

# RUNAWAY FORGIVENESS

*It seems Onesimus ran away for a little while so that you could have him back forever.*  
Philemon 1:15

While I was gone a week ago, 'suffering for Jesus' at Golf Camp in the beautiful Black Hills of SD, 3 very different events were reported in the news. The absolute focus required to be an effective "dean" at golf camp prohibited me from watching TV...plus the fact that there is virtually no television reception in the camp; made me completely unaware of these happenings until just a few days ago...and I wish to comment.

A couple weeks ago now a local situation boiled over in a small town in southern Ohio. Seems there is a zealous and dedicated pastor who with some loyal members of his church, have been protesting the presence of a strip joint (Gentlemen's Club) some 7 miles from their church. It has been going on for 4 years, and has evolved to include the harassment of both the owner and workers in the club, along with those patrons who frequent the club; even to the point of recording license plate numbers and placing them on a website (since closed down) called something about shame! Well, a few weeks ago the owner and employees of the strip joint decided to turn the tables on the church folk and showed up before the church began, staging their own protests. The women were dressed in bikinis, and carried banners denouncing the pastor and church for their judgmentalism and general lack of compassion, and according to the owner and women; their overall hypocrisy. Wouldn't that be an interesting turn of events to greet us at our door on a Sunday Morning?

An issue much closer to home. In Macon Georgia, the new pastor of a church there, went to enroll his son in school only to discover that the school's mascot name is The Demons. He almost immediately began a campaign within his church and community, to gather signatures to get the named changed. (Sound familiar to any who have recently resided in Devil's Lake?)

He has since been arrested twice for illegally protesting in front of the school, and most recently shouting through a bull horn to the Principal as he approached the school building, that the Principal needed to repent. In a news account the Principal noted the history of the name has nothing to do with the biblical or spiritual entities we call demons, but was a name given to a local squadron of Air Force pilots 60 years ago, who were immortalized for their bravery and valor, which earned them the nickname Screamin Demons. When the school was established, they chose that nickname to remember those men. Wonder how the young people in that school will respond when invited to attend youth group at that church?

In more recent days, an event that occurred almost a year ago has been finalized...a bit. Tiger and Elin Woods are officially divorced. It seems the natural consequence of some very salacious decisions he made with women other than his wife. Most of us have resigned ourselves to the fact that he got what he deserved, and she got a lot of money...which is why people get married in the first place...right? I don't bring this up because I play golf, or love Tiger Woods, but because of something that happened to me almost immediately after the ugly incident blew up last November. As the press and rest of the world roundly condemned Tiger for his actions, his cover-ups, his less than convincing press conferences...I was struck with this thought: what if he were a friend of mine, and more significantly; what if he and Elin were members here of Legacy UMC. I think we might think of them differently. I believe that we'd all have a much more gracious reaction to them if we knew them, than if they remain strangers to us. I believe they might have found in this grace-filled and redemptive place; some loving support and the caring healing that all of us are finding here right now!

I bring these three events to our minds today partly because of a scripture story that God impressed on my heart while driving home from my mom's last Monday. I don't know why God reminded me of this story from the book of Philemon, but this is how it's about to come out.

Along with the 23 other public or corporate Epistles that the Apostle Paul wrote, he also wrote 4 personal letters that are recorded in the New Testament. Well, actually three, but one was a two-parter. He wrote to Titus, and the two letters to Timothy, and this much shorter, much more intimate note, a postcard really, 25 short verses...and yet in this amazing story I believe there is a message for us.

You see, I'm absolutely convinced that even though John 3:17 records *that God sent Jesus into the world not to condemn the world, but to save the world through him...* most people who don't yet know Jesus, don't believe the same is true about those who say they are followers of Jesus. Most people in this country believe that Christianity (or at least the church) has devolved into an "anti-everything", "out of touch", "hypocritical and pharisaic" "always begging for money", boring relic. They believe we're against just about everything. We are noticed, or more appropriately "when" we are noticed; it's for being against just about everything the rest of the world seems to love, relish and enjoy. It is a terrible reputation for a group that was commanded to be known by our love; and that to be a witness to the world. We've been relegated to the periphery of society; and largely it's not because we are ineffective in our presentations, or impotent in our organizations, or inefficient in our efforts...it's because we don't love one another, let alone forgive as we've been forgiven, or give because we've received so much. No, we're known for our judgementalism and hypocrisy. I want to change that. Let's look at this letter: (read Philemon 1-25)

