



# Central Peninsula Church

Catalog No. 1278-2  
Philemon 8–16  
Steve Aurell  
August 1, 2004

## Trusting in God's Process

SERIES: *Restoring Relationships God's Way*

---

CoCo, was a pit bull mix, just barely one year old. As a puppy she was dumped on the freeway, but rescued by a teenager. He then handed her off to another friend who eventually gave her to yet another friend who then left her in the hands of an animal shelter. When Clayton and Deanna laid eyes on the homeless dog, it was love at first sight. With three soaring hearts and one wagging tail they brought their newly adopted pet into a loving home at last. It wasn't long, however, before they discovered a secret: CoCo had issues. With Clayton and Deanna she was loving and obedient. But with other people she was hostile and aggressive. So they hired a dog trainer who specialized in aggressive breeds. Over the next few weeks she stopped fighting with other animals, stopped her random barking, no more racing through the house, no more digging in the yard. For months they trained CoCo faithfully and witnessed with delight her gradual transformation. Their story seemed destined for a happy ending. Except for one thing. CoCo remained hostile towards other people. So they had to keep her penned in the yard when anyone came over for dinner. On walks they had to keep her on a tight choke collar, muzzled and away from children. In fact CoCo's aggression was so strong, it soon became unlikely that any additional training would help. Despite their best efforts, Clayton and Deanna came to the realization they couldn't keep her. So after much prayer and discussion they made a hard decision. They had done all they could to save this dog. Now exhausted they chose to do the responsible thing, however heartbreaking that was.

This story illustrates a foundational principle; one we can ill afford to forget. And one that underlies Paul's entire appeal to Philemon. As humans we are limited in our capacity to affect change in our relationships. But God is not bound by time or space, but rather moves in powerful ways when it is His will to do so. Now, we can say all the right things and model all the right perspectives. But unless God empowers the change, we may as well "try and catch the wind." You know, sometimes we can get a little confused in this regard. Somehow we get this idea, very subtly in the beginning, that it's actually possible to do what only God can do. And like a mechanic who fixes cars we start spending immeasurable energy trying to fix people.

Counselors call this "codependency," a phrase that often defines the tendency of some to be a "savior" to others. But as is so often the case, when saviors fail in their attempts to affect change in others they tend to feel as if they have betrayed God's purpose for their lives. That's the "Judas" side of the story. They may even get a little critical when the outcome doesn't measure up to their expectations.

Let me share a little secret. Only God has the power to change hearts. Our responsibility is to speak the word in truth and to love others in Christ. I'm not suggesting we not help others grow. But this is more like teaching a child to ride a bicycle than managing our daily planners. Surely we provide the encouragement and support and point them in the right direction. But if the child is to ever learn how to pedal, steer, and balance alone, we must eventually let go of the handlebars. We have to give others the freedom to decide for themselves the obedience Christ requires *and* trust God's process in them. We simply can't micromanage relationships as we do our business strategies.

Paul understood these tendencies well. So when we come to his letter to Philemon we see how he applies the antidote. Here, Paul is mediating a potentially explosive situation between two brothers in Christ. And yet he has no interest in lording his authority or winning their obedience through compulsion. His only desire is to empower those he loves to develop their own sense of moral responsibility. If you were with us last week you may recall that Paul was imprisoned in Rome at the time of this writing. And he had a friend named Philemon, who was an upstanding member of the Christian community in Colossae, some thirteen hundred miles away. Somehow, Paul ended up meeting a runaway slave of Philemon's named Onesimus. And through his ministry Onesimus became a new believer in Christ. Paul, however, now faced a dilemma. To keep Onesimus would have been beneficial to him. But the slave's rightful place was with his master. So Paul suggests that Onesimus do the courageous and ethical thing and return home. And in this letter, one that Onesimus will hand deliver to his disgruntled master, Paul becomes his advocate. Let's pick up the story starting in verse 8.

## A. Hold Our Rights Loosely

**“Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do that which is proper, yet for love’s sake I rather appeal to you”** (vv. 8-9a). In his appeal to Philemon, Paul is first willing to surrender his authority before the greater demand of love. In other words, he holds his rights loosely. He is not showing Philemon an iron hand in a velvet glove of humility. One can give good advice without being authoritative. In saying he has enough confidence to order Philemon, Paul is referring to the right to speak freely and fearlessly, which any Christian can do. His right to speak into this matter doesn’t come from his office as an apostle but rather from being “in Christ.” Any Christian, apostle or not, can counsel another brother or sister in Christ. Now, some may obey out of respect to the one giving the advice or out of fear of punishment for failing to comply. But Paul would prefer that Christians do what is good because it’s the right thing to do for the Lord.

