

November 12, 2023

Spirit Life: Love

Pastor Paul Dean

Freedom... it's a word that has deep meaning for me. That word has been shaped by my experiences growing up as a black kid in south central Texas. Bring refused service in restaurants, unable to swim in public pools, and the segregation of my hometown all shaped what freedom meant.

And, at the same time being adopted by white parents, growing up with the love of a white church, allowed me to see a different part of humanity – loving, even when many others in my community were not so loving. Growing up in a church with a father who was a pastor, my Christian imagination was soaked in the story of Exodus, freedom, and salvation. Those themes still resonate deeply with me, they shape my everyday life.

My journey has also been highly influenced by two women, whom I have never met but who I feel know me well and are deeply connected to my story. They are Harriet Tubman and Rosa Parks. They were the best examples of a living Christ I could find. Harriet Tubman, as a part of the Underground Railroad, showed me what sacrificial love looked like. Harriet kept coming back. Kept leaving safety to risk danger, over and over again to free others. She kept coming back for others that looked like me, who were unable to free themselves. Time and time again, she returned. Through swamps, rivers, thorns and brush she returned. Risking her life for complete strangers. I even imagined her coming for me. Gently shaking me awake one night, whispering to me, "Let's go. I've got you." And then we'd get on a train that ran underground. Hey, I was a kid and it was called the Underground Railroad.

And then Rosa Parks. Rosa Parks didn't just take a seat for herself. She took a seat for me. She took a seat for all of us. A seat to show us the worst part of ourselves. A seat to show us the best part of ourselves. A seat that, like the shepherd boy David, was a direct hit on the injustice of Goliath. A seat that showed clearly for all of us to see that the Gospel of Jesus Christ can and does make a difference. A seat of love that brings freedom.

Freedom... God is coming for you, no matter what it takes. God is coming for you right now. And God is not only coming for you, but also for all of us. Every single one of us. Even for a guy named Onesimus. Onesimus, a slave, a complete nobody until the Apostle Paul gets involved. The Apostle Paul knows that Spirit Life is filled with love, a love that Harriet and Rosa sought to live and a love Apostle Paul's friend Philemon, who is the slave owner of Onesimus, doesn't yet know.

Somehow – Onesimus escaped the power of Philemon and found his way to Paul. We think that Paul was in prison, maybe in Rome. So, on the face of things, maybe not the right call Onesimus. But it turns out to be the perfect call.

Now before we start – let's talk about slavery in the time of Paul. There were different types of people we would or could call slaves. But there were some major differences when compared to our own history of slavery. In the Roman Empire, at this time, if a slave escaped what they felt were harsh circumstances they could find sanctuary, a religious asylum.

Then, whoever was the priest of that religious asylum, would try to convince the slave to go back to the owner. If the slave could not be convinced to go back, then the priest providing sanctuary would then sell the slave to a new – and hopefully better owner and return the proceeds back to the original owner. Nice and tidy. Very Roman Empire – like.

So different than our own experience of slavery in our country – but still slavery, another person owning another person. And sadly – an affliction throughout human history and still is to this day.

Onesimus – feeling Philemon too harsh – runs away and somehow finds sanctuary with Philemon's friend and fellow believer Paul. Paul is that priest to Onesimus. But Paul, being a Roman citizen, would know the law. However, Paul also knows the Gospel. Actually, the Apostle Paul is called the Apostle Paul because he's been helping to shape what the Gospel of Jesus Christ means for a bunch of churches and Philemon is a member of one of them. And the Gospel of Jesus Christ calls Paul, his churches and us, now in our time to live by the Spirit. Spirit Life. Spirit Live that bears the fruit of love. Love that breaks chains. Love that

returns time and time again to bring freedom. Love that takes a seat, like slingshot to the head of Goliath. That kind of love. And that is the Spirit Life Paul invites Philemon to live.

Philemon 1:4-17

When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother. For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love-- and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother-- especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.

Spirit Life Philemon. How do you know Christ Jesus? Through love. Philemon, you know what Spirit Life looks as you respond to Christ Jesus' in faith. Philemon, you know what Spirit Life looks like as you love the other members of the church. You can hear Paul say – be generous Philemon. Be generous with your love. Be generous with your love in ways that you would never have imagined. More love than your community could ever have imagined.

Think about the impact on that entire community. Onesimus wasn't the only slave in that community of new believers. Think of what kind of example,

what a ripple effect that would have had. Philemon – Paul says – Spirit Life is not found in slave ownership. Spirit Life is more love that creates equality. Spirit Life is more love that creates freedom. Spirit Live is more love that opens new possibilities.

You and I profess to follow Jesus, we have a particular way of seeing the world, and that is through the eyes of Jesus and his teachings. We call Jesus Lord and so we turn to Jesus. This is what Jesus says.

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35)

Today we have the opportunity to join together with our statements of intent. Statements of financial generosity. Statements of Spirit Life. Statements of generous love. More love, Jesus says, more love... and through your generosity, through your Spirit Life we as Prince of Peace gather our gifts, our offerings bringing love to the world.