

As Free As Onesimus -- Ginger Coakley

Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 1; Philemon 1:1-21; Luke 14:25-33

Many of you know me as I am today—Onesimus, a bishop now in Ephesus. But perhaps you do not know my back story. I was not born into this office. I came to it by way of slavery, and then restoration. I love to tell my story. More than it being my story, it is God's Story and can be yours.

"I ran. I ran as fast as I could. I had gathered my papers while the master and his friends were foolishly drunk. They weren't watching me or any of the other slaves in their house, so I stole my papers back and I ran. I never looked back. I have never run so fast in my life. 'Running forced me to live on the streets, but it was better than living under the master.'¹

"I eventually made my way from Laodicea² to Rome. When I got there, there was quite a buzz rippling through the streets about a man and a message he was proclaiming. I heard words like love, crucifixion, and phrases like 'obey the Lord's commands', and *give up all your possessions*, and *carry the cross*. Why would anyone choose to carry a cross? Here in Rome that's the vilest and most exploitive death one can die. I, I didn't know. I couldn't figure out if this Story was horrendous or remarkable. Many were praising the name of the Lord while still others were angry at this man, calling him blasphemous and a traitor. What did all these things mean? I was curious and I was watchful. Then I heard it—I learned of the place where this man was staying.

"The palate of my heart was so thirsty for life, I didn't have anything to lose. As a runaway slave the only thing coming to me was death anyhow. So I risked going to find this man. I sensed that this going was even more pivotal than my decision to run. I felt in my heart that this was a choice for *life and prosperity* or *death and destruction*, but something yet pulled at me to go. I found him finally. He had become imprisoned because people didn't like his message, but I was able to see him. I met Paul, I told him my story and asked questions about all I had heard in the streets. He told me the truth of everything—about a man who was fully God and fully man; he called this man Jesus and he told me some of his Story. He invited me into the Ekklesia and I went. I joined others in their homes. I heard them tell the Story from beginning to end many times as they gathered together at the table.

"Those at the table accepted me. I was restored in this community as I and they risked everything. They heard Jesus' words and lived by them, that they must give up everything to follow him. They put their lives on the line each night they met in the Ekklesia home. As we gathered, hosts told the Story to anyone who wanted to know more of Jesus. They came just like I did, seeking Truth about the murmurings in the street—murmurings of love and miracles, death and life. Each person who came asked hard questions, trying to reconcile this story as either absurd or remarkable. Most heard the Story and chose to 'risk all to serve Jesus—to keep covenant with him, to love as we have been loved. For this is the new exodus, this renewal of the covenant, the forgiveness of sins, the end of exile. Many joined us as we remembered that we have not only been

¹ Personal account of escape by a resident of Eden's Glory.

² Barclay. The Letters of Timothy, Titus, and Philemon. Page 273.

freed from servitude to sin; we have also been liberated for service to God.³

“Even all these years later I am assured in my skin, through these goose bumps, that the Story from beginning to end that climaxes at Jesus is truly remarkable. And this story, it changes people. I have seen countless eyes move from blank emptiness to vibrant life as they accept the Truth of what Jesus’ death and rising really means. I myself have, many times over, taken steps on the journey that leads from death to new life. History now hinges its time-keeping on the birth of this King. An ancient religion and nation has seen the answer to their waiting. All of Israel is trying to make sense of this man’s words and life. Jesus is the Messiah. And he brought salvation to all of creation, not just to the Jews. This is mind-blowing and life-saving. And this, this new Story—it’s changing people. People are full of love. They are crossing societal boundaries. They are bold and taking risks for this Word.

“In my heart I knew, I just knew that God’s mercy dwelt there in Rome and that I wanted to stay, but I also wanted to advance this message of life and freedom. I wanted people know the Story of God, how he sets before us a choice—a choice to live and receive blessings or a choice to die and live destructively. His command to us is so simple, even though risky; all he asks is that we love the Lord our God, walk in his ways, and keep his commands. He promises we will live and increase and be blessed in each land we move to possess. In this city and through this Ekklesia, I am seeing that blessing doesn’t mean safety. That living doesn’t mean avoiding death. Life and blessing and increase are not measureable, but instead they are the experience of the heart. Who knew that following God’s commands and earnestly obeying Jesus’ instructions would fill my heart to bursting?! Absorbing his love, his sacrifice for my sins is nearly too much to handle. He died that I might live! I must share this good news, I thought. I must advance His message.

