

09/08/2019

O God, we thank you that you have called us your children. We are thankful for your provision, your guidance and your unending love for us. As your children, help us to listen and obey. You know us better than we know ourselves. Let us rest in that truth and live in the joy of being the children of God! Amen.

A grandfather was sitting on the porch after dinner with his three young grandsons. The older boy asks the grandfather to make the croaking noise that frogs make. "No, not tonight," he replied. "I'm not feeling that well." The second grandson continues. "Please, grandpa, you know the noise we mean. We want to hear the frog croak."

"Not tonight," grandpa responded, getting a little annoyed. "Why do you insist on my making the frog noise?"

The smallest grandson pipes up. "Well, mommy says that when Grandpa croaks, we all get to go to Disneyworld."

Sometimes we don't treat people with the dignity that they deserve.

This morning, we read a very personal letter from Paul to Philemon.

What struck me, was that it brought me back to a portion of the Baptismal Promises. "Will we strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being"?

This is one of the few occasions that we essentially read an entire letter from Paul. He is writing to his trusted friend, Philemon and for a very specific purpose. He is writing on behalf of his new brother Onesimus, who apparently has been a slave in the household of Philemon. We don't know if he was a run away or not, but had somehow ended up spending time with Paul and had become a believer. Now Paul is sending him back. But in his eyes, Onesimus was no longer a slave but a brother in Christ.

Paul would have been very aware of the significance of a runaway slave, hence the letter.

He does not weigh in on the issue of slavery and probably accepted this as part of the social milieu at that time. No matter how Paul may have felt in the beginning, about Onesimus as a slave, he now held him up as a friend and a brother. And he expected Philemon to do the same.

We must remember that slavery for the Jewish people was nothing like what we know slavery to be. Slavery in our history was called chattel slavery. People who were taken by force and were considered to be property. They were bought and sold as such. Most slaves in the time of the Israelites lived and worked within the family they served, many times paying off a debt that was owed. Some were too poor to make it on their own so they worked for someone who could take care of them and pay off their debts. But debt slavery came with a time limit.

Exodus 21:2 states:

“When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free, for nothing”. This was what happened with Jacob when he sold himself to Laban for fourteen years to pay the bridal prices of Leah and Rachel.

Interestingly enough, it was not illegal for a slave to run away **but the debt was still owed**. This may be why Paul offers to pay off any debt that Onesimus might still owe Philemon.

As I said before, this type of slavery had little appearance to what we know today. Any Jew who would have kidnapped someone to sell, would have serious consequences.

Exodus 21:16 states: “Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death”.

The evils of slavery in this country are not debatable, but how we deal with the after effects today is very much in the news.

There is an article on the Episcopal News website that came out this past week.

Virginia Theological Seminary announced that it had set aside \$1.7 million dollars for a slavery reparations fund which would be used in various ways toward justice and peace initiatives; to raise up more African American Clergy to serve the Church; and possibly for ways to help serve the descendants of the slaves who worked to build the university.

The article goes on to say that, "Students at Georgetown University have pushed a measure that would raise a reparations fund at the Jesuit university in Washington by adding a fee to students' tuition bills. Georgetown is a prominent case because of its own research into the 272 campus-owned slaves who were sold in 1838 to save the school from closure".

Racism still remains as an indignity towards another person. It has no place in being a follower of Jesus. In 2006, General Convention passed a resolution supporting federal legislation that would confront the country's legacy of slavery and take a step toward "monetary and non-monetary reparations to the descendants of the victims of slavery."

As we have discussed before, areas we face today include immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. This is not new in our country. Hannah Arendt was a Jewish political philosopher born 1906 in Hanover, Germany. In 1933, fearing Nazi persecution, she fled to France. Then in 1941, she fled to the US after spending time in a French Internment Camp as an "enemy alien".

In 1943, she wrote an article called, "We Refugees." In part she states; "In order to forget more efficiently, we (Jews) rather avoid any allusion to concentration or internment camps we experienced in nearly all European countries—it might be interpreted as pessimism or

lack of confidence in the new homeland. Besides, how often have we been told that nobody likes to listen to all that; hell is no longer a religious belief or a fantasy, but something as real as houses and stones and trees. Apparently, nobody wants to know that contemporary history has created a new kind of human beings—the kind that are put in concentration camps by their foes and in internment camps by their friends”. Tragically, we saw this in our country during WWII with the Japanese.

Hanna speaks about the Jews having to assimilate in whatever country and people that they found themselves part of. And when they were driven out of one country, they had to assimilate into another.

Most of the time, this came with an abandonment of who they were and where they came from. There is little dignity in that. This brought to my mind that ironically, a type of reverse assimilation took place with the Native Americans. It was the immigrants, in this case, who came into this country, and forced the indigenous people to assimilate to their customs, traditions, language and way of life. I can say after having spent 7 years at the Fort Hall Reservation in Idaho, that this has not been forgotten by the Indigenous people and the ripple effects are still there.

How do we overcome this history of treating others with less dignity than they deserve? These public displays of asking forgiveness are needed and long waited for. Yes, we as individuals and even as church, had no direct involvement with the atrocities commitment centuries ago. Yet, there are still acts of discrimination in many forms today that are taking place. The deliberate actions of institutions like Virginia Theological Seminary, Georgetown University, and Episcopal Migration Ministries are important steps along the path of recovery and action.

When it comes to our individual efforts to treat others with the dignity, we do what we can through Racism training, SAFE training, online classes, and reading. Also, through many various ministries that we can be involved in. In October, I am taking classes at Hospice of Lenawee to learn more about Hospice Ministry and what that might look like. My only involvement with Hospice has been from the medical side of things. Other than visits to patients in the hospital, I have never ministered with those who are near death. I also came across a program called, "No One Dies Alone". NODA provides compassionate presence to individuals who have no family or close friends to sit with them at the end of life. It was started by a nurse back in 2001. She was asked by a patient to sit with him on her night shift. She had been told he might not make it through the night, but she was alone and had other patients to tend to. She told him she would come back as soon as she could, but when she went back, he had passed away. This was devastating to her and she knew that many patients had no family or friends to be with them and a lot of folks do not want to die alone. Since then, Programs have been started at many hospitals around the country. They have lists of people that can be called day or night just to come and sit with the patient if needed. This gives some measure of dignity and love to the dying that they might not otherwise have.

Paul uses the Greek term, *koinonia*. when he addresses Philemon. He prays that "the *koinonia*, or sharing, of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. *Koinonia* means sharing, contribution, fellowship, spiritual communion. We speak of contribution, not only financially for the continued work of God, but also in time. We speak of fellowship, not just at coffee hour after church, but as we read in the Book of Acts; the first converts to Christianity "devoted themselves to the apostles'

teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers". Koinonia is companionship, friendship, and comradeship.

It also means spiritual communion. Paul asks the Corinthians; "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ?" The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?" (1 Corinthians 10:16). When we receive the sacrament of Holy Eucharist, we are sharing and participating in a meal that connects us to Christ and to each other.

This level of sharing is not possible outside of our Baptismal promises to treat each other with dignity, with love, and in a setting of justice.

Paul's letter today, overflows with love, respect, and dignity towards both Philemon and Onesimus. He is not concerned about how Onesimus will be received because He knows how much Philemon loves Jesus and his fellow servants in Christ. Paul is confident that Philemon will respond in love.

There are many opportunities out there for us to share Koinonia with our sisters and brothers in Christ.

God loves each of us. We all have worth. We all have dignity. Not everyone believes that. However, we have been called to make sure that as many people as possible know this. Now is the time.

Amen