

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time: September 8, 2019
St. Mary's Catholic Church, Richmond VA
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His name is Philemon. Not *Pokemon*, but Philemon. And he has a problem.

We heard about Philemon's problem in today's second reading. Saint Paul's letter to Philemon is the shortest book in the Bible. It has only 23 verses.

In this short letter, Paul tells Philemon that Philemon has a problem... and so do *we*.

What is the problem? It's this: If we take Jesus seriously, we'll see that Jesus wants us to change the world. And doing that is going to be very hard.

A little background: Paul writes this letter around the year 60. He is in prison for the "crime" of preaching about Jesus.

Paul has a friend named Pokemon... er, *Philemon*! Paul probably baptized Philemon. In a sense, Philemon owes his faith, and his soul, to Paul!

Like many people at that time, Philemon owned slaves. One of his slaves, named Onesimus, ran away, and found his way to Paul. What did Paul do? Paul preached to him, and baptized him!

Then, Paul writes his brief letter to Philemon.

And Paul says: "I am sending Onesimus, your slave, back to you." Paul says, "I am sending him back to you, not as a *slave*, but as a *brother in Christ*." And Paul concludes, "if you love me, then treat Onesimus *as you would treat me*."

Do you see Philemon's problem?

Philemon and Onesimus are now baptized brothers in Christ. They worship the same God and receive the same Eucharist. Paul's point is this – once Jesus comes into the equation, *everything changes*.

Paul's message to Philemon is clear: "If you take Jesus seriously, you have to change the way you treat people!"

Jesus has CREATED a problem for Philemon!

The whole economic structure of the ancient world was built upon slavery. Everyone's livelihood depended on slavery.

Jesus messes this up! Because once a slave and a slave-owner become brothers in Christ, everything *has* to change. Paul said, "Treat him as you would treat me."

Life was easier before this trouble-making Jesus came along...

Drive around Richmond, and read the electronic signs in front of Churches. You will see signs that say, "Do you have questions? Jesus has answers!" Or, "Are you struggling? Jesus will lift your burden!" You get the impression that Jesus came to fix our problems.

But along comes Jesus in today's Gospel reading, and he says: "If you want to follow me, you must hate your father and mother, your spouse and children, and your whole life. Oh, and you have to renounce all your money."

What? Imagine if I put a big sign out front announcing: "If you want to join St. Mary's, you must hate your parents, your spouse and your kids, and give us all your money." What do you think would happen to attendance?

Now, when Jesus says that we have to "hate" our families, we've hit a bit of a translation problem. The Greek word Jesus uses means, "You have to love me first, love me fully, and then all of your other loves flow from that."

The Greek word is about our relationship *priorities*. We must love Christ first. He is our top priority. Then every other love in our life flows from that.

Our love for Jesus must shape our love for everyone else. And that will change how we treat our parents, our spouse, our children. It may create conflicts. It will require that we change how we treat our families, our neighbors, (our slaves), our enemy.

Jesus is creating NEW problems for us!

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus's disciples quickly came to understand – once you take Jesus seriously, he is going to keep causing you problems. Philemon quickly discovered – once he took Jesus seriously, his whole life, his whole economic and social world, was getting turned around... because – now - his slave was his *brother*.

If you are coming to church hoping that Jesus will *fix* your problems, you may not be paying attention. Each week, the Gospel should create a new problem for you!

Let me give an example. I am a flawed human being. And as a flawed human being, there are members of this parish who, every time I see them, they get on my last nerve! (Do you know someone like that?)

Well, if it weren't for Jesus, this wouldn't be a problem! If I were not a Christian and I meet someone I don't like, I can just ignore them, dismiss them, brush them aside.

But Jesus has created a problem for me. That parishioner who gets on my nerves: He's a brother in Christ, she's a sister in Christ. And I have to treat them the way I would treat Christ!

(Darn it!)

How easy life would be if I could just dismiss the people I want to dismiss. Lots of folks do that in our culture.

But Jesus has created a problem. He demands that I treat you the way I would treat Jesus. And that takes work.

When we fail to do what Jesus demands, the world is fractured. 400 years ago the first Africans came to the New World. They arrived on the ironically named "Point Comfort," which we now call "Hampton, Virginia." They came to this New World as slaves.

Think how different our nation's history would be if, from the very beginning, someone had allowed Jesus to give them a problem; if they had stood up 400 years ago and said, "We cannot treat them as slaves – we must treat them as brothers and sisters in Christ."

We still wrestle with the horrible repercussions of our failure to do what Jesus demands.

After the Civil War slavery ended, but we got 'creative' in finding new ways to subjugate African Americans. We called them the "Jim Crow" laws. Why weren't there more voices demanding that we treat African Americans like sisters and brothers in Christ?

When Irish immigrants came to this country, they faced violent persecution in the cities of the northeast. When Italians and Poles came here, they faced racial and cultural hatreds.

Today, human trafficking continues. Young people are seized and their lives are stolen.

Doesn't Christ want us to have a problem with that?

Doesn't Christ want us to have a problem with the fact that people get paid different wages to do identical work?

Isn't Christ demanding that we treat children in the womb the way that we would treat Christ? Isn't Christ demanding that we treat children at the border the way we would treat Christ? Isn't Christ demanding that we treat the prisoner on death row, the hungry veteran down the street, the family member with dementia, the lonely neighbor, the way we would treat Christ?

Like I said, if we take him seriously, Jesus and his Gospel will create new problems for us, every time we listen. Oh, and he also creates new opportunities for us to be strengthened to do his work, every time we come together here, in a community of brothers and sisters who can inspire us to stay faithful. Here, we encounter the community where we are nourished for this work in the body and blood of Christ... Christ, whom we should love first and best.

One day, a visitor saw Mother Teresa cleaning the wounds of a dying leper. The visitor felt sick to his stomach, and said to Mother Teresa in his Texas accent, "I wouldn't do that for a million dollars."

And Mother Teresa replied, "Neither would I. But I would gladly do it for Christ...."

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