Summoned: Luke 14:25-33; Philemon 1-21

by Bruce Wollenberg in the August 24, 2004 issue

Paul was in Rome, the epicenter of empire, the magnet for people on the lam such as fugitive slaves. He was a “prisoner of Christ Jesus” not only because the Messiah had captured his heart but also because he had boldly proclaimed the grace and peace he had found. Somehow, through the Christian grapevine, Onesimus found Paul and sought shelter with him. Now Onesimus is going back to his owner.

Is it a shock to our modern sensibilities that the man who wrote the “neither slave nor free” line does not strike out at the institution of slavery when Onesimus is a legal “prisoner” of his master Philemon? Perhaps Paul weighed the cost of speaking out, and decided that this was not a winnable fight in his time and place. It was not until the late 18th century that William Wilberforce and others finally embraced abolition. When they did, they framed arguments based on Paul’s writings.

Slavery is appallingly not anachronistic even 20 centuries out. Fair-trade advocates lament that it is almost impossible to purchase chocolate that is untainted by forced labor. Women lured by the promise of good jobs wind up indentured to the global sex trade. Boys and young men slave away in diamond mines and carpet factories. It’s enough to make God weep.

We are not sure that Paul is asking Philemon to manumit his slave from bondage. What is clear is that Onesimus and Paul have bonded. Onesimus—whose name means “profitable or useful one”—has become highly useful to Paul, his “father,” in his gospel ministry. Now this “old man” (*presbytes*) wants Philemon to understand that his slave has become a child of God the Father through the Son. This implies that Onesimus’s relationship with Philemon has changed. Yes, he is still a slave and a runaway at that. Yet to bondage has been added the bond of baptism. Onesimus is now family, a brother in the faith.

Paul emphasizes the slave’s altered status in his letter of entreaty, taking the legal and financial situation into consideration. “If he owes you anything,” Paul writes, “charge that to my account.” Yet he refuses to treat his charge as mere property, and he urges Philemon to receive him “no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a

beloved brother.” In fact, so close has Onesimus become to Paul that it is as if he is sending himself.

As he does elsewhere in his letters, the apostle reflects on his authority as one called and sent by the Lord himself. By this authority he could have turned his request into a simple command. After all, Philemon owes Paul his “very self” because he has won him for Christ. But Paul uses persuasion rather than the imperial imperative; he wants Philemon to acquiesce in his request “in the Lord” and “on the basis of love.” “Refresh my heart in Christ,” he writes.

This approach is consonant with the gospel Paul preaches. Almighty God certainly has the power and authority to command and demand. Yet how does he choose to approach humankind? In the weakness of Jesus who, though in the form of God, emptied himself of power and became the servant of all. The glory of God is disclosed on a cross: while we were yet sinners, disobedient to Authority, Christ died for us. Love that cannot be commanded is evoked by love. God is not the cosmic bully who demands our compliance with the divine directives . . . or else. Rather, he risks conditionless love in perfect freedom, knowing it might not be returned. The summons to a holy life does not come blunt from heaven but issues from the cross. And we are free as Philemon was to demur from doing “the good that we may do for Christ.”

What we may do for Christ seems utterly unattainable in the version of Jesus Luke presents in chapter 14. In the previous chapter the evangelist tells us that Jesus was “casting out demons and performing cures.” No wonder large crowds were mobbing him wherever he went. It was squarely in their self-interest to do so. Still, it must have come as a shock when this hard-working exorcist and healer suddenly unleashed his stark criteria for discipleship. *Hate*, he says. Not, “Put your family in proper perspective, given God’s prior claim on you.” He doesn’t remind them that all life comes from God and therefore permanent gratitude is in order. Such teaching would have made perfect sense. Instead he tells the cure seekers that the key family value is hatred for it. Loathe life, he recommends. They are not to busy themselves usefully, like Onesimus, but to engage in cross-carrying (whatever that might mean) and itinerancy.

What could the crowd do with this wild counsel? What are we to do with it? Yes, Jesus once described his true family not biologically but theologically as those who do the will of his Father. But he also basked in the “family” of Mary and Martha, gave

a once-dead daughter back to her father and created an instant family for his mother with his dying breaths. Will the real Jesus please stand up?

Perhaps we can do no more than leave the tension in place. We are not prepared to hate, carry, follow or give up all our stuff. Therefore, having counted the cost and declared it excessive, we cannot be counted disciples of Jesus. Our only recourse is to the God of the cross we're incapable of carrying, to a grace that requires nothing, including discipleship. And perhaps mercy will allow us to (mis)interpret the Master's words as calling us to give up all our plans and possessions to God and let this impossible Jesus be Lord of every relationship, and of every last penny.