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September 15, 2019

Wasting our hearts on fear no more

I don't know about you, but I'm not a risk-taker by nature. Kayaking on a peaceful lake watching wildlife is lovely; but I'm not remotely tempted to take on Class 5 rapids. I like hiking on marked trails rather than bush-whacking through the wilderness. And you might find me cross-country skiing on a flat path; but you'll never see me tackling a triple black diamond downhill run.

When it comes to facing an unknown risk, I'm more likely to turn to a movie or a book. There I can vicariously enter into a thrilling or dangerous situation – from the safety of my own home!

Maybe I need a grown-up version of the *Choose Your Own Adventure* children's books that were so popular when my kids were growing up. You probably remember how these second person books work. The reader takes on the role of protagonist and, after a few pages, faces two or three options in terms of what happens next. Each of these lead to more options and eventually to one of many different endings. There's no way to guess how long the story will be or what will happen at the story's end. Hence, the books offer a realistic sense of unpredictability. That's part of the fun!

I think part of why I don't like *real life* unpredictability is that I grew up in a household where domestic violence periodically erupted. As was true of his father when he was growing up, my dad's own demons could unexpectedly appear. Despite being a loving father in many other ways, he could suddenly lash out in violent ways.

Through counseling, spiritual direction, and prayer journaling over many years, I've grappled with those difficult experiences. And, with the support and encouragement of people of faith, I've found a good measure of healing – including considering myself a survivor (more than a victim) who found coping strategies and was given the strength I needed.

At the same time, I find that I need to continue to integrate these experiences – for they'll always be part of my story and I want to understand how they may still

impact me and my relationships. I need to keep taking the risk of growing and being changed.

It's the kind of hard good work that I know many of us here have done - and continue to do - as we come to terms with our various life experiences; and then choose how we want to live on as the protagonists in our own stories.

Uncommon courage

Towards that end, this morning let's consider the story of Onesimus - a hidden figure in this very short letter from Paul to Philemon. From the text, we can presume that Philemon is a wealthy friend of Paul's who hosts a house church. Paul sends Onesimus, a person who was previously enslaved by Philemon and has escaped or been sent away, to deliver a pointed request to Philemon. Paul wants him to welcome Onesimus back - "no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother". (v.16)

Somehow, Onesimus finds the strength to return to Philemon's home – not as an enslaved person, but standing tall with a letter from Paul affirming his new identity as Philemon's equal. A full partner in sharing the *Good News* of God's love for all. A beloved brother in Christ.

What strikes me most in this story is the uncommon courage that Onesimus would have needed to summon in order to go back to the very place where he was enslaved and face the very person who apparently still legally owns him.

There was real risk there and re-authoring his story like that was a gutsy move. What was the source of Onesimus' courage? And what might this hidden figure's example mean for us?

In his preface to *Philemon* in The Message, Eugene Peterson argues:

Every movement we make in response to God has a ripple effect, touching family, neighbors, friends, community. Belief in God alters our language. Love of God affects daily relationships. Hope in God enters into our work. Also their opposites – unbelief, indifference, and despair. None of these movements and responses, beliefs and prayers, gestures and searches, can be confined to the soul. They spill out and make history...

Peterson goes on to say:

Philemon and Onesimus...had no idea that believing in Jesus would involve them in radical social change. But as the two of them were brought together by this letter, it did.

Now, as Cindy Lapp, pastor of Hyattsville Mennonite Church, has noted, the book of Philemon

...is not without its problems – for those in slavery, for those who have slaves, for a housechurch that is trying to live by the new values set by Jesus. Why is Paul sending a man who safely escaped slavery right back into the situation?

...we [also] do not get the idea that Paul is trying to overthrow slavery in all the housechurches. His appeal is only to this one slave owner, for this one [enslaved person]. There is not even mention of other slaves in Philemon's household being freed...

In addition, as a free person and member of the majority culture, I'm certainly not claiming that I can understand the experience of a person who has been enslaved.

