Useful Again

On Philemon, the Potter's Hand, and Being Reformed

Rob Massie

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The Thirteenth Week After Pentecost

We don't really follow the church calendar in our congregation, but maybe we should. Today is the thirteenth week since Pentecost. Over the past few weeks we have been talking about how, from the very beginning, God had a plan to bring all of humanity into one family through the Spirit: that the Gentiles, who had no hope, would be brought near; that what had been promised through the prophets would now be lived out through the church. And what is remarkable is that the lectionary texts most Christians around the world read this morning press exactly that point. The passages for this Sunday in the wider church are Deuteronomy 30, Psalm 139, Jeremiah 18, and Philemon. Today, you get to hear about Philemon.

I did not plan a sermon on Philemon. I went looking and discovered I had no notes on Philemon. But today is a Philemon day. Sharpen your pencils, this may be the only chance you ever get to hear a sermon on this little book.

And the threads tie together. The themes the church has been singing, *that Christ would be formed in me, that we are no longer slaves, that from my mother's womb the arms of the Father have surrounded me*: these are the very threads Deuteronomy 30, Psalm 139, Jeremiah 18, and Philemon weave. He is forming something in us. He is calling us to be sons and daughters.

Acts 2 says it directly:

"And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven" (Acts 2:5).

Luke means it: *every* nation. There was nobody missing. When the crowd asked what was happening, Peter stood up with the eleven and said, *This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel*:

> It shall come to pass in the last days, says God, that I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams. And on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days; and they shall prophesy. (Acts 2:17–18)

What had been isolated to a very small percentage of the population in the days of the prophets, that small line of the spirit-filled who could speak the wisdom of God for the people, has now been opened to *all flesh*. Fifty days after the death and resurrection of Christ, the day Joel had promised arrived. The Passover had been anticipated for fifteen hundred years; now the final Passover had been fulfilled. The Passover Lamb had been finally accepted. People's lives had been redeemed by the blood of *the* Lamb, and the writer of Hebrews makes plain that this was not something to be perpetuated year after year, like the blood of bulls and goats. *Once for all*, the Passover was completed. Once for all, the day of Pentecost had occurred. From then on, the Pentecost is there perpetually for us to receive, the Passover is there perpetually for us to partake in. All of the festivals that had been anticipated were fulfilled in Jesus.

Down to the Potter's House

So a redeemed people gets gathered up out of every nation. And how that happens, the *method* by which God redeems a marred people, Jeremiah saw it in advance:

> The word which came to Jeremiah from the Lord, saying: “Arise and go down to the potter’s house, and there I will cause you to hear My words.” Then I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was, making something at the wheel. And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter; so he made it again into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to make. (Jeremiah 18:1–4)

Picture it. Jeremiah goes down and watches a craftsman at his wheel. There must have been something almost meditative about it, like watching skilled hands shape something out of nothing, the kind of thing you can stand and watch for an hour. The potter has clay on his wheel. He is forming something. And the vessel is *marred*. Something has gone wrong. Maybe lumpy. Maybe off-center. So he stops. He crushes the clay back into a ball. And then he begins again, and the second time, he makes something different. One translation renders it: *he took that same clay and made it something new*.

In our lives, we sometimes experience the cutting down. We can think there is no hope for us, that we have been estranged from the blessings of God, that we are marred past usefulness. But God takes what is marred and adds water, and adds more clay if needed, and *reshapes*. And what comes out of his hand is what was in his mind from the very beginning. The end of the reshaping is what we were singing about earlier: *till Christ be formed in me*. He is forming something in us, and it is not that we lose ourselves. I do not love a couple of the lines in some of the songs we sing that go *I give up, I lose my will*. No, what makes the work of God uniquely beautiful is that Christ himself said:

> “It is to your advantage that I go away . . . the works that I do you will do also; and greater works than these you will do, because I go to My Father.” (cf. John 16:7; 14:12)

He was about to pour something out into individuals, individuals with wills and experiences, and form something *uniquely* in each one of us, and through that uniqueness form something *globally* across the nations. Something unique. Something transformational.

Listen to how Jeremiah's vision concludes:

> "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter?" says the Lord. "Look, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel! The instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, to pull down, and to destroy it, if that nation against whom I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I thought to bring upon it. And the instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it, if it does evil in My sight so that it does not obey My voice, then I will relent concerning the good with which I said I would benefit it." (Jeremiah 18:6–10)

There is an action on our part. We look at words like *pluck up* and *pull down* and *destroy* and assume God has some destructive characteristic. But look at verse 8. *If that nation turns from its evil, I will relent.* The work of the potter on a marred vessel is *reformation*, not annihilation. Pentecost was the day when the nations that had been gripped by idolatry were being overturned, not by destruction, but by repentance. When Peter had finished his sermon, the people asked, "What shall we do?" And he said, *Repent, and be baptized every one of you* (Acts 2:38). That was the reshaping.

And Jeremiah concludes the chapter with God speaking to Israel directly:

> "Behold, I am fashioning a disaster and devising a plan against you. Return now every one from his evil way, and make your ways and your doings good" (Jeremiah 18:11).

That is heavy. Isn't it heavy? We need the full counsel of God here, and the full counsel is not all cotton-candy Jesus. There is real work going on in our lives. There are things God needs to pluck up and uproot. There are things he needs to plant and water. We need to stay close enough to the wheel to let the formation actually happen. When we come to Christ, we do not assume we are okay as we are. He saves us. He delivers us. *And then* the Christ-formation, the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, gets going. Christ is being formed in us for a lifetime. So don't give up on yourself. Stay on the wheel. Let him work out the lumps and the imbalances of the pot you are. Paul will later use this exact image: *we are all vessels*. We are all vessels of God.

Knit Together in the Lowest Parts

Psalm 139 takes the same image of God's hand at work, but moves it into the individual's interior life:

> O Lord, You have searched me and known me. You know my sitting down and my rising up; You understand my thought afar off. You comprehend my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word on my tongue, but behold, O Lord, You know it altogether. You have hedged me behind and before, and laid Your hand upon me. (Psalm 139:1–5)

"You have hedged me behind and before, and laid Your hand upon me." When you are baptized in the Spirit, that is the direct experience of Christ laying his hands on you. He is hedging you. He is around you. He is in your midst. He is forming you. And then, a few verses on:

> For You formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother's womb. I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; marvelous are Your works, and that my soul knows very well. My frame was not hidden from You, when I was made in secret,

> and skillfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. And in Your book they all were written, the days fashioned for me, when as yet there were none of them. (Psalm 139:13–16)

"When I was *unformed*, you formed me." When someone has poured herself into making something, when she has stitched intricate work, painted detailed flowers, framed a careful piece of needlework that ends up in a place of honor in her home, that piece takes on a value to her greater than to anyone else. She remembers the painstaking detail. She remembers every brushstroke. *That* is what Psalm 139 is saying. *You formed me. You saw me when I was unformed. The very days of my life were written down before any of them began.*

Now hold that individually-formed soul in one hand, and hold the nation-shaping image of Jeremiah 18 in the other. If God is *that* attentive to the forming of one human in the womb, what kind of heart should we have for the people most unlike us, the people we are tempted to dismiss as unformed, uninformed, unfashioned, disreputable, of no use? Whole nations get written off in conversations on back porches. *He skillfully wrought them in the lowest parts of the earth.* He sees substance where we see nothing.

I do a thought experiment sometimes. I will sit on my back deck and let the breeze blow through, just letting gratitude rise for the peace of an afternoon, and then I will think of a people group I have only read about. What are they doing right now, in this same moment? When the eastern border of Afghanistan was hit by an earthquake that lasted barely a minute, an earthquake we would scarcely have felt here, lives were crushed, families broken open, mothers bereaved of their children. I do that thought experiment, and it does not bring me down. It does not make me feel I should eat dirt to empathize more acutely. Any of us who has lived five minutes in this world knows what it is to suffer loss and pain. We have all felt the stump-like losses where hope

seemed gone. But the thought experiment puts me in a posture that recognizes those distant people as *valuable*. My prayers can go up. I may never reach them. But there are people in my own community (*bereft* people, the women we heard testifying at the gala last night about what they have suffered) who I *can* reach. There are opportunities to share our lives right here. If you are a young mother and you cannot do one more thing, that is fine. God has given you those little ones to raise. Pour your life into them: They were formed too, and their days were written in his book before any of them began. The empty-nesters among us can take up some of the volunteer work.

Onesimus, the Useful One

Acts 2 was the day the nations came together. The eighth chapter of Acts repeats the event with the Samaritans, half-Jews receiving the Spirit. The tenth chapter repeats it again with Cornelius and his Gentile household. The book of Acts ends with Paul in Rome, writing letter after letter. He has no writer's block; he is writing to Philippi, to Colossae, to all the churches. *Trust God. The victory of God is on its way. Be the people God has called you to be.*

And among those letters from Rome is the shortest in the whole New Testament, the book of Philemon: a personal note Paul wrote alongside the letter to the Colossians, both of them carried by the same delivery. The letter centers on a runaway slave named Onesimus. *Onesimus* in Greek means *profitable, useful, helpful*. It was one of the most popular male slave names in the Greco-Roman world. Imagine the master's hope written into the name: *I hope this kid turns out useful*. Maybe Onesimus was born in Philemon's house and Philemon named him this way. Maybe he was an aftermarket purchase and the slave dealer named him for marketing; *Look! This one's named Useful. Surely he will be.* It was the way an applicant might write *self-starter*

and *works well with others* across the top of a résumé. You are giving yourself a name and a promise in one breath.

Whatever the origin of his