As we saw last week, Philemon had a proven track record in this regard. He was a man of great faith, one who poured himself into service for the sake of others. But he was also a slave owner. And Paul knew that interfering directly in a master-slave relationship was as disrespectful as someone today ordering around another person’s child. Slaves were viewed as personal possessions, and Philemon would have been expected to take revenge on one who had run away. But what was accepted in that culture was at odds with Christian morality. And Paul assumes that Philemon, as a Christian who knows God’s love, will show the same love and forgiveness in his grievance against Onesimus. In this way love becomes the virtue that forms the basis of Paul’s appeal. He doesn’t use the language of fear and guilt because that would reduce Philemon to the level of a slave. Had he done so he would have validated the very system he was speaking into. As one writer put it: “Slavery is a system of bossing people around. If Paul had bossed Philemon, he might submit and grudgingly free Onesimus, but the principle of domination would still be intact. And slavery would spring up again inside the church, in more ways than one. Instead, Paul subverts the entire system of domination by appealing to Philemon’s free decision, to act in a manner consistent with the equality and love between brothers and sisters in Christ.”

So how do we recognize this system at work? Whenever people get together for any length of time a “pecking order” is the first thing that gets established. In the chicken pen there is no peace until it’s clear who is the greatest, who is the least, and who is at every rung

in between. You may have noticed this at large family gatherings or staff meetings or even in your own community groups. When I was doing my counselor training in college our professor came to class one day and said, “Today we are going to learn about group dynamics.” So she had everyone set their chairs around in a circle - all of us, that is, except her. Our teacher, the one with all the authority, experience and expertise, took herself out of the established order and said not a word. So we sat there in this dumb silence, squirming in our seats, looking at each other as if to say, “Okay! Who is going to take the lead? Who’s going to be the first to speak?” And what I noticed was the one who spoke first was also the one most uncomfortable with the silence, the absence of rules or agenda, and who had the greatest need to interject a new “pecking order.” That would be me! No, I’m just kidding! But we can easily see this tendency in the simplest things as well. We see it where people sit. How they walk in relation to others. Or who gives way when two people are speaking at the same time. These dynamics are written across the face of every society. The point is not that we need to do away with all rules or authority; that would be anarchy. But that our Christian faith completely redefines leadership and rearranges the lines of authority. Jesus didn’t simply reverse the pecking order, as many assume. He abolished it. The authority of which Jesus spoke was not an authority to manipulate or control. It was an authority of function, and not status.

In Matthew 20:25-28, Jesus corrected His disciples concern about who would be the greatest by saying, **“You know, the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you.”** Jesus rejected the right of any brother or sister in Christ imposing their will upon another in the pecking order systems of his day. And in its place, He interjected these words for all future generations to hear, **“but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve.”** What this means is this: the spiritual authority we have in Christ is not found in a position or a title, but in love’s service. It’s found in a towel. Love is not love that coerces, but as Alexander Maclaren writes, “is the weapon that casts aside the trappings of superiority, and is never greater than when it descends, nor more absolute than when it binds authority, and appeals with love to love. Such ever is love’s way, to rise it stoops.” Paul is allowing

Philemon the freedom to work out what is demanded by love, which implies the freedom to choose wrongly. He trusts, however, that his love is resourceful enough to find the right way in accomplishing the good.

## B. Consider the Mutual Benefit

The second thing Paul does is in verses 9b-14. He considers the mutual benefit for all concerned. He writes,

**“Since I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus – I appeal to you for my child, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, Onesimus, who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me. And I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart, whom I wished to keep with me, that in your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel; but without your consent I did not want to do anything, that your goodness should not be as it were by compulsion, but of your own free will.”**

As the “aged” one, Paul is not saying that he has one foot in the grave, although he was around 60 at the time of this writing. What is important is the implication that he is older than Philemon. And the customary respect shown to elder statesmen in that culture gave Paul more leeway to make his request. Paul also pulls at Philemon’s heartstrings by reminding him of his sufferings for Christ sake. As a prisoner, he would share the same social alienation as a slave. So he holds up his shackles in order to penetrate Philemon’s heart. All he desires is that Onesimus be given a place in Philemon’s heart and that his compassion would override his clamor for justice.

Paul uses 145 out of a total of 335 carefully chosen words before mentioning Onesimus’ name. Some of us can’t even wait until after our morning coffee before bringing up sensitive issues. And if you’re a plodder like I am, that’s like trying to translate Swahili. But here is another example of Paul’s tact in handling conflict. Paul has gone to great lengths to frame his request in the context of love. Notice too that Paul points to the status of Onesimus as a new believer before even mentioning his name. Maybe he anticipated Philemon saying, “So that’s it! He wants me to take back that ungrateful, thieving, good for nothing slave. How could he?” So Paul stops that argument before it even begins by referring to Onesimus as “my child, begotten in my imprisonment.” Isn’t that great! In a short time Paul has become a “papa”! Maybe the former master will need to consider how long Onesimus had been in his service without coming to the Lord. Or what may impress Philemon even more is the fact that someone like Onesimus has been saved, period.

