

## Something Beautiful – Ben Wayman

Jeremiah 18:1-11; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33

I often get a sinking feeling that I am reading Jesus wrongly. I seem to have developed some nifty skills for reading these uncomfortable demands right out of the text. For example, I might read this passage from Luke and interpret it something like – in order to be Jesus' disciple, I need to love him more than anyone or anything, I need to hold my possessions lightly, and oh yeah, I need to be financially responsible. That last bit is particularly nice. In fact maybe that's Jesus' point: God wants me to be a better money manager; I need less debt and more Dave Ramsey.

But the problem with reading Jesus like this is that Jesus himself rejects it. Jesus sees his popularity as an indication that the crowd misunderstands him. It's as if Jesus is insisting: following me makes no sense; so what do you all think you're doing? Since the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke, Jesus has set his face toward Jerusalem and the cross. The cross is where crowds scatter, not gather. Jesus knows the crowds are reading him wrongly because he knows that following him to the cross is not the stuff of common sense.

Growing up I read a lot of C. S. Lewis. I read his fiction and I read his more formal theology. Lewis is great with giving play to the Christian imagination as well as making confusing concepts more clear. But I have a bone to pick with him. As I've read Lewis, he seems to think, particularly in *Mere Christianity*, that if you're smart enough you'll see that following Jesus makes sense. I think Jesus would disagree.

Jesus would disagree because he knows discipleship requires conversion. And here's why: following him impacts every aspect of our lives and will require massive repentance. The temptation is to read him in such a way that we can follow Jesus without conversion.

Carrying the cross, leaving our family, giving away our things is not only difficult, but it's unreasonable and maybe even unnecessary. Why can't we have it all? What if we can figure out what Jesus couldn't? What if we can find a way to keep family and things, to protect ourselves from risk, and at the same time follow Jesus, support the church and its ministry, and live sacrificially (within reason)?

Enter Philemon. Today is the only day in our three-year lectionary cycle that we read Paul's letter to Philemon and his house-church in Colossae. And it couldn't have come at a better time. Maybe Philemon can help us figure out how we can be faithful disciples and reasonable people.

Philemon seems to have things figured out. Paul clearly loves him and thinks well of him as he rattles off his praises of Philemon's charity and generosity. Apparently, Philemon has provided his house as a place for worship in Colossae. Presumably he makes a ton of money and has a ton of things that he freely gives to the church both at home and abroad. Oh, and one more thing about Philemon: he has a slave named Onesimus.

I could offer some historical background about how slavery was common in the ancient Near East, how Jews often released their slaves after six years of service and supplied them with resources, how slaves could own property, and how slavery was often a way to climb the social ladder in that culture... but that's not the point. The point is this: one aspect of Philemon's life has been spotlighted because he is following Jesus. In other words, Philemon's discipleship has called into question the common sense of his culture and his own acceptance of it.

Letters in scripture and letters in general can be tricky to understand because of what a letter it is: It's part of an ongoing conversation. There's a lot we don't know about Philemon and his slave Onesimus, so we're in a position of making the most of every word from this short letter. I'd like to highlight three points from this letter that touch directly on discipleship and see how they might help us better understand our Gospel lesson.

**First:** Philemon is a Christian. Based on what Paul says in the letter, it seems that Paul converted him. Philemon appears to be wealthy, but he also seems to be free with his resources with Christians in his local and global community.

**Second:** Paul's letter to Philemon is pastoral. In fact, this may be Paul at his pastoral best. The letter could be read as manipulative, but I think Paul is carefully offering counsel and direction to invite Philemon to voluntarily set free Onesimus.

**Third:** Philemon is being invited to undergo another conversion as a Christian. Paul's letter to Philemon shows us that conversion is at the heart of the Christian life because conversion is what we do daily.

Christine Pohl of Asbury Seminary puts it this way, "While we might prefer to make a single dramatic sacrifice as an expression of our commitment, usually the way of faithfulness involves laying down our lives in little pieces, through small decisions and unremarkable acts of kindness and generosity."

This, I think, is what Jesus is talking about when he says "carry the cross." He says this in the present tense, which means that cross carrying is what disciples do...every day.

I'd like to unpack these three observations a bit more.

**First,** to state that Philemon is a Christian is not to imply that God's work is done with Philemon. Our lesson from Jeremiah is particularly instructive with this. While the Psalm tells us we are

fearfully and wonderfully made by God, Jeremiah reminds us that God's making is not done. Just like Judah in exile and disobedience, we have been spoiled. But God is a potter. If we let him, God will remake us. In fact, friendship with God requires that we allow God to remake us into people capable of his friendship.

Twice in Jeremiah's proclamation he mentions how God will change his mind based on human response. The fate of Judah and other nations is not fixed; the prophet assumes that we have a choice in our destiny. Jesus also thinks we have a choice.

Jeremiah shows us that friendship with God is mutual and reciprocating. While God's relation to us is a perpetual 'yes' to friendship, he is willing to discipline us for our own sake. God is no pushover, but he's also no tyrant. God loves us enough to rework us into something beautiful. Discipleship may not be fun, and it may not make much sense outside of conversion, but it is beautiful.

**Second**, the importance of the observation that Paul's letter is pastoral and an invitation to Philemon is that it demonstrates the way that God remakes us. God will not force us to be his disciples. Rather, he invites us to count the cost and choose life. It may seem odd, but the way to new life is through death. Through Jesus's death, God brought resurrection. Through our death to ourselves, God raises us to new life. It seems counter-intuitive, but that's the promise: if you lay down your life, you will gain it.

The truth is, if you don't lay down your life, you are still saying No to life. It's a double negative and it doesn't make a positive.

My dad likes to tell the childhood story that whenever he refused to go to church, his mom would gladly give him the choice: either stay home and clean the house, mow the lawn, and do everyone else's chores, or you can go to church. Not much of a choice. Neither is conversion. You can either hold on to your life, which you never actually held, or you can lay down your life and gain it.

And, **Third**, Philemon is confronted by an invitation to conversion. Will he convert? In his letter, Paul makes it clear that Onesimus' conversion changes everything. He's no longer Philemon's slave, but his brother. He's no longer Philemon's possession; he belongs to God. He's no longer subordinate to Philemon; he's his friend. The relations of the kingdom win out. For Philemon to continue to live in the common sense of his culture and regard Onesimus as a slave would be an outright rejection of his Faith. Either Philemon can recognize that Onesimus's conversion changes everything, or he can reject the Gospel.

What Paul makes clear in his letter to Philemon and his church in Colossae is that following Jesus knows no bounds. The Gospel impacts everything. It assumes a new social network; it assumes a new economy; and it assumes a new politic. Basically, it assumes a new approach

to life that requires conversion. In the sixth verse, Paul prays that Philemon will “perceive all the good that we may do for Christ.”

I’m not sure how well we would handle it if God decided to affect our full conversion in one moment. I don’t know, it may be too much too quickly. I do know that some people have dramatic conversion stories where they seem to become different people overnight.

But for many of us, we take one step at a time. Paul’s letter shows us that there are aspects of Philemon’s life that have not yet been sufficiently penetrated by the good news. Similarly, there are aspects of my life, and yours, that God has not reshaped and remade in the light of the Gospel.

God wants to remake us, the whole of us. But he will only do it with our cooperation. And here’s the good news: if we let God recreate us, we will be more beautiful than we could possibly be left to our own devices.