

Useful

Philemon

September 5, 2010

It's Labor Day weekend!

Do you know what that means? It means everybody gets an extra day off! Everybody except me, that is, because Monday is always my day off! Everybody gets a day off because it's a holiday, a national holiday.

And what does the holiday celebrate? The end of summer, of course! One last chance to get out to the cabin or take a weekend road trip or grill out with friends!

No. We're not celebrating the end of summer or the start of school. We are celebrating ... labor. Labor Day is a day set aside to remember and honor the members of the American work force.

Really? Did you know that? Do you ever think about that? It seems to me that Labor Day is the American holiday most disconnected from its original intent.

Even if we don't mark the day listening to speeches or holding parades, we are aware that Presidents' Day in February is meant to remember and honor two of our greatest national leaders, men who helped our country stay the course in especially perilous times.

And even if we treat it as no more than a welcome day off in January, we are aware that Martin Luther King Day is meant to remember and honor this preacher and activist and icon of the civil rights movement, a movement that made our nation pay attention again to its dearest ideals.

And we all know that Memorial Day is about remembering and honoring the dead, particularly those men and women who have died while serving as members of this nation's armed forces.

But Labor Day? What's that about? It's not about remembering and celebrating the joys of childbirth!

Labor Day was designated a national holiday in 1894, in a time of volatile and often violent conflict between labor and management, between members of the working class and business owners. The violence cut both ways -- hired guards doing violence to striking workers and striking workers doing violence to replacement workers.

Tensions peaked in Chicago in May, 1886, at Haymarket Square. A peaceful rally had been organized there to support striking workers and to press the cause of the eight-hour movement, a labor reform movement advocating eight hours a day for work, eight hours for recreation and family, and eight hours for rest. Seems reasonable.

Chicago's mayor had explicitly instructed the city's police force not to interfere, but as the rally was coming to a close, police moved in, ordering the crowd to disperse. During the ensuing confusion, someone from the crowd threw a pipe bomb that exploded, killing a police officer. It was never determined who threw the bomb, but eight of the rally's leaders were indicted and convicted of murder, and four of them were subsequently hanged.

In the late 1800's, the Labor Day holiday was adopted state by state and finally nationalized in an attempt to validate the cause of working men and women and smooth over some of these bitter divisions in American society. But the first Monday in September was chosen for the holiday instead of the May 1st date favored by many international worker groups to avoid associations with the Haymarket rally and the more radical elements of the labor movement.

So, that's why we have a Labor Day holiday! But, you may wonder, if we have a Labor Day, why don't we have a Management Day, too? I'll give you the same reason I gave my children when they asked why, if there is a Mothers' Day and a Fathers' Day, there is no Children's Day. Because, I would tell them, every day is children's day!

Onesimus was labor, most definitely labor. He didn't work an eight-hour day or even a twelve or sixteen hour day. He worked a twenty-four hour day, because he was a slave.

Slave labor was a critical component of the economy throughout the Roman Empire. It is estimated that as much as a third of the population of the empire were slaves. Almost anybody could end up a slave. Slavery in the empire was not race-based, rather the slave population came primarily from prisoners-of-war or debtors or people sold to pay debts.

Slaves could be freed, by consent of their masters or by some kind of buy-out agreement, but as long as they were slaves, their masters held complete sway over their lives. Slaves were bought and sold and rented out, and they could be punished at the owner's whim without legal impediment, even to the point of death.

Onesimus was a slave. And he bore a name common to slaves, "Onesimus," which means ... "useful."

How would you like such a name?

Hi, Paul, glad to meet you. I'm "Useful."

Not "Timothy," one who honors God, or "Peter," the rock, or "Thaddeus," brave, but "Onesimus," ... useful. The man has become a commodity, something to be used. I have a wife in whom I delight, children in whom I invest, friends with whom I share, and a slave who is ... useful.

Onesimus was Philemon's slave. Philemon was a prominent and wealthy citizen of the Greek city of Colossae. And Philemon was a Christian, a follower of Jesus, one of the leaders of the Colossian church. In fact, the church gathered for worship in his home.

A Christian and a slave owner? This is where it get complicated. You see, Onesimus ran away. He escaped his master's home, quite likely taking some of his master's money with him. He made his way to the city where Paul was imprisoned, probably Rome, somehow met up with Paul there, and through Paul's friendship and witness became a Christian himself, a believer, a follower of Jesus.

So what do you do? Paul knows he is harboring a runaway slave -- which was, by the way, a punishable offense -- but this slave has become a brother in Christ, as well as a dear friend and helper. What do you do?

Paul sent him back. Paul sent him back to Philemon, but not alone and not defenseless . Paul sent him with Tychicus and sent with them two letters, one intended for the churches in Colossae and Laodicea church. our New Testament "Letter to the Colossians" and this personal letter addressed to Philemon.

It's an extraordinary letter, gentle and firm, acknowledging Philemon's rights and dignity, but also advocating for Onesimus' dignity and his rights.

On the one hand, Paul appeals to Philemon's better nature, simply making him a plea on Onesimus' behalf, asking him to do the right thing of his own free will. On the other hand, Paul reminds him that he could order him to do the right thing if he chose, invoking his authority as an apostle and overseer of the church.

On the one hand, Paul offers himself as the guarantor of Onesimus debts, ready to reimburse Philemon in full for any losses he may have incurred. And on the other hand, Paul reminds Philemon, that he, Philemon, owes everything, even his very self, to Paul!

But Paul's strongest appeal is to remind Philemon of what Onesimus has become.

Now he is not just a slave, but much more than a slave: he is a dear brother in Christ.

He is a dear brother in Christ, and Paul urges Philemon to welcome him and receive him just as Philemon would welcome and receive Paul himself. Onesimus is not the same man he was when he left. Everything has changed -- status, roles, relationships, obligations. Everything has changed. So Philemon must act -- in good conscience, out of deference to Paul, and, above all, for the Lord's sake -- as if everything indeed has changed. Paul even makes a word play on Onesimus' name, telling Philemon that though Onesimus once proved "useless" to him, he is now most "useful," both to Philemon and to Paul.

There's that unfortunate name again -- "Useful" -- but Paul casts it now in an entirely different light. Onesimus is now useful, not for the labor he may produce, not as an engine of economic productivity, not as a slave subject to his master's beck and call, but as a brother, a co-worker in the cause of God's kingdom, a fellow witness to the grace and mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ. Onesimus is most useful now, not to Philemon's personal family and household, but to Philemon's church family and the household of faith!

We know almost nothing of what became of Onesimus and Philemon after the receipt of Paul's letter, but there is one historical footnote that suggests Philemon may well have taken Paul's counsel to heart, and that Paul's testimony to Onesimus' usefulness to the church was proved to be most true. The record shows that in the ensuing years, the church in nearby Ephesus was served by a bishop named ... Onesimus! A useful man indeed!

So what about us, those who read Paul's letter to Philemon some twenty centuries after the fact? What can we learn from it? What does God have to say to us through these words? I think that depends on where you are in your life.

You may feel like Onesimus, on the outside looking in, unappreciated, undervalued, misused. In that case, you need to remember your name! You need to remember that you are most useful to the family of God, as a brother, as a sister, in Christ.

You may be like Paul, called on to defend a friend, to stick up for a brother or sister or neighbor whose reputation or welfare is at risk. In that case, you can learn from Paul how to be strong and gentle, wise and insistent, loving and

bold. You can follow his lead, putting everything on the line for someone who needs you, even your own reputation and your own finances.

Or you may be like Philemon, a member of a church, even perhaps a church leader -- a member, a leader, who needs to be reminded that our oneness in Christ supersedes all other differences, crosses all other boundaries. In Christ there is no difference between Jew and Gentile, between slave and free, between male and female, between black and white, between labor and management, between old and young. You are all one in union with Christ Jesus. You are all one in union with Christ Jesus ...