Maybe to Philemon, Onesimus seemed an unlikely candidate for God’s grace. His story then is a

reminder that our God knows nothing of hopeless cases. If that were not so I certainly wouldn’t be standing here this morning. And neither would you. Paul then eases the tension with a play on Onesimus’ name, which literally means “useful” in the Greek. By saying that he was “formerly useless, but now is useful,” Paul is contrasting the difference the gospel makes in a life. Though Onesimus had run away from Philemon, he unwittingly ran smack into the Lord. As a result, what he once was, he no longer is. His true identity is now anchored in Christ.

But Onesimus had truly been useful to Paul. As an “aged prisoner” Paul needed others to take care of his basic needs - to fix his food, run his errands, keep him company. So useful had he become that Paul refers to him as his “very heart.” Paul uses this term in all three sections of the letter. He has already praised Philemon in verse 7 for “refreshing the hearts of the saints.” In the same way, Onesimus has refreshed Paul.

In his conclusion in verse 20, Paul will make yet another play on Onesimus’ name: “let me *benefit* from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.” Paul is indirectly requesting that Philemon refresh his heart as he has others by accepting Onesimus back as a brother. This phrase then reflects Paul’s conviction that all of one’s actions should be directed to the benefit of others. Although his personal preference would be to keep Onesimus with him, he puts aside his own wishes out of consideration for Philemon’s rights and feelings. He had kept Onesimus because of his usefulness. Now, by sending him back – his child, his very heart – Paul is demonstrating the kind of selfless love he wishes to instill in Philemon.

You know, we should never expect others to do what we are unwilling to do ourselves. Paul has waived his own interests out of a sense of responsibility to Philemon. How powerful is that! Our natural instinct is to cling to what we love. We don’t like to let go of that which has proven benefit to us personally. One look at Linus in the *Peanuts* cartoons shows clearly where his head is at. “I can’t live without my blanket,” he says. Linus’s blanket is a symbol of what he is attached to, and in this sense, none of us are without our “blankets.” These blankets can be material – our homes, our relationships, or our finances. Or they can be immaterial – our need to hold tightly our pride, our control, or our affections. The danger is: where our blankets are, there our hearts may also be. They can easily become idols if we’re not careful. So the question is – what are we holding on to, or withholding, in our

relationships with others? Maybe it's the hurt and pride that stems from being wronged unjustly. Maybe it's the need to be right or in control that has alienated friends or loved ones. Maybe it's a busy schedule that leaves little room for nurturing relationships, period. Regardless of the specific, how's that affecting your family? Your community? Your relationship with the Lord? If it has no eternal benefit, then lay it down. Lay it at the foot of the cross where God's grace is always of benefit.

There is one more thing to notice here. In returning, Onesimus is also acting from love. He has wronged Philemon in his own home. And now he is returning to bring things full circle. Granted, he is carrying with him a ringing endorsement from Paul in the form of this letter, but there is no guarantee Philemon will honor it. So Onesimus must accept with grace whatever Philemon decides, which in that day could include severe punishment or even death. But in order to clean up his side of the street, this is a risk he is willing to take.

You know, whenever we have unfinished business with others it effects our relationship with God. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, "If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift." Jesus here is stressing the importance of taking immediate action in settling grievances against one another. As soon as we are conscious of a broken relationship Jesus calls us to mend it. This is done by taking responsibility for our part and offering amends. Our procrastination only serves to clutter our spiritual lives. Carrying the load of an apology owed, a resentment held, or an unexpressed remorse is like living in a messy house. We can pretend the piles of debris aren't there but this doesn't make the mess go away. In the end, the dirty dishes, the crumb-filled carpet, and the overflowing wastebaskets are still there, waiting to be cleaned up. Onesimus, as young as he was in the Lord, understood that his faith didn't provide an escape clause for earthly debts. So he committed, with a repentant heart, to make a wrong a right at whatever cost to himself personally. In so doing he provides a great model for us.

Do you have amends you need to make? Then go! Make things right with your family, coworker, brother or sister in Christ. One word of caution though - apologies amount to lip service if not accompanied by a heartfelt commitment to change. Making amends is not so much about saying, "I'm sorry," but being sorry enough to change. And if we are to be a community that works through conflict God's way, then making prompt amends is essential to family health.

