

“Refresh My Heart in Christ”

Sunday, September 5, 2007

Philemon 1-21; Psalm 119:57-64

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What would you have done? What would you have done if you had been Officer Tori Matthews of the Southern California Humane Society?

Officer Matthews responded to the emergency call. A little boy's small pet had been scared up a tree by a neighbor's dog. The pet then fell into a swimming pool and sank like a brick. The pet, you see, was an iguana.

What did she do? She dove into the pool to retrieve the limp lizard! Next, she had a conversation with herself. She had the training. But was she really going to do it?

“Now that I look back on it,” she told a newspaper reporter sometime later, “it was a pretty ugly animal to be kissing.” Let me explain. Officer Matthews had performed CPR on the lizard lips. I'll let her own words explain further – “It was a pretty ugly animal to be kissing, but the last thing I wanted to do was to tell this little boy that his iguana had died.”

Would you have offered this lung-to-lung labor of love? If you're thinking, “um, no way,” let me tell you that she successfully resuscitated that bullfrog-on-steroids looking critter. More than an ugly, water-logged reptile, Office Matthews more clearly saw a little boy's beloved pet. This made it beautiful and worthy of every effort to give it life again. Her actions were refreshing not only to the iguana, but to the little boy's heart and soul as well.

Our New Testament passage this morning tells a similar story. It doesn't tell of a humane society officer, but it does feature a chief official of Christianity. It doesn't have a lizard nearly forever separated from its owner, but it does have an ancient society slave separated from his ancient society master. It doesn't recount any heroic Cardio Pulmonary Resuscitation, but it does recount the impact of C.P.R. – Christ's Powerful Resuscitation – on a person's life.

It's a very personal letter written by the Apostle Paul, a letter written as a plea on behalf of a man who'd been banished from his home. The reasons for this aren't explicitly stated. We do know that this man, known by the name Onesimus (Oh-knee-simus), was a household slave in the unjust social structure of his long ago day. He'd done something wrong, something Paul tells us rendered him “useless.” Paul used this

word “useless” on purpose because it is a play on Onesimus’ name, which means “useful.” In any event, the head of the household, a man named Philemon (Fi-lee-mon), kicked Onesimus out. In the unjust social structure of that day, it was illegal for a slave to be separated from his master, and so began a life on the run as a fugitive of the law.

What would you have done? What tree would you have climbed up to escape the howling dogs of authority?

It’s widely held that Onesimus ran away to the big city of Rome, and it was there that he came into contact with Paul. At that time, Paul was imprisoned, so it’s possible that Onesimus came into contact with him after being captured and put in jail. Or, as some scholars contend, Onesimus found a way to visit the imprisoned Paul without being identified and imprisoned himself.

Why would he have sought out Paul? Because Philemon was one of Paul’s friends, a Christian brother. And if there was any hope of reconciliation, of Onesimus being able to end his life on the run and returning home safely, it was a hope he knew would have to be born of Paul’s clout as *the* Christian leader. Being a fugitive, we can assume, was more threatening a life than returning to the home of a Christian master.

What did Paul do? Did he have Onesimus arrested as was his legal obligation to do? Did he see him only as a household slave, someone not important enough for him to be bothered with?

Of course not! Paul, a prisoner in chains for Jesus Christ, was not interested in honoring human law when it came to someone at risk of sinking deeper into the dregs of society. That said, he did indeed have an interest in providing Onesimus safe haven back in the company of his friend Philemon. But it would only be a safe haven if Onesimus knew the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ himself -- and if Philemon himself were reminded of its transformative power.

In this way, Paul knew that something rather radical, something really refreshing could come out of the whole mess; something greater than the legalities of a society that honored slavery; something that could truly reconcile whatever transgression had transpired back in Philemon’s home.

Onesimus, who had perhaps already heard some things about Jesus, indeed accepted him as his Lord. Refreshed by Paul’s administering Christ’s Resuscitating Power, Onesimus became, in Paul’s own words, a “son,” his “very own heart.” Paul was supremely confident in his friend Philemon, that by grace and through faith he would indeed welcome Onesimus back home, not as a slave, but as more than a slave ... as a

beloved brother.

What Paul did next we know well ... he wrote the letter we have before us in the New Testament. It is not a letter condoning the unjust institution of slavery. It's a letter celebrating the liberating and reconciling nature of being a family in Christ. It's a letter demonstrating that the grace of God trumps all personal conflicts in the home, and all injustices of all human societies. It's a letter about daring to give a kiss of resuscitating spiritual life to people regarded by the world as not particularly worth saving.

What are we to do with this letter today? Do you know any drowning "iguanas" who also happen to be incredibly loved? Do you know any fugitives from families who you might be able to administer Christ's Resuscitating Power to? Do you know anyone from the fellowship of any family branch of the church in need of this faithful C.P.R.?

Paul's exhortation to us is clear. He says to us every bit as much as he said to his friend Philemon – "Refresh my heart in Christ." (Phil., v. 20)

Andrew Purves, in the *Renovare Spiritual Formation Bible*, interprets this to mean we are to "go the extra mile, hold nothing back." We are to "live within the framework of the appeal on the basis of love, which builds up Christian community by enabling and restoring relationships." This life refreshing love means we need to "look upon one another as we would look upon those we love, and especially as we would choose to look upon Jesus Christ."

Jesus looked upon all sorts of people with amazing love. He gave the kiss of new life to lepers, foreigners, and all manner of social outcasts. The community he gathered up around him was to firmly follow his example of not making assessments of worth based on appearances or social status. And it was not fear offering his spiritual C.P.R. to individuals and social institutions alike. They were to dive in the deep end over and over again.

I hear and read a lot these days about how Christians have lost their common identity. We are all so entangled in our theological and political debates on hot-button issues and various traditions that we've grown blind to seeing ourselves as Christ sees us. Sadly, I often agree. There is a sense among many Christians, myself included, that the institution of the church is sinking like a brick in American society as well as in other parts of the world. What are we to do? What are we to do, especially since we are living in this post 9/11 world where terror keeps chasing good people up trees? Where prejudices and personal pains still so often prevail?

This little letter of Paul's to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus exists to remind us

and guide us and inspire us. It's not a big, weighty dissertation on the Christian faith the likes of the Letter to the Romans. It's just a small witness ... but one with a big view. It's not a big course in Christian ethics at a big name seminary ... but it teaches enough to tell us how to offer life-refreshing love to one another. Christ's Resuscitating Power, when administered faithfully and consistently through us by the grace of God, continues to be the true hope of the world for we who profess to believe in it.

So inspired by it, I have a request of all of you. As we work together in ministry, as we seek to grow FPC into whatever God is willing for it to be, I ask, as your pastor ... will you please keep *refreshing my heart in Christ?* Amen.