

Sermon Archive 529

Sunday 30 March, 2025

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reading: Philemon 1-22

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



A Letter from Jourdan Anderson to Colonel P.H Anderson (1865)

Dayton, Ohio, August 7, 1865.

To my old Master, Colonel P. H. Anderson, Big Spring, Tennessee.

Sir:

I got your letter, and was glad to find that you had not forgotten Jourdon, and that you wanted me to come back and live with you again, promising to do better for me than anybody else can. I have often felt uneasy about you. I thought the Yankees would have hung you long before this, for harboring Rebs they found at your house. I suppose they never heard about your going to Colonel Martin's to kill the Union soldier that was left by his company in their stable. Although you shot at me twice before I left you, I did not want to hear of your being hurt, and am glad you are still living. It would do me good to go back to the dear old home again, and see Miss Mary and Miss Martha and Allen, Esther, Green, and Lee. Give my love to them all, and tell them I hope we will meet in the better world, if not in this. I would have gone back to see you all when I was working in the Nashville Hospital, but one of the neighbors told me that Henry intended to shoot me if he ever got a chance.

I want to know particularly what the good chance is you propose to give me. I am doing tolerably well here. I get \$25 a month, with victuals and clothing; have a comfortable home for Mandy (the folks call her Mrs. Anderson), and the children, Milly, Jane, and Grundy, go to school and are learning well. The teacher says Grundy has a head for a preacher. They go to Sunday school, and Mandy and me attend church regularly. We are kindly treated. Sometimes we overhear others saying, "Them colored people were slaves" down in Tennessee. The children feel hurt when they hear such remarks; but I tell them it was no disgrace in Tennessee to

belong to Colonel Anderson. Many darkeys would have been proud, as I used to be, to call you master. Now if you will write and say what wages you will give me, I will be better able to decide whether it would be to my advantage to move back again.

As to my freedom, which you say I can have, there is nothing to be gained on that score, as I got my free papers in 1864 from the Provost-Marshal-General of the Department of Nashville. Mandy says she would be afraid to go back without some proof that you were disposed to treat us justly and kindly; and we have concluded to test your sincerity by asking you to send us our wages for the time we served you. This will make us forget and forgive old scores, and rely on your justice and friendship in the future. I served you faithfully for thirty-two years, and Mandy twenty years. At \$25 a month for me, and \$2 a week for Mandy, our earnings would amount to \$11,680. Add to this the interest for the time our wages have been kept back, and deduct what you paid for our clothing, and three doctor's visits to me, and pulling a tooth for Mandy, and the balance will show what we are in justice entitled to. Please send the money by Adams Express, in care of V. Winters, Esq., Dayton, Ohio. If you fail to pay us for faithful labors in the past, we can have little faith in your promises in the future. We trust the good Maker has opened your eyes to the wrongs which you and your fathers have done to me and my fathers, in making us toil for you for generations without recompense. Here I draw my wages every Saturday night; but in Tennessee there was never any pay-day for the negroes any more than for the horses and cows. Surely there will be a day of reckoning for those who defraud the laborer of his hire.

In answering this letter, please state if there would be any safety for my Milly and Jane, who are now grown up, and both good-looking girls. You know how it was with poor Matilda and Catherine. I would rather stay here and starve and die, if it come to that, than have my girls brought to shame by the violence and wickedness of their young masters. You will also please state if there has been any schools opened for the colored children in your neighborhood. The great desire of my life now is to give my children an education, and have them form virtuous habits.

From your old servant,

Jourdon Anderson

P.S.— Say howdy to George Carter, and thank him for taking the pistol from you when you were shooting at me.

Bible Reading: Philemon 1-22

Philemon - from Colossae. I received the letter a little bit nervously. Letters bring news, and yes, I'd heard that Paul had been arrested. The letter could well have been a farewell one. Like a doctor with bad news or a judge passing down a capital sentence that you don't want to hear but can't avoid, the letter could have been Paul thanking me for our friendship, wishing me well for the future, slipping in the news of his fate. Indeed, my heart sank when it began with "I thank God always when I mention you in my prayers . . ." It sounded like the start of a sign-off.

He'd been my friend for a long time, and I'd not be the person I am today without him. And "the person I am today" doesn't mean my wealth - although I have wealth, I've had it for ages (nice house, couple of slaves, good food and security). No, when I say "the person I am today" with Paul in mind, I mean hope. I think I mean peace - I mean how much **deep** peace does anyone have - so long as we have conscience and an awareness that Christ-in-the-heart notwithstanding, we're all probably still harbouring blind spots (I believe Lord, help my unbelief). Paul gave me faith, and for that I will always be grateful. So of course I'd heard that he was in prison, and the arrival of the letter caused me concern.

Also of concern was the sheepish creature delivering it to me - Onesimus. I can't tell you how long it had been since I'd seen him, although his disappearance was notable. "Where's bloody Onesimus gone, Master", his fellow slave had said - although not with the word "bloody" - that's my edit. I was so "bloody" cross. I'd kept him in clothing. I'd shared my food - well, the food of the house - not from my table, you understand (he's a slave).

No, I can't tell you how long I'd been looking for him, or whether I'd given up by the time he's there with this letter in his hand. I'd probably not given up, because slaves are worth money. You don't give up looking for something valuable, do you? And also there's a sort of "loss of face" when someone runs away from you. It's embarrassing - did you hear that Philemon's lost one of his slaves! Was that careless, or what? They

mock me . . . Now here he is in front of me - there's room here for retribution . . .

Room for retribution went to the back boiler when he handed me the letter - because suddenly it's not about the slave, but about my friend - Paul, and whether I'm going to lose him. The slave can wait . . .

"I thank God always when I mention you in my prayers . . ." O God!

Then no; he's **not** saying "goodbye". He's saying "hello", and "hello" also for someone else to whom, in prison, he has become very close. It's Onesimus, the sheepish slave. Paul calls him his "child". The request is that I take him back, forgive him for running away, give him a new place in my household - a freer, more dignified, shall I say "equal" status in my home.

I suppose you noticed I called Paul's word to me a "request", not a demand. He said "don't do it because I'm telling you to do it. Do it on the basis of love. Well, I hope he means love for Paul, not love for Onesimus, since I'm not sure the latter exists just yet. Paul has sent this young man back to me only because he trusts me to act in love. Is that presuming too much? Or does Paul believe that faith in Christ gives us power to love when others mightn't be able to? I don't know.

If you are listening to me on the fourth Sunday in Lent, let this be something of a fulcrum moment for you. There is someone called Paul, who loved Jesus Christ enough to dare to believe that others might love him enough to act out of love towards one another - and that that love would be strong enough to break down the wrongs of slavery that we can't even yet see. See, I'm not at the point of realising that this whole way of dividing the world into slave and free is a sin. But I'm willing (for faith and love) to let one slave not only be free, but to become my brother. In the middle of your Lent, be encouraged that this might be the power of gospel. You've been asking all through your Lenten season whether there is a vision you might spy way off there in the distant realm of Easter. Today, be blessed by the testimony of one slave owner that this one (just this one) today is free.

Thank you. Now off you go to have your moment of quiet.