We get from this one sided exchange part of the story; I'll try to fill in some details. Paul was in Rome, about 30 years after Jesus' death, under house arrest for preaching the gospel, yet free enough to entertain guests, and continue his teaching. An escaped slave made Paul's acquaintance; whether he had heard of and wished to meet Paul, or had been imprisoned himself, or because the serendipitous hand of God brought them together...we don't know. Apparently, Paul had the opportunity to lead this young slave to a saving faith in Jesus, and thereafter the slave Onesimus began serving and ministering to and with the Apostle. When Onesimus shared with Paul that he was once a slave belonging to Paul's friend, Philemon, a leader of the church in a city near Colossae; Paul wrote this note to encourage his friend to receive and be reconciled to his once former slave; who was now his faith brother.

Can you imagine Philemon opening the door of his mansion one day; and there stands the slave who ran away, holding a letter, addressed to him from Paul, their mentor and the founder of both their faith lives? How do you suppose Philemon reacted – it's no where recorded? But judging by the fact that this book is now included in the corpus of the New Testament, I'm guessing they were reconciled, and a divine hug took place following the reading of the letter. I don't see this letter being included if Philemon disregards Paul's "encouragement", throws away this letter, and has his slave Onesimus branded or killed which was his legal right. Judging from the description Paul gives of the graciousness and generosity of Philemon, I'm betting that a sweet reunion took place, and a new relationship began.

Now to the point. This letter might be used to make an argument about the institution of slavery, and time might worthily be spent doing so; but for the purpose of this message, I want to focus on what enabled Philemon to heed Paul's favor, and embrace his former slave, now turned faith brother; Onesimus.

It was the fact that Philemon, like Onesimus, had been a slave, a slave to sin without God in his life. It was the fact that Philemon, like Onesimus, had run away from God and probably stolen from Him too. It was the fact that Philemon, like Onesimus abandoned his responsibilities, and sought refuge maybe not in a far away land like Rome, but far away from God.

One day, whether by intention or accident, Philemon, like Onesimus, heard the Good News about Jesus from an agent of God named Paul, and his life was changed, his past was forgiven, his chains were broken, his heart was mended, and his future was different. Philemon, like Onesimus was forgiven, and now Philemon faced the one who had so sorely wronged him, with a choice...this generous recipient of God's forgiveness...was now being compelled to be an extension of that forgiveness to Onesimus.

Forgiveness is a process not an act...and rarely an easy act. Forgiveness is an ongoing choice, not a one time statement, or declaration. Forgiveness involves three very distinctive elements: repentance, restitution, and reconciliation. Onesimus repented by admitting to Paul that he had stolen from his owner, and run away illegally. Paul reassured Philemon that he would help with the restitution, and make his accounts right upon his impending return to Colossae. And now, restoration was pending in the hands of a former slave owner, who finished reading the brief letter we just read.

Sometimes all we focus on is repentance. Sometimes in conversations with my friends at the prison I am reminded that restitution from there is difficult. And I know that sometimes reconciliation is impossible, maybe not even desirable, sometimes not even healthy. But the point must not be missed.

When we consider how much we have been forgiven...like Paul subtly reminded Philemon...how can we maintain a critical and judgmental attitude toward other people?

How can we sneer at the folly of Tiger and Elin, or thousands of others whose marriages don't work? How can we condemn the sin of stripping while ignoring so many others, and the women themselves? How can we who claim to love Jesus be so threatened by a name, that we level shouts of "repent" to an innocent public servant who is seeking to teach our children? We must be more careful what we protest, and what we condemn, and what we judge...lest it come back to roost in our own lap or on our own church steps. Didn't Jesus tell a story about casting the first stone? How did that go again?

I'm in no way advocating that stripping for a living is anything but tragic and sad. I'd never blame Elin for leaving, but neither would I automatically assume that reconciliation were impossible with the right commitment from both her and Tiger. And if I were starting a school, I'd probably choose a different nickname than "The Demons". I worked on a church staff onetime with a fellow who was fond of saying: "You don't have to crucified on every cross you drive by." I think that meant it might be wise to carefully choose the battles we fight; not all of them are worth it. I had a seminary professor who was fond of saying: "A dog can always beat a skunk in a fight...but it's just not worth the effort." Again, probably the same message.

Philemon and Onesimus and Paul give us a good reminder today...I hope we'll take it to heart and be more gracious, and forgiving...not so hard when we remember how much grace and forgiveness we have all received.

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