this congregation on the application for school, because that is pretty much the message I have received from this congregation since I arrived here as an interim over 5 yrs ago, and it is a main reason that I am—very happily, by the way—still here! I have said very publicly that I am interested in helping Lake Edge to become more inclusive by becoming more multi-ethnic and multi-cultural and multi-class and

multi-gender and sexual orientation, and multi-generational so that we can have a faith community that looks more like the Kingdom of God that Jesus preached and taught about. Not many faith communities in this country have engaged their Christian imaginations toward a vision such as that. I am feeling the vision and imagination of this congregation solidifying in that direction. And I am praising God; and I am prayerful that I am not mis-reading the desires and imaginations of this faith community; and I remain hopeful for our journey together.

II.

Another thing I would like to share with you this morning is the story of Paul's letter to Philemon, and what it serves us up on our sermonic plates today, and how those things speak into our Christian imaginations.

How many are familiar with Paul's letter to Philemon?

Philemon is a 1st century Christian who was converted to the faith by Paul, whose home is being used as a house church, who has a slave

named Onesimus. As an image begins to form in your mind that goes along with the story, add to your thought process that this story is from 1st century Asia Minor—what is now southern Europe—during the time of the Roman Empire. Slavery was not the racialized commodity that it became 1400 years later as Europe began to invade the continents of Africa, South America, North America, and Asia, as well as the Pacific islands centuries before that. So, Philemon the slave-owner is not necessarily white, and Onesimus the slave is not necessarily black!

The story is never clear as to how and why Onesimus left Philemon, so we don't really know all the dynamics and tensions that may or may not be going on between Philemon and Onesimus. All we know is that Onesimus ended up where Paul was—which was in prison somewhere, a somewhere we also are not sure of, because Paul was arrested and imprisoned A LOT, in A LOT of places, A LOT of times. Was Onesimus sent by Philemon to minister to Paul in prison for a while? Or did

Onesimus run away from Philemon and seek refuge with Paul? We don't know.

What we DO know is that while Onesimus was with Paul, he became a Christian by Paul's leading. And now, for whatever reason, Paul is sending Onesimus the slave back to Philemon the slave-master, with a very strong suggestion to Philemon that since Onesimus is now a brother in the Lord, that Philemon "do his duty" regarding Onesimus—without specifying what Philemon's "duty" would be. Paul in effect says to Philemon, *"I could command you to do your duty regarding Onesimus, since I am both your father and his father in the Lord; but instead, I strongly appeal to you to use your Christian imagination in this matter."*

How could the liberating message of Jesus Christ possibly guide our Christian imaginations concerning the issues surrounding slavery?

III.

So, let's get to the heart of the matter: how does *slavery* and *the gospel of Jesus Christ* ever go together in the FIRST place?

In order to enslave another human being, you somehow have to consider them as NOT human; as SUB-human; as a some-THING and not as a some-ONE. Early Greek philosophers like Aristotle believed that some humans were made to be servants and slaves to others.

The evidence shows that Aristotle was not alone in his belief, because while sex may be the world's oldest profession, slavery is one of the world's oldest entitlements. The history of slavery is so pervasive that it predates written records; it has probably been a practice of every prevailing human empire that has ever ruled on earth, and has DEFINITELY been a part of the prevailing human empire in which WE live—and still is, since human trafficking IS slavery—as well as a part of the 1st century Roman Empire, the prevailing power when Jesus and Paul walked on the earth.

Slavery has taken different forms—from voluntary to involuntary; from indentured servitude to kidnaping and chattel slavery—but history shows that slavery was always a brutal business, with masters and owners literally being able to treat their slave any way they chose, for whatever reason, and slaves generally having no recourse.

It's pretty difficult to treat someone like a slave, and consider them a brother or sister in the Lord, a beloved child of the same loving God, precious and equal in God's sight—just like you; blessed and highly favored—just like you; died for and raised for—just like you!

There are some things that Jesus and the good news of God speaks clearly against, **AND SLAVERY IN ANY FORM IS ONE OF THEM!** In Luke 4 Jesus says the Spirit of the Lord has anointed him to proclaim **RELEASE** to the captives, **FREEDOM** to those who are bound and oppressed, and to **PROCLAIM** the year of Jubilee, when all debts are forgiven, all land is returned, and all slavery is abolished. Slavery in any form is anti-thetical to authentic Christian values—authentic in that they come from

Jesus. Period! The radical nature of the radical love that Jesus models for us that is the bedrock of the kingdom values would seem to leave no room in our Christian imaginations to entertain the enslavement of others.

But in the early Jesus communities of Paul's day, the evidence shows there were very few whose Christian imaginations allowed them to engage the egalitarian implications of the gospel and set the slaves in their faith communities free. Most faith communities played out the cultural practice of slavery in their midst.

1400 years later, the Christian imagination seems to have grown darker and duller, as it not only allowed Christians to keep slavery in their midst, but also allowed the Christian Church as an institution to go to other inhabited places, claim them in the name of Jesus, and enslave the native peoples there—people who were usually of a darker complexion, and considered sub-human by the church. There is a quote attributed to Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa

that sums up some of those encounters. He said, *“When the white man landed on our shores, we had the land and they had the Bible. They said ‘Let us close our eyes and pray.’ When we opened our eyes, they had the land and we had the Bible.”*

Our Christian imaginations can lead to very dangerous things when we leave out or mis-interpret the values associated with the adjective “Christian.” The “Christian” in the phrase “Christian imagination” stands for “Christ-like”; as in *“having a Christ-like imagination.”* What can we individually or collectively imagine that would lift up the Christ who stood with the least, the last, the lonely, and the left-out?

The Christ who washed his disciple’s feet, and told them to go and wash each other’s feet?

The Christ who told the parable of the Good Samaritan, and told us to “go and do likewise?”

The Christ who welcomed children, who touched and healed lepers, who violated religious protocol to be inclusive to others, and who fed over 5000 people at one time?

The Christ who came to set people free, and not to enslave them?

What do you think our Christian imaginations could conjure up that could adequately represent that Christ?

IV.

There is one more quick thing I want to share with you this morning.

You see, in Paul's time, there were only a few Jesus communities who took their faith to the mat and let their Christian imaginations soar and abolished slavery in their midst. Most of them didn't; but a few of them did...

My hope for Lake Edge is that we become one of the few faith communities that lets our Christian imagination SOAR!

I don't know what that means for us. I don't know what the opportunity to do so will be for us. But when it comes...as it comes... hopefully we will know.

Let us pray that our *Kairos* moment—our moment that God has called us to that will make a difference in the world—will not pass us by.

Amen.

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