

**The Lutheran World Federation
Council Meeting
Worship on September 5th 2004
Sermon by Rev. Lusmarina Campos Garcia**

Unforgivable. That was the condition of a runaway slave who defrauded his master. In the Roman Empire there were sixty million slaves and the danger of revolt was constant. A rebellious slave was rapidly punished. He could either be branded with a red-hot iron on the forehead, with the letter F, which stands for *fugitivus*, runaway – or he could be crucified. Roman law imposed practically no limits on the power of a master over his slave. A thief and a runaway slave had no right to ask for forgiveness.

Onesimus, whose name means “useful”, had been a slave in the household of Philemon and now was a convert to the faith. Philemon was a leader of the church in Colossae and became a Christian through Paul’s evangelism. Today it sounds odd that a Christian would own a slave, but at that time, slavery was an accepted feature of society; an institution in both Greek and Roman cultures.

Paul’s attitude was a challenge in different directions. On the one hand, to ask Onesimus to return to Philemon was potentially dangerous. Onesimus might become a slave again or be brutally punished, even killed. On the other hand, to ask Philemon to receive Onesimus back could be offensive and bring embarrassment to Philemon. Would Onesimus survive? Would Philemon be able to relate to Onesimus as a person and not as a slave, as a person and not as a thing? What would the community gathered in Philemon’s house say? Philemon’s response had complex implications which gambled reputation, authority, control, social expectation, status quo, governance and more. It was not an easy decision for either Onesimus or Philemon.

Although Paul had no intention of turning social codes and values inside out, he did it. Paul was not a crusader to abolish slavery, but he seeded that possibility.

We are also confronted with issues and situations that challenge our values and cultural structures. We are also called to review our concepts and renew our positions. We are invited to bring our hearts to our decision-making processes and to judge others on the basis of love.

How many people within our societies and churches are considered unforgivable? Who are they? In your country or city what group of people would you not even consider getting close to?

Terry who attended the International Conference on AIDS in Bangkok told about three Pentecostal women from Africa who are HIV positive and who went to pray everyday at the chapel of the Conference. They said they have been always involved in their churches in different ways. After finding out they had become HIV positive, they decided to start a weekly prayer service; nobody joined them for prayer. Our resistance to those who threaten our social, moral and spiritual stability varies from place to place, from time to

time. Sometimes we can't cope when our views and understandings are stretched. Flexibility is not always easy. We need to learn with Philemon, with Onesimus and with Paul. We have to learn with Jesus who was constantly reinterpreting the law and his society's values. The gospel was counter-cultural to its own context. Jesus Christ challenged his culture and religion when he took the side of the powerless, when he forgave the sins of an adulterous woman, when he cured a bent over woman on the Sabbath, when he blessed the children and called them the criterion for entering the Kingdom of God, when he supported Mary to learn from him in a society where women were not supposed to sit at a Master's feet. Jesus was critical of his culture when it became blind and plundered people's dignity.

Jesus pushed his people at his time as Paul pushed Philemon later.

What are the issues that are pushing us?

As a human family we have been repeatedly pushed by violence and war. Last week in Brazil, sixteen people who live in the streets of Sao Paulo, were brutally attacked and six were murdered. In Beslan, Russia, in the last three days, more than three hundred and twenty two bodies have been pulled from the rubble of the school where a hostage siege ended in a bloodbath. Many of the injured and dead were children. One of the boys who escaped was so traumatized that he couldn't remember his name. We do not want children losing the memory of their own identity. We don't want anybody killed by a bomb, whether it comes strapped to someone committing suicide, or coming from a helicopter gunship with orders from a government.

As Christian we are called to peace. As long as peace is not a tangible reality in the whole world, we can not stop seeking it. How we respond to the outcry of peace it shows how committed we are with it.

As members of the Lutheran World Federation you have the task of discussing the issue of family, marriage and human sexuality. This is a theme which pushes many churches hard. It could lead the Lutheran family to grow apart. There are different understandings, experiences, feelings and expectations surrounding the issues implied in this discussion. I am sure most of you have a defined position. But as you engage in this and other hard discussions, I invite you to look at Philemon, who could have chosen to preserve his social and religious approach, his society and culture's establishment, but instead, he opened himself to a new totally different value: love. Through faith, he came to love a slave. Through love, a possession became a person; a master, a brother. The unforgivable was forgiven. The useless converted to useful.

How can I affirm that Philemon received Onesimus? First is the fact that the letter is in the New Testament canon. Second, ecclesiastical tradition represents Onesimus as Bishop of Beraea (Constit. Apost., VII, 46) and Philemon as Bishop of Colossae (Const. Apost., VI, 46). The Menaia of 22 November speak of Philemon as a holy apostle who, in company with Appia, Archippus, and Onesimus was martyred at Colossae during the first general persecution in the reign of Nero.

Philemon changed. We sometimes are afraid of changing because we fear we won't recognize ourselves anymore. Although this is a genuine fear, it isn't part of our identity as Christians nor as Lutherans.

Christ radically changes our lives. And this change is not a static process; it happens every day. Martin Luther said, "We are all the Lord's Onesimi, we are all the Lord's profitable servants." How have we been made profitable or useful to our God? Where and when are we unprofitable? The unprofitable becomes profitable. It is the incessant picture of Christ dealing with human beings. cf. Isa. 53:6. We were all runaway slaves to sin. "All of us are in need for forgiveness", Luther also says. We are all in the same condition: runaway slaves to sin forgiven by Jesus Christ. This changes everything. It defines who we are. A forgiven people called to serve one another, or if you prefer, to be useful to one another, a forgiven people pursued to forgive one another.

For you are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized in Christ, have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free: there is neither male nor female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal., iii, 26-28; cf. Col., iii, 10- 11). May we believe that. Amen.

Martin Luther. E. Theodore Bachmann, ed. "Preface to the Epistle of Saint Paul to Philemon, 1546 (1522)" Luther's Works, American Edition vol. 35, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960) 390.