“One night, I decided to tell Paul of my desire and this urging in my being to go, to take possession of other cities for Jesus Christ. Others must know him. Doesn’t God promise in Deuteronomy, and other places in the Story, that he will give us blessing and success when we go in His name?

“Paul placed his hands on my shoulders and looked me square in the eyes. ‘Onesimus, my son, you are coming into your calling. You are fulfilling the meaning of your name to be very useful.’ He told me that day that he sees himself in me—zealous for the cause of Christ—but that before I can be truly useful and fulfill my purpose and advance the Kingdom, I must first be reconciled in my relationships. I must seek total healing in my being. He urged that I return to Philemon. It was then he told me that he had been to Laodicea and Colossae—that he knew Philemon, that he and his house had also become an Ekklesia and accepted the message of Jesus and were living in life and freedom. Amazed and nervous, I agreed to go to Philemon to seek reconciliation.

“When Paul sent me with a letter back to Laodicea, to Philemon my master, he assured me that the community must decide together if I would be received as a brother. That was his urging since, after all, the new covenant is one of love and forgiveness.

“I still remember that journey to Philemon’s house. My mind swirled, imagining myself handing him Paul’s letter. I read it over and over again; I hoped and wondered if it would

³ Gladding. The Story of God, the Story of Us. Pg. 196.

work. Would the Ekklesia there be like the Ekklesia in Rome? The family I was leaving looked on me with love—they never saw my past, they only saw *me* when they looked into my eyes. They never disgraced me or judged me for stealing or running away or doing what I had to in order to survive. They only had love in their eyes. Paul was asking the same of Philemon and the Ekklesia there—for them to look on me with the eyes of Christ, and that their actions and their decision might ‘match the love they ought to have’.⁴ But what did I have to lose? The only thing coming to me now was life, regardless of what happened here on earth.

“You could almost say that, well, the rest is history. Philemon and the Ekklesia obeyed Jesus’ words that we must be his disciples first, even if that means to hate brother and mother or even our own life. They counted the cost of denying me or embracing me, finding the cost to their community higher if they rejected Paul’s plea to welcome me as a brother. Obedience and Love had become their way of being. It is a beautiful thing seeing the transformation of people in response to Love. They had given it all to follow Jesus and that meant that, no matter their back story, any who listened to the Story and accepted Christ as Savior were their family. From the point of them receiving me we encouraged one another in love and practiced our faith.

“A phenomenal experience was the choice to be active in our faith. When we welcomed strangers, when we provided food, when we picked up our crosses—our community, our Ekklesia, became a beautiful mosaic. Each day it changed shaped and we recognized the Kingdom in one another. We saw and experienced what Paul meant in his letter to Philemon. The fullness of understanding of every good thing we have in Christ has nothing to do with wealth or resource or gain. It has everything to do with our spirits, it has everything to do with a completeness we gain as more learn of the gift in Jesus’ sacrifice. It has everything to do with giving glory to God the Father and accepting the gift of his Son. The mosaic is beautiful and we don’t realize that it hasn’t been complete until another brother or sister joins us. Each new member adds to the fullness of the Story. There is more to come, there are more to welcome.

“Just last week I spent time with a young woman sharing the Story with her. Her story is very much like my own. From a young girl she was held as a slave, forced to do things that caused her much pain. As I sat with her, sharing in the Story and tending to her, we had occasion to pray. Her prayer is the most beautiful prayer I’ve heard yet. She brings bright color to the mosaic of the Ekklesia, and has helped us understand the Kingdom more deeply. Her prayer was this, ‘I offer you my heart, God. I am sorry it is full of holes and bruised. I am giving it to you hoping, trusting you will stitch it up and make it new.’⁵ She is inspiring in her journey from death into new life. She understands the Gospel and adds richly to the Kingdom.

“Welcoming isn’t always easy; there is a cost, a risk that can’t be measured. But the cost is greater if we do not welcome and do not embrace and do not share the Story.

“We have given it all to follow Jesus. But we have gained so, so much more. I may very well be Bishop of Ephesus, but more than that I am a disciple of Christ and I carry a cross of love.”⁶

⁴ Barclay. The Letters of Timothy, Titus, and Philemon. Page 281.

⁵ Prayer of an Eden’s Glory resident, August 2016.

⁶ Ignatius of Antioch. Letter to Ephesus. https://www.ewtn.com/library/PATRISTC/ignatius_ephesians.htm

