

**Change Everything**  
**Luke 14:25-33, Philemon 1:1-25**  
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The Gospel of Luke is full of so many wonderful stories about Jesus – Zacchaeus climbing the tree in Jericho, the two travellers on the Road to Emmaus, parables like the Lost Sheep, the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, all these stories about love, forgiveness, grace, welcoming the stranger and the outcast. Jesus is always surrounded by children and sheep, smiling and laughing together. Gentle Jesus, meek and mild. That’s what we expect from Jesus. But that’s not what we get from our gospel reading today. Today’s story is different. This story doesn’t make it into the children’s bibles or the hymn book or the Sunday school curriculum. Jesus turns to the crowd following him and tells them, if you want to be my disciples - if you want to follow Jesus - then you must hate your family: your parents, your spouse, your children, your siblings, even your own life. Following Jesus means hating your family. And that’s just about the last thing you expect to hear Jesus say.

So what is Jesus talking about here? Well, to help us understand, let’s take a look at a very different story, the other story we read this morning, Paul’s letter to Philemon. Philemon was a wealthy man from the city of Colossae who met Paul on one of his missionary journeys. Paul told him the good news about Jesus, and Philemon decided to become a disciple, a

follower of Jesus Christ, he became a leader in the church in Colossae, hosting the Christian community in his own home. And like most wealthy landowners at the time, Philemon owned slaves, including a slave named Onesimus, who at some point ran away from his master and fled to Rome. And there in Rome, Onesimus also met Paul, who was in prison there for preaching about Jesus. There in Rome, Paul told Onesimus the good news about Jesus, and Onesimus decided to become a disciple, a follower of Jesus Christ, and he dedicated his life to serving Paul and helping him carry out his ministry from his Roman prison cell. And so now Paul writes two letters, one to the church in Colossae, and one to his old friend Philemon, and sends those letters back to Colossae, carried by Philemon's old slave, Onesimus.

So one fine morning, Philemon looks out the window and he sees Onesimus, his former slave, the runaway slave, walking up the driveway towards the. Can you imagine what a shock that must've been? For a slave, escaping is punishable by death - if you're recaptured, your owner can choose to have you executed immediately, or force you to work hard labour in a Roman penal colony for the rest of your short, miserable life. In order to keep all the other slaves in line, punishment for those who tried to escape had to be brutal and final and thorough; there could be no mercy. After all, if you show mercy to an escaped slave, you're telling all the rest of your slaves that they should take their chances and make a run for it - you're encouraging rebellion and disloyalty, not just towards you,

but towards the rest of your family, towards the rest of society, all the other wealthy landowners in town who rely on slaves to maintain their homes and businesses and their comfortable lifestyles. Once slaves start thinking that their master has gone soft, the entire foundation of Roman society falls apart. So when Philemon sees Onesimus walking back up to his house, he must've immediately started dreaming up some nice elaborate punishments for this renegade slave - thumbscrews and waterboarding, that kind of thing. Say goodbye to your fingernails, Onesimus, you won't need them where you're going.

Except that Onesimus is carrying those letters. The letters from Paul. And in his letter to the church, the epistle to the Colossians, Paul tells them all that because of Jesus Christ, they have taken off their old selves with their old ways, and put on a new self. They are being renewed in knowledge in the image of their Creator, because now there is no such thing as slaves or masters. Christ is all, and Christ is in all. So as God's chosen people, they are to clothe themselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. They should bear with each other and forgive each other if anyone has a grievance against anyone else – like maybe against a runaway slave – forgive as the Lord forgave you. And then in this personal letter to Philemon, Paul tells his friend to do the complete opposite of what he wants to do, the complete opposite of everything his entire world is built on. Paul tells Philemon to welcome Onesimus back home. No torture. No imprisonment. Paul tells Philemon

to welcome Onesimus back home, and not as a slave. As a brother. As part of the family. Remember, even just giving Onesimus his old position as a slave back would've been unimaginably merciful and gracious - just sparing his life and putting him back to work in the fields would've been a counter-cultural, audacious act - but that's not enough for Paul. Paul tells Philemon to welcome Onesimus back as a brother, to make Onesimus part of the family, to reward him for his betrayal and rebellion with a promotion, adopting him, giving him a place to live and a seat at their table. Can you imagine what all the other slaves in Philemon's house would be thinking when they go around before supper serving the drinks and washing feet, and they suddenly realize who they're serving, whose feet they're washing? Do you think any of them are going to stick around serving Philemon as slaves once they realize that if they run away they'll get their freedom and a hefty reward? And what do you think the neighbours are going to think, when they see Philemon and Onesimus hanging out around town together, golfing, going for brunch, former master and former slave acting like equals, like family? Can you imagine the scandal? The uproar? And if the rest of the slaves in all the other wealthy homes around Colossae find out what Philemon has done, about the life Onesimus is living, how long before they're demanding the same kind of freedom, even if they have to fight or kill to get it? There was no greater threat to the stability of the Roman Empire than a slave rebellion - the Roman army could defend the empire against any manner of external

threat, but if the slaves turned on their masters, it would mean turmoil and destruction and civil war, it could plunge the entire empire into anarchy. If Philemon does what Paul is asking him to do, he is throwing his entire life into shame and disrepute, he is risking his home, his prosperity, his family name and honour, their wealth and their safety, he's risking the very stability of the entire community, of Rome itself. To do anything like that, to risk every good thing you had, to put your family and friends in danger, it sure would seem like you didn't really care about their safety, their prosperity. In the eyes of the world around, it would look like you hated them - you'd have to hate them, your family, your friends, your society, your life, to do something so reckless and risky as set a slave free, make a slave part of the family. That's what Paul is asking Philemon to do - he's asking him to risk everything, to act like he hates everything and everyone in his life, and instead choose to follow Jesus Christ, put loving Jesus ahead of everything else.

Loving Jesus, following Jesus, learning to love other people the way Jesus loves you, forgiving others as the Lord forgave you, that is a transformative act – it doesn't just change one part of your life, it changes everything. It doesn't just affect your relationship with God, it affects all your relationships with everyone around you. Paul tells Philemon that following Jesus has transformed Onesimus - once he was useless, but now he is useful, once he was your slave, but now he's your brother, and Paul makes it clear that following Jesus has to transform Philemon as well - he

can't go on living the way he once lived, owning other human beings, acting only to preserve his own prosperity and comfort. Following Jesus means becoming a new kind of person, and that is going to cost him his respectability, his place of honour in the community, it may cost him his safety, it may cost him his life, but none of that matters as much as following Jesus Christ. Nothing else matters but following Jesus Christ, sharing the love you've been given with the people around you in ways that will be scary and counter-cultural and even dangerous. And Paul knows this firsthand – Paul was once a successful religious leader in Jerusalem, honoured and respected, powerful and wealthy, and then he met Jesus Christ. Following Jesus transformed Paul's life, and now he's writing from his prison cell in a Roman dungeon, a life of suffering and persecution and martyrdom ahead, Paul gave up everything to follow Jesus Christ. And he knows that it's worth it. Following Jesus, being transformed by his power and love, even if it costs you everything, it is always worth it.

That's what happens when you start following Jesus Christ – you are transformed, your priorities, your values, the things you used to think were so very important, all those things get turned inside out and upside down when you start following Jesus. Just like a potter with a lump of clay, God molds us and shapes us and remakes us into something entirely different than what we were before, someone who sees the world in an entirely new way, someone capable of acting in the world in an entirely

different way. And that will change the way we interact with the world around us. That transformation will inevitably change what we think is important, the ways we use our time and our energy and our talents, our relationships with family, friends and neighbours, they won't stay the same as they were before. When the Holy Spirit gets to work in your life, when you spend each and every day growing in faith and service and love, it has a way of re-arranging and rebuilding who you are, little by little, each and every day to make you look a little more like Jesus Christ. And that kind of transformation can be frightening, and it can be dangerous, and it can call into question a lot of who we thought we were and what we thought we knew about the world around us. But it's worth it. It's always worth it. We don't know for sure how Philemon ultimately responded to Paul's letter. We can't say for certain whether Onesimus returned home as a slave or as a brother. But we do know that this private letter from Paul to his friend Philemon was shared with the rest of the church, in the city of Colossae and far beyond throughout the Roman Empire, so that when the church gathered to decide which of Paul's letters should be considered scripture, they included this personal letter as part of the Holy Word of God. And we also know that around 40 years after this letter was written, the leader of all the Christian churches in the area around Colossae, the Bishop of Ephesus, was a man named Onesimus. Welcoming Onesimus home, opening your home and your heart to a new found brother, that act of transforming love can change everything, it can

change the world, it can make that home and that city look a little less like part of the Roman Empire and a little more like the Kingdom of Heaven. And that's what we're called to do today. We are followers of Jesus Christ, and the same transforming power and love that went to work in Paul and Philemon and Onesimus, that love is here with us. The love of Jesus Christ is here with us, ready to change our world, ready to make this place, and every place wherever we go part of the kingdom of Heaven. And when we let that power go to work in our lives, it might cost us something. It might make our lives more complicated, it might force us to give up some of the comforts and routines we're used to, some of the values our world seems to hold dear, we might need to let some of that go. But the love of Jesus Christ is worth it. Even if we lose everything else, even if we lose the whole world, as long as we have Jesus Christ, then it's always worth it. Here today, and everyday, we are part of the Kingdom of Heaven, and that kingdom is breaking through into this broken, divided world, ready to proclaim liberty for the captives, healing for the wounded, rest for the weary, hope for those in despair, and as we follow Jesus, as his Spirit transforms us, as his love makes us new, we can let go of everything else and discover over and over again how endlessly abundant the love of Jesus Christ truly is. Here today, may we follow Jesus Christ wherever he leads, so that in his love, we will discover who we are, and who we are meant to be. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.