

Welcomed Guest

**Ps 146 & Philemon 1:17-22 (Text 1:22)
563, 548, 530, 556**

***One thing more – prepare a guest room for me,
for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you.
(Philemon 1:7)***

This is a fascinating little letter.
It's the only personal letter of Paul's
that made it into the New Testament.
The historian in me is curious about how many other personal letters like this
might have been written by Paul
and what we might have learned from them.

But we'll never know, this side of the veil between earth and heaven.

So we focus on what we can learn from this one.

For example, Paul values the love and prayers of the Christian community
to give him the resilience to stay true to the Gospel
in a world that ignores or is hostile to it.

As another example, Paul sees in the work of God in Jesus Christ
the fulfillment of all the promises for well-being
that God made to this world since creation.

And still another example, Paul knows deep in his bones that accepting Jesus as Lord
means profound changes in way we see the world and act in the world.

For Philemon, specifically, it means treating Onesimus,
his slave who had stolen from him and run away,
as a beloved friend in Christ and a welcomed guest in his home,
forgiving all that he had done
foregoing all the punishments that the Roman Empire allowed him to inflict,
including death.

That's a tall order from Paul,
claiming that in these matters he is indeed speaking for Jesus Christ.

That's a huge change for Philemon,
settled as he is into the comfort and status
of his position in the community and in the church.

And that's an incredible gift for Onesimus,
who had every reason to expect the severest of punishments
for his disobedience to that state's laws,
regardless of how faithful he had been to the Gospel
in working with Paul in planting churches.

At the heart of all these changes,
changes that emerge from accepting Jesus as Lord,
is a process of becoming a welcomed guest.

First, and foremost, we are welcomed guests of God.
The story of the Gospel
is the story of the story of the prodigal welcomed home.
That home is this world
transformed by the love of God into the commonwealth of God.
It is a community of justice, peace, and beauty,
a family full of mutual respect and support.
The crafting and cultivation of this home
Is not yet complete,
but its success is guaranteed in Jesus Christ,
the first person of the new humanity being transformed by God.
To be part of the church
is to participate in this welcoming transformation.

Many don't know what to do with this welcome.

The oldest son was outraged.
It was not fair.
He'd been so good.
His prodigal brother had been so bad.
Why was he not being punished?
What's with this 'welcomed guest' thing?

Even the returning son expected to be treated like a slave.
His attempt to live without his father
had been a miserable failure.
There had to be some cost for that.

But the restoration is unconditional.
It creates a new reality for the whole creation
In which every beloved friend of God
is a welcomed guest.

That means that Onesimus comes home to Philemon
as a welcomed guest, not as a runaway, thieving slave.

That means that Paul comes to Colossae after his release from prison
as a welcomed guest, not a harping critic.

That means that Philemon grows to a new level of appreciation
for the changes that the God of the Gospel
initiates and enables in his life,
as he discovers new depths of faith, hope, and love
as a welcomed guest in the life of the community of the friends of Jesus Christ,
not a stubborn outcast insisting that he knew best.

And all of this means that we are always welcomed guests
here in this house of worship, learning, fellowship and service
that the Spirit has fashioned as the home of our reconciliation with God.
It is to the table of reconciliation that we are invited this morning,
to be welcomed there by Jesus, our Lord, as respected guests
and nourished by his incomparable grace.

I've been reading Anne Lamott's wonderful novel called *Blue Shoes*.
The story revolves around Matti, a single mom with two kids
and a cast of family and friends
who all bring to life wonderfully Paul's descriptions
of humans being 'treasures in earthen vessels.'
There's a short story that Matti's minister tells her one Sunday
about a woman who asked her minister
whether everyone she loved would be in heaven.
"What will make it heaven," said the minister,
"is that you'll love everyone who is there." (157)

That's what the God of the Gospel invites us to do here,
as we step into those words from the Lord's Prayer,
"your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven."

As this church goes about its business
of nourishing souls to flourish in the grace of Jesus Christ,
making people feel that they are welcome guests of God in this space of grace
is a crucial step in helping Jesus encounter them with his redemption.
We don't know and we can't control how the Spirit will use this space
to bring people into a more conscious and contented relationship with Jesus.
But we do know how important the welcome these guests get is
and we can enhance that welcome for every soul drawn to this sanctuary.

May God use every welcome offered to every guest
to touch that person with the irresistible vibe
of the steadfast and everlasting love of God in Jesus Christ.