Nor am I arguing that people who've experienced trauma of any kind should do anything that doesn't feel safe or right for them.

Moreover, we don't even know for sure how this morning's story turned out.

Still, the letter survived...

And, rather surprisingly, it became part of the canon - which leads many scholars to argue that Philemon and Onesimus likely did risk a new relationship. Onesimus embracing a new identity as follower of Jesus and Paul's helper; Philemon affirming his primary identity in Christ, too. I can't help but think that this changed other relationships in that house church, as well.

Being God's partner in re-authoring our stories

For I think that this is a story about God changing a beloved community; about various people in that community re-authoring their stories in ways that were more like what God had in mind for them and for the world.

It's about Onesimus being recognized as a real partner in sharing God's love for all; and how that helped him find the courage and agency he needed to risk claiming and living into his full place as a valued community member. It's about Paul challenging Philemon to change and re-author his story, too.

I also think this story is about the big idea of *God's reconciling mission in the world*; and how a big theological idea like that becomes reality to the degree that we allow it to play out in our lives and world.

How might the Spirit be inviting us to partner with God in re-authoring our individual stories in good and healthy ways that spill over to our community here at CMCL and beyond? How might we find the courage we need to take that sometimes risky step? And how might we support one another as well as we can along the way?

Our desire and intention at CMCL is to do our best to remind one another and those whom we encounter that all are known and loved by God and are a valued part of God's healing work in the world. While none of us does that perfectly, we know that this simple message has real power – for us and for all people.

Bishop Desmond Tutu described the power of this kind of message in an *On Being* interview with Krista Tippett a couple of years ago. Reflecting on life under apartheid, he laughed incredulously as he said:

...if these white people had intended keeping us under they shouldn't have given us the Bible! ...when you discover that apartheid sought to mislead people into believing that what gave value to human beings was... skin color or ethnicity, - and then you saw how the scriptures say it is because we are created in the image of God... each one of us is a God-carrier. No matter what our physical circumstances may be, no matter how awful, no matter how deprived you could be, it doesn't take away from you this intrinsic worth. One saw just how significant it was.

Tutu went on to describe his small congregation:

...Most of my parishioners were domestic workers... The white employers most frequently...said the person's name was too difficult. And so most African women would be called "Annie".

And I would say to them, "When they ask who are you, you say, 'Me? I'm a God-carrier. I'm God's partner. I'm created in the image of God.'"

As beloved members of the kind of community that tries to remind one another who we really are in the eyes of God, we can find the courage we need to re-author our stories. We can risk being changed for our own healing and for the good of the world.

A Morning Offering

I'd like to close with this prayer from John O'Donahue. It acknowledges our toughest life experiences, as well as the gifts of survival and resilience we may glean along the way. It also welcomes wonder and the possibilities for healing and health open to us today.

A MORNING OFFERING

*I bless the night that nourished my heart
To set the ghosts of longing free
Into the flow and figure of dream
That went to harvest from the dark
Bread for the hunger no one sees.*

*All that is eternal in me
Welcomes the wonder of this day,
The field of brightness it creates
Offering time for each thing
To arise and illuminate.*

*I place on the altar of dawn:
The quiet loyalty of breath,
The tent of thought where I shelter,
Waves of desire I am shore to
And all beauty drawn to the eye.*

*May my mind come alive today
To the invisible geography
That invites me to new frontiers,
To break the dead shell of yesterdays,
To risk being disturbed and changed*

*May I have the courage today
To live the life that I would love,
To postpone my dream no longer
But do at last what I came here for
And waste my heart on fear no more.*

Cindy Lapp, *Philemon and Onesimus*,
<https://hyattsvillemennonite.org/sermons/philemon-and-onesimus/>, accessed
9/9/19.

Bishop Desmond Tutu, *OnBeing*, <https://onbeing.org/programs/desmond-tutu-a-god-of-surprises/#transcript>, accessed 9/9/19.

John O'Donahue, *A Morning Offering*, To Bless the Space Between Us, p.9.