

“A Disciple of Christ Jesus”

**Pastor Dave Carlson
First Presbyterian Church
Sunday, September 1, 2013**

**Old Testament Lesson – Deuteronomy 30:15-20
New Testament Lesson – Philemon 1, 10-16**

Ben Patterson, in his book “Serving God: The Grand Essentials of Work and Worship,” tells about a sign with a picture that he saw on a cardboard box in the foyer of a Baptist church in Minneapolis. The sign reads, “Tim Lindbloom’s Prayer Ministry.” The picture is of a young man in a wheelchair, wearing a helmet – apparently he has cerebral palsy. The cardboard box had a slot at the top for people to insert prayer requests. The sign said, “I only ask that you let me know what happens.”

Seeing this, Patterson realized that “the only hints (Tim Lindbloom) might have that he was getting something done, was to hear what had happened from those for whom he prayed – a special fellowship, and a special reward notes Patterson.”¹

I don’t know about you, but as I think about my Christian walk as a follower of Jesus, , I’d love to hear what Lindbloom has to say about how God blesses us, about the untapped opportunities we have for spiritual growth and vitality, and our ability as individuals to touch the life of another human being.

Each one of us – regardless of life circumstances; heck, because of our particular life circumstances – each one of us has something to share that would contribute to the faith life of another person. Paul’s letter shows us that! In his letter to Philēmon, which we heard this morning, we see how Paul pulls back the fabric of society to reveal the workings of God just beneath the surface. And he challenges us – as he challenged Philemon – to bring God’s presence and activity out into the open.

We see this in how Paul comes to look at his current circumstances in the light of Jesus Christ and his life as a disciple, a follower. Paul is writing from a Roman prison, but he experiences his confines – his limitations and his freedoms – as if he were, quote, “a prisoner of Christ Jesus,” which means he’s free and inspired to guide and shape the lives of fellow travelers along life’s path, regardless of any earthly limitations.

Paul looks upon Philēmon’s runaway slave, Onesimus and sees a son, calling him “my child ... whose father I have become....” “Formerly he was useless to you,” Paul says, “but now he is indeed useful, both to you and to me. ... Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while,

¹ Ben Patterson, *Serving God: The Grand Essentials of Work and Worship* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 76.

so that you might have him back forever, no 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.”

Here Paul takes the fabric of societal boundaries – in this case the separation that lies between this wealthy businessman and his indentured worker or slave – and he pulls that fabric back to reveal so much more. He shows Philemon the true value and potential of a human life, regardless of social class, regardless of employment status, regardless of worldly knowledge or power.

These dividing forces in our world, when seen through the eyes of Christ, just slip away. And all of a sudden, we begin to see new opportunities for spiritual growth and enrichment, for us and for all whom we encounter along the way.

It’s never too late to pursue further spiritual growth and enrichment, never too late to seek a deeper, more meaningful, and more rewarding experience of life as a follower of Jesus Christ.

And, as Paul says, “perhaps this is the reason” for what has come before, that being for Philēmon, his old relationship and way of living along side his slave – now a brother in Christ, AND for us, our old relationship with ourselves and how we live life.

Before we came to know Christ or really took on being a follower of Jesus, life was different. Those differences can now pave the way forward for unimaginable blessings, both for us and for those with whom we share our faith stories, our faith experiences.

Paul says that Onesimus is of more value to his owner as a brother in Christ than as a slave in the marketplace, of more value both in the flesh and in the Lord, in the Spirit. In the marketplace, Onesimus was highly valued for what he could do physically for Philemon, in the flesh. But now as a brother in the Lord, Onesimus has so much more to offer, spiritually. This tells us that, for Paul, we can either treat each other as a means to an end, someone to work shoulder to shoulder with in service to the church, and leave it at that. Or we can treat each other as fellow travelers along a spiritual path, a path of growth and discovery.

The reality is that once we have claimed our identity as Christians, we are all on the same path. We are all seeking guidance in the way forward. We are all trying to discover – and display – what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ, a student or disciple of his way of life. And in that, we can all learn from one another.

A student was sitting outside his university classroom reading the Bible when his professor walked by and heard the student exclaim, “Wow! Praise the Lord!” Intrigued, the professor asked what had him so excited. “Well,” said the student, “I just read how God parted the waters of the Red Sea so the Israelites could pass to safety.” The professor calmly explained that, in actuality, there was a mistranslation and the Reed Sea, where the crossing actually took place, was at that time of year only about three inches deep. Confident he had handled the situation, the professor went to get something from his office. Coming out, he passed the same student only to hear him shout again, “Wow! Praise the Lord!” Interested, the professor asks the student what was so fascinating this time. “I just read how God drowned the entire Egyptian army in just three inches of water!”

There’s a lot of different ways to look upon or interpret life’s events. Sometimes we see them only through the veil of human knowledge and wisdom. But then there are those times, if we’re open to it – when we see behind the veil, those times when we glimpse the very hand of God at work in our lives and in our world.

Here at First Church, we have an opportunity to come alongside one another and help to pull back the fabric of life and glimpse God’s glory. But that means being open to coming alongside one another in new and surprising ways. What this might look like, God only knows. But if and when we’re ready, it’s something that God does show to us – what it looks like and feels like to disciple another person in the faith; it can be electric! Discipling or nurturing or guiding another person in the faith might mean you simply get together one-on-one with someone from your Sunday school class or Bible study, or maybe it’s a young person from our GenOn Youth Program, or a neighbor, family member or friend.

The first step in knowing what it’s like is to just be open to a having a spiritual check-in with someone, maybe just sharing mutual support with each other. You don’t have to figure it all out upfront; God will lead the way when the time is right, particularly if you share with others your desire to check in from time to time; actually let someone know you’re open to it. You could do that after worship today or sometime this week.

And the beauty of it is that God already has shown us what it’s like to nurture and guide each other along our spiritual journey. We’ve seen in this church how God has reshaped and redefined family boundaries to ensure the Christian care and upbringing of our young people.

We’ve seen how God has called otherwise unrelated individuals to develop and share a special, lifelong bond, which has resulted in stronger faith in Christ and richer experiences of God’s love for all concerned.

We’ve seen how God has brought people to the doors of this church to encounter Jesus, the risen Lord, enfleshed in ministries of Christian fellowship, spiritual and physical assistance, and lifelong learning and growth.

This is what it is to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, over and above membership at First Presbyterian Church. The only question for us is, as an individual, do you really think of yourself as a disciple of Jesus; do we look for opportunities to help others dig below the surface and to see God at work in our lives and in our world.

Part of being a member of First Presbyterian Church, or any Christian church, is faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. And part of having that faith is showing it to others.

So let's look for those opportunities to share in life as a family of faith, to share in both the joys of life and in the struggles. Because when it's our faith that we bring to bear on life's circumstances, that's when God opens the way forward, so that we can most fully experience and share in life's richest blessings as brothers and sisters in the Lord, as fellow disciples of Jesus Christ. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Almighty God, you gave rise to creation in the beginning; you continue to care for the universe and all that is in it; and you find yet more things to begin anew.

Surely there is a new age coming if we but have the eyes and the ears and the understanding to behold it.

Surely it will emerge if we have the will to invite it and embrace it.

Help us to ever look to you in all our beginnings, our "start overs," and at those times of completion, ever thankful of your guidance and your nurture along the way.

We pray all this, lifting up in song the prayer that you taught us, singing together:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;

**and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.**

Amen.