### **C. Reflect on God's Purposes**

So far this morning, we have seen that in order to

effectively navigate conflict, love has to be the governing principle. The love that Paul models, first of all, holds its rights loosely. It refuses to lord it over another. And secondly, it considers in a selfless way the mutual benefit for all concerned. That benefit is the restoration of broken relationships to grace. In verses 15-16, Paul lifts his eyes to the heavens to reflect on God's purposes. **"For perhaps he was for this reason parted from you for a while, that you should have him back forever, 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."**

By using the word "perhaps" Paul is being careful not to presume on God's providence. He wants Philemon to see, however, the hand of God by implying that Onesimus' flight may have had some divine purpose. And here is another example of Paul's insight and tact. For the less malicious intent we assign to the one who has wronged us, the less anger we will feel toward them. By couching Onesimus' flight in the grammar of God's purposes can only help Philemon ease his anger at his slave. Now Paul is not saying that the wrongs were inspired by God, but that God has used it for the good. And the basic assumption is that God, who transformed Onesimus, had separated the slave from his master in order to do just that.

Have you ever thought about God's hand in regards to a friend or family member who rejected your fellowship? It's one thing to hear about how God uses someone else's harmful choices for the good. It's quite another when that someone is a loved one. I have a good friend who lives in Aurora, Colorado. Danny grew up in church, but to hear him tell it he "couldn't understand why folks were so nice and courteous on Sunday and yet so nasty every other day of the week." As a result, he became disillusioned with the Christian faith. So at a young and impressionable age Danny rejected his family and community to join the hippie ranks along the Big Sur coastline. And it was there, in the midst of God's natural creation, that the Lord moved on his heart.

Now this is not a unique story. Many of us have had similar experiences. And at least from where we sit today can look back and even chuckle at the irony of God's timing. But what do you think Danny's parents were experiencing as they watched their son leave home? Do you think their hearts burned with the desire to bring him back? To warn him against the dangers he was facing? Do you think they were tempted to use their parental influence to protect him from harm? Probably so! But at some point they must have realized their limitations and

became willing to place their son into God's hands. They must have also allowed the pain of that rejection to find resolution in God's forgiveness.

Well, Danny eventually returned to a church community. In fact, he pastors one in Aurora, where he makes his home. And he is now one of the most sought after worship leaders in the country. Isn't that great! None of us can plum, can we, the depths of God's ways. But what we see here is the mysterious providence of God at work. We can't straighten out the lines of our own paths, or the paths of others, but God can. He can turn the worst-case scenario for the good; healing hearts and mending relationships along the way.

So the story of Onesimus helps us see that even our darkest moments, our deepest despair, or most destructive choices can have some meaning in God's sight. And though we can only make out the individual threads, we are all part of His great tapestry. Philemon lost a slave for a while so that he could gain him back forever. It's as if Paul is saying, "Onesimus will always be yours but on a different level, not as your possession, but as your brother." And though it was never Paul's intent to make a frontal attack on the institution of slavery, he does, however, interject the dynamics of Christian love into it. In time this principle would work itself into the very fabric of society – that every man is of worth in himself as created in the image of God.

So, what can we apply to our own relational conflicts? First of all, in the same way that Paul surrenders his "rights," we need to *get all pride and control out of the way*. This doesn't mean we stop speaking truth, or communicating appropriate boundaries, or pointing others towards Christ. It does mean, however, that we allow others the dignity to decide for themselves the obedience Christ demands. This challenges us to respond, not "above" our circumstances, but "in" the midst of them, relying on the Lord's assurance that He is in control; that He loves His children and will do His utmost in helping relationships heal. But oftentimes we must first get "self" out of the way. All control is a way of navigating around the risks involved in trusting. And without trust the conduit by which grace might otherwise flow is compromised. So let go and let God.

Secondly, *examine your motivation*. In other words, take a moral inventory. Is selfishness or humility fueling your responses? In his appeal to Philemon, Paul is modeling his words to the Philippian believers, "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit," he tells them, "but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely

look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others." Conflicts arise when there are at least two people promoting competing agendas. This kind of conflict can't exist when each is concerned about the interests of others. When we stop looking out for ourselves and start seeking agreement, the issue is no longer, "What do I want?" but "How can I help?" Being "right" then becomes less important than being united to a single purpose.

And finally, *seek God's perspective*. The question is not what *they* need to learn but what is God teaching *me*. Perhaps God has placed us in the midst of conflict for a reason. To reveal what needs to be changed in our hearts. Or to help us learn to rely on His resources. Maybe it's to teach us a deeper lesson in humility, acceptance, or grace. Or like Paul in this passage, to be an ambassador of reconciliation between two hurting friends. Ultimately all our issues will need to be settled before God, "who through Christ reconciled us to Himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation." But that's next week's lesson and a fitting conclusion to Paul's letter to Philemon.