



September 4, 2016 – “An Open Letter to PHPC, Philemon”

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Have you ever read an “open letter?” An open letter is addressed to one person or group, but is meant for publication or to be read by a wide audience. Often these letters address a problem. Throughout history, a few open letters have been very effective—think Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter a Birmingham Jail.” Open letters are usually meant to persuade not just those who it’s addressed to, but to all the readers who come across it. Written in response to eight white southern religious leaders, King’s letter was published in the newspaper, discussing non-violent demonstrations in response to segregation. His letter gives not only the 8 original writers a chance to contemplate his points, but for a whole nation of readers to choose his way of change.

Think of Paul’s letter to Philemon as an open letter. It’s initially addressed to Philemon, a “dear friend and co-worker” of Paul’s, but then is also meant to be heard by Apphia, Archippus, and to the whole church that meets in Philemon’s house. And since we are reading it again today, it appears that this letter made the rounds— not only among Philemon’s church, but among the early Christian church, and through centuries of Christian readers. While it’s not as long as King’s, it certainly has a similar goal—to persuade its readers to “do the right thing” in pursuit of following Jesus Christ—and that means choosing right relationship over being right.

Now some open letters are nasty—passive aggressive and insulting. One example is this recently published open letter from a writer at the Chicago Tribune to Olympic swimmer Ryan Lochte:

“Dear Stupid, (and you know who you are, Ryan Lochte),
No. Wait. You don’t know who you are. You don’t know what a dope you are. Because you’re acting like a spoiled brat. At 32. Because you could swim well. Yeesh.

In an NPR opinion piece titled, “An Open Letter...About Open Letters,” author Samara O’Shea writes, “I advise against writing an open letter—or any letter—when you are angry or in immediate defensive response to another open letter. Write the letter when you are calm and be ready to stand by your words if there’s a backlash or condescending comments.”

Paul, sitting in jail, understands the purpose of an open letter, because he’s spent much of his adult life writing them to early house churches. In this letter, Paul isn’t writing from a place of raw anger, commanding Philemon to do his will, but is appealing to him on the basis of love. Like many good parents who want their children to learn to make the right choices on their own—Paul wants Philemon to want to do the right thing. But what exactly is the right thing here? Onesimus is likely a runaway slave—why he ran, we can’t be sure, but what we can be sure of is that runaway slaves, if caught, are destined for punishment. And so legally, the right thing for Paul to do would be to return the slave to his master, who would deal with any punishment.



Unfortunately, this letter has been used in our own country's history to make this argument. "Rational" arguments were made, citing Paul's words and actions. Something along the lines of, Paul accepts the institution of slavery, and so should we. It's in the Bible! Looking back in time, it seems obvious that's a pretty ridiculous rationalization of a terrible blot in our nation and world's history. But that's the trouble with what Paul is asking. If Philemon is going to do what is culturally acceptable and legal in his times, the right thing to do doesn't bode well for Onesimus.

In King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail," he directly addresses this conflict of interests between law and what is right in relation to segregation. He says "The answer is found in the fact that there are two types of laws: there are just laws, and there are unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that 'An unjust law is no law at all...' A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law, or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law."

Paul beats around the bush a little more, but this is what he is getting at. He has the advantage that his intended audience is not in opposition to his life's work as a follower of Jesus, but co-workers. They are a community of faith who are already living in opposition in some ways—they believe things that maybe their own friends and families don't believe, they are trying to follow teachings of Jesus that are just plain hard, and they're welcoming people into their community that they would never have talked to before. As Christians, they are different. But the decisions and choices Paul is asking Philemon, and Philemon's surrounding community to make, might have seemed like too big of a lifestyle change. Slavery might be unjust, but it's how they got things done. And to welcome someone who was considered less than human as a brother, as they would welcome Paul, their beloved leader? That just seems a little much.

Paul is giving Philemon an opportunity to set an example of what it means to follow Jesus for his church community by choosing the way of Christ—which is often different than the rules of society. The way of Christ asks us to choose right relationship over being right every time.

Palmer Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=utSZIKaloT0&feature=youtu.be>

Unfortunately, what is right is complicated. Even when we are "right," we might not be right about the whole picture. Who we are in conflict with is probably also right about something. As Park Palmer said, "if I'm not in right relationship with those who disagree with me, we can't hold the space long enough to work through these complications."

Most of you have probably caught some glimpse of the San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick coverage in the last week, when he caught the media's attention after not standing during the national anthem. He did this intentionally, because he felt it was right in protest of what he sees as wrongdoings against African Americans and minorities in the United States. And as usual, what is right is complicated, as we have seen by the backlash of anger and support across the nation. All eyes were on Kaepernick on Thursday night when the 49ers played the San Diego Chargers at their annual military



tribute game. Here's what showed up on camera that night: (show CBS news footage of Kaepernick kneeling).

Ok, so he's kneeling. Still not standing, not pleasing his critics. Look to his left and you'll see Former Army Green Beret Nate Boyer standing at attention with his hand over his heart. And while this looks like a picture of opposition, what you're actually seeing are two people working to be in right relationship with one another, trying to hold the space between them long enough to work through complications. In the theme of open letters, Boyer released one of his own this week in the Army Times. It was addressed to Colin Kaepernick, but quickly gained a public audience. It's a little longer than Paul's letter, so we aren't going to read all of it, but here's an excerpt to give you the gist of it.

"I'm not judging you for standing up for what you believe in. It's your inalienable right. What you are doing takes a lot of courage, and I'd be lying if I said I knew what it was like to walk around in your shoes. I've never had to deal with prejudice because of the color of my skin, and for me to say I can relate to what you've gone through is as ignorant as someone who's never been in a combat zone telling me they understand what it's like to go to war.

Even though my initial reaction to your protest was one of anger, I'm trying to listen to what you're saying and why you're doing it. When I told my mom about this article, she cautioned me that "the last thing our country needed right now was more hate." As usual, she's right.

There are already plenty people fighting fire with fire, and it's just not helping anyone or anything. So I'm just going to keep listening, with an open mind."

Following this letter, Kaepernick invited Boyer to the game, and they met and talked for an hour and a half before kick-off, speaking together about different avenues of protest. Kaepernick expressed his desire not to disrespect the military with his protest, and they arrived at the decision that tonight when the Star Spangled Banner begins, Kaepernick would take a knee, in respect to those who have served in the military alongside his dissent for a country which he feels oppresses black people and people of color. So side by side, they took their stand-or their knee, holding that space Palmer talks about as they continue to work through their differences. Boyer closes his letter saying, "I look forward to the day you're inspired to once again stand during our national anthem. I'll be standing right there next to you."

Paul hopes to be standing next to Philemon. What's right for Philemon and Onesimus is complicated. Between law, cultural expectations, financial investment, Paul's letter, their church community, and the possibility of slave turning brother, what is "right" for either one of them will compromise something for the other. We don't know what happened at the end of this story-we only have one side of a conversation through letters-but from Paul's letter, we can tell that he expected and promised to stay in relationship with Philemon and Onesimus as best he could, without hearing the outcome of this situation. "Prepare a guest room for me," Paul writes. I'm coming to see you when this is all over!



What was right for the Civil Rights movement and race relations is and was complicated. Changing laws made an enormous difference in the life of African-Americans in the United States-but changing the systems that continue to oppress people of color is a process that continues to challenge our country. Staying in relationship is the only thing that moves progress forward. As King writes, "We must come to see that human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of men [and I'll insert women here too] willing to be coworkers with God."

Following Jesus, choosing right relationship over being right and staying with one another in the difficulties of conflict is what church is all about. And that's why letters like Paul's and Dr. King's are read to the whole community. It's why the choice to free Onesimus is not only on Philemon's shoulders, but in the hands of his whole church family. It's why the fight for desegregation and racial equality wasn't only the burden of Martin Luther King or just a problem for people of color, but a daily struggle we each have responsibility for. And it's why we as a community of faith come together-to pray, sing, learn and serve in right relationship with our God and our brothers and sisters in Christ. So, as promised in my sermon title, here's my open letter to Pleasant Hill Presbyterian Church for today, only slightly plagiarized from the Apostle Paul.

Dear Andy and Jody, and Janice and Rose, and Erin, and the session, and the youth, and the children, and all those at Pleasant Hill Presbyterian Church,

I thank God everyday for you, because I know of your love and faithfulness, which you have both for our Lord Jesus, and for all God's people. I pray that you continue to find ways inside and outside the walls of this church to connect faith with everyday life. I work with great encouragement because of your love, because I see the hearts of God's people lifted up by your actions, my sisters and brothers in Christ.

Therefore, I appeal to you on the basis of love to go beyond being right, and to follow Jesus by being in right relationship with all God's people. On Friday night, our 8th grade confirmation class served dinner at Clifton Sanctuary Ministries for the men staying there. As we prepared and served the food, we were thanked for what we brought, and for giving our time. It felt right to serve people who are hungry. And it is! But more than being right is being in right relationship. So our 8th graders grabbed a plate and plopped down at the tables next to those they had just served and ate dinner too. Over baked ziti they learned each other's names, talked about sports, laughed over TV shows, and listened to what the other had to say. More than servers and customers, we became brothers and sisters, breaking bread together.

So, as you come to the Lord's Table in a few minutes for communion, think about places in your life where there's a difference between being right and being in right relationship. Is it a political argument on Facebook? A family member holding a grudge over your head? Fear of getting to know someone different than you? Forgiveness that doesn't come easily? None of this will be easy to fix-but consider how you can bring it before your church family, and let us walk with you in this. I'm writing to you, confident of your love for right relationship over being right, knowing with each other's support and the work of the Spirit, you will do more than what I ask. Also, one more thing-prepare a guest room for me.



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Sermon Archives

I'm coming over for dinner and staying for dessert. May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your Spirit. Amen.