

Over the 60+ years of my life, I have met three people who have the special set of skills and smarts to fix just about anything, whether it's dropped off at their door, their garage, or left by the curb. There's Mike, my brother-in-law. There's Dave, my neighbor down the block. And, there's Fred or Manfred, he's in heaven.

These three can take things that are broken, worn out or even missing parts and with their skillful hands and minds turn something that was once useless into something that is now useful.

Sometimes people get broken, worn out or feel something is missing. They feel useless. But even the most skilled hands and minds can't make them feel useful again. Can anything make what was useless ... useful again? Yes! The Gospel can! It did that for a runaway slave named Onesimus, for the Apostle Paul and for us.

The message of the Book of Philemon is this: **“Once Useless, Now Useful: The Story of Onesimus, Paul and Us All.”**

The case of Onesimus vs. Philemon is on today's docket. Here are the facts. Onesimus had been a slave of a Christian named Philemon. Hold it right there! What's a Christian doing with a slave? Isn't slavery wrong? While the Bible never condemns slavery, we do have Paul working to change one slave owner's heart to set one slave free.

Paul and Peter encouraged slaves to obey and respect their masters, while slave owners were expected to love and care for their slaves. **“Love your neighbor as yourself”** applied to them like it did everyone else. We hope that Philemon treated Onesimus in that way.

If he did, Onesimus wasn't very appreciative. Not only did he run away but he probably financed his flight to freedom by stealing from his master: **(v.18) And if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge it to me.**

Philemon may have been ready to give up on Onesimus, God wasn't. He steered Onesimus to

Rome and made certain that, out of all the people there, he crossed paths with Paul, who was in jail.

Paul met Onesimus and soon found out he was the runaway slave of a Christian he knew back in Colosse, 600 miles away. He saw this as the hand of his heavenly Father and went to work.

First, he pointed out Onesimus' sin of running away from his master. Then, he followed that up with the gospel, the good news of how Jesus had already paid for that sin. As a result, Onesimus was not only converted to Christianity by Paul's witness, he also became a trusted and reliable helper for Paul. **(v.10) I am appealing to you on behalf of my child Onesimus. I became his father while I was in chains.**

The runaway slave who had once been useless, now finally lived up to his name, *Onesimus*, which means “useful.”

The purpose of Paul's letter is to encourage Philemon to receive his runaway slave back. Yes, that would be a difficult ask of Philemon who had three legal options. 1) He had the right to have Onesimus put to death. 2) He could allow him to live, but Onesimus' was required to pay or work off this fine for running away. 3) He could forgive the debt of this brother in Christ and set Onesimus free.

Paul was hoping for option three and that his words of encouragement would hit a special note with Philemon, who also had been in slavery. Philemon's slavery was to sin. Through Paul's witness, Philemon had been converted: **(v.9) I am appealing to you, instead, on the basis of love, just as I, Paul, am an old man and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.** Philemon had gained a freedom unlike any other through faith in Jesus. His sins? Gone! Forgiven!

Onesimus' escape had obviously been a loss to Philemon's workforce. But at the same time, God also made it a gain, Onesimus was now his Christian brother: **(v.16) no longer as a slave, but as more than a slave, as a dear brother. He certainly is dear to me, but he is even more of a**

dear brother to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

Paul was aware of the cost of what he was asking, but was also confident Philemon would do the right thing: **(v.21) Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you'll do even more than I ask.**

Just as God directed Onesimus' steps to Rome, he still guides our steps today. It's no accident that you are here. God brought you here even though we run away from him and our responsibilities as children, parents, employers, employees, and church members. Here you learn through the gospel of your forgiveness and his plan for you. God makes us useful again.

How does God plan to use us? First, let's see what he had in store for Onesimus. Paul would have loved to keep Onesimus on as a trusted friend of the gospel. But he sent him back. Onesimus was still Philemon's slave and if he was repentant of running away, he would return as Philemon's slave.

Things had changed. Onesimus was still Philemon's slave, and now his brother in the faith. Paul urged Philemon to receive Onesimus back as if he was receiving Paul back: **(v.17) So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.** Paul didn't demand or beg Philemon. He was sure he'd make the right choice.

Notice how Paul worked. When we want our Christian brothers and sisters to share in the ministry we carry on here at St. Paul's, we don't demand or beg. We simply explain the opportunities, remind each other of what God has done for us and trust in the Gospel's power.

Onesimus still must have been nervous about going back to Philemon. He knew what he could face according to Roman law. Paul offered to pay Philemon for any damage Onesimus had done. This promise let Onesimus go back and serve without fear of punishment.

Do you see parallels between Onesimus and us? Although we should be punished for our sins, Jesus told his heavenly Father to charge our sins to him. Jesus paid for our sins on the cross so that we now

can serve without fear of punishment. Jesus forgives and equips us.

What is it that God wants us to do? Like Onesimus, we'd try to undo any damage our sins have caused. If we've run away from our responsibilities as a parent or child, as a boss or employee, as a teacher or student, we'll make things right ... speak kindly to our spouse ... listen to our parents ... do our best as a boss or employee, teacher or student.

Don't stop there. Onesimus didn't, who according to tradition became a pastor to let his light shine. We have that opportunity too, don't we? Not that we all become pastors or teachers, but we can let our light (our faith) shine and get involved in the work of our church.

"I don't have the energy I used to. I don't get around very well anymore. How can I do anything that's useful here?" Have you heard yourself say those things lately?

Did Paul feel that way in jail? If he did, he got over it and shared Jesus with whoever came by ... Onesimus, the guards on duty. In Philippians, Paul writes about the guards coming to believe in Jesus.

Besides sharing God's Word, he used his time to pray for and write letters to his fellow Christians. During this time, he wrote to Philemon, and to the Colossian, Ephesian and Philippian Christians. Every generation since has benefited from those letters, including us

Even if God has taken away your mobility, your eyesight, your energy, you aren't useless.

- You can pray for fellow believers and the work of your church.
- You can write letters, emails or texts of encouragement to your church's leaders.
- You can tell those who come to visit you about Jesus.

You may think you're useless, but in Christ, you're useful.

Mike, Dave and Fred took what was useless and made it useful. By the power of the gospel we, who were by nature ... **once useless, are now useful** ... by God's grace.