

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Sunday, September 4, 2022
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
The Rev Dr Scott Couper
“A New Identity (in Christ)”
Christian Scripture: Philemon 1-12

As most of you know from my most recent submission to the *eNews* (September 1), I have been traveling for some weeks. One of my many destinations was Cape Town, South Africa. There I reunited with family, friends, and former academic colleagues. During a visit with a fellow historian, I reminisced with her about a mutual faculty mentor, Dr. Catherine Burns. Over coffee, I recalled in amazement with my colleague how incredibly Catherine affirmed me during the many years she taught me and how positive she was about *all to whom she addressed*. For example, when Catherine introduces you to someone else, she lists all your positive attributes. For me, she would wax about my running accomplishments, my strong faith in the church and my ministry (even though she herself did not subscribe to any particular faith tradition), my sacrifice for my family, and my academic prowess and publications (no matter how few they were). When she was done, I felt like I was really worth something. Catherine had this ability to render all to whom she referred to be praise-worthy. She had a talent of portraying people as grand, noble, and in the process of contributing something to the world.

Now, there are two dangers to giving fulsome praise to everyone on a constant basis. One, it is very easy to be render yourself unbelievable. If you are positive about everyone, at best, you run risk of others seeing you to be deluded, naïve, Pollyannaish, and just plain unrealistic. By presenting such positive portrayals, at worst, it is easy to render yourself disingenuous, a flatterer, and rather untrustworthy, thus doing yourself and no one else any favors. I want to stress that Catherine had a sharp and critical mind and without a doubt is considered one of the most astute academics in South Africa and the world. So, she should not be accused of spouting what is often termed 'toxic positivity'. Also, if you listen to Catherine carefully and parse her words, she does not lie about you nor does she engage in hyperbole – although it certainly seems like it. If you listen to Catherine with a critical ear, you realize two things about the praise she offers. One, it is communicated primarily through energy rather than words. Her *enthusiasm* portrays you as greater than you perceived you were. Two, and this is the key, Catherine sees you and describes more who you are becoming and will soon be rather than your present incomplete self. Catherine, without falsehood or exaggeration, describes you as how you are becoming - and your heart could just burst upon hearing it. Today, Catherine has a legion of former students who are leaders in their fields, chairs of departments, and heads of faculties around the

world years, if not decades, before they normally would be because they heard Catherine many times over describe them as realizing their fullest potential.

In our scripture reading this morning, we read a letter that the apostle Paul wrote to a dear friend, Philemon. The letter concerned a piece of property that awkwardly ended-up in Paul's possession. As you would for an unpaid for grocery item that inconveniently found itself in your pocket as you exited the store, Paul tried to return the item. The only difference is that the item was a human being, a slave, named Onesimus. As Kate mentioned in her introduction of the scripture, we do not know the circumstances that led to this 'sticky-wicket' of a situation. Yet, the letter's context makes it clear that Paul employed every rhetorical strategy in the book to try to achieve his goal of returning Onesimus back to Philemon thus extricating both Paul and Onesimus from an uncomfortable conundrum, all the while respecting and honoring Philemon as a property owner and friend. In short, Paul tried to make a win-win-win-win result for everyone. When I read and re-read the letter, I notice that Paul employed affirmation: affirmation of himself (somewhat self-servingly), affirmation of Onesimus, and affirmation of Philemon.

Upon reflection, it might be easy to accuse Paul of engaging in hyperbole, flattery, or being just plain disingenuous in his affirming descriptions of Philemon and Onesimus. But, I believe this view is too cynical. Rather, I perceive that Paul is

rightfully described them not just who they were in their present, but rather, more accurately, who they were becoming and as future fulfillments of who they were.

Right of the bat, verse 1, Paul affirmed - referring to Philemon as “dear friend” and “fellow worker”, to Apphia as a “sister”, to Archippus as a “soldier” in the faith (1-2). I interpret these endorsements as *proscriptive* as much, if not more, than *descriptive*. The praise continued in Paul’s preface. Paul commented on the strength of their faith, their understanding of their Christian mission, and their benevolent love (5-7). For the remaining of the letter to Philemon, Paul used what might be considered ‘the power of suggestion’ that mixed the present with the future. While Paul described Philemon and Onesimus, he introduced them to their future selves. Yes, Paul communicated to Philemon who they were. Yet, more importantly, he shared with Philemon who they will more fully be. And what were and what will Philemon and Onesimus be? Well, Onesimus was as ‘a son’ to Paul (10). Without using the word, Paul described Philemon as ‘merciful’ (14).

Philemon was obedient (21), but more importantly because Paul did not demand it, Philemon was gracious in accepting Onesimus without penalty. Perhaps most importantly, while acknowledging Philemon’s rightful claim to re-enslave or at least punish Onesimus (18-19), Paul pled to Philemon to, not only emancipate Onesimus, but to make him his equal, as all three are considered ‘dear brothers’ in Christ. Paul went so far to say that Philemon considered Onesimus even more

precious than Paul did (16). Finally, Paul affirmed Philemon by declaring that he will do even more than Paul asked. Wow, everyone affirmed.

After I let this letter seep into me, I realized that Paul's letter is more than rhetorically clever and is more than simply 'affirmational'. I believe the lesson here from Paul is beyond relational tactics. I believe there is a deep theological lesson for us. I believe that because God created us, God intends that each and every one of us reach our fullest God-given potential. I believe Paul saw and described Onesimus and Philemon as God saw Onesimus and Philemon. Paul simply said to both, "You are as God created you, so live as God created you"! Paul's affirmations were as then-currently descriptive as they were proscriptive for the future. In hearing Paul's description of Onesimus, Onesimus was encouraged to be who Paul described him to be and thus who God intended him to be. Upon hearing Paul's affirmations, Philemon and Onesimus will implement self-fulfilling prophecies. Just like Catherine's students did.

Friends, when you introduce your children or grandchildren, introduce them as who they are and thus who they will become. When you speak to your spouse or partner, describe him, her, or they as beautifully as God created them so they will fulfill your descriptions of and God's intentions for them. When you introduce church members and friends to newcomers, speak of their faithfulness, their dedication, and their love for God and our church and they will live into

those descriptions. Make the hallmark of your ministry to the world the honor of introducing beautiful people to other beautiful people – introduce them as fellow travelers, brothers and sisters to one another, sharing with one another the God-given gifts each one of us possess. In doing so, you will enable yourself and others do as Leo Tolstoy did: to discover a *new identity* in Christ. Tolstoy described in his autobiographical book *Confessions* how he returned “to a faith [...] that [...] gave birth to me and which asked something of me”. Tolstoy continued, “I returned to the conviction that the single most important purpose of my life was to be better, to live according to [God’s] will”.¹ To become new identity in Christ.

This was the word of God. And it was preached to the people of God. And the people of God responded, “Amen”.

¹ Leo Tolstoy, *Confession*, translated by David Patterson (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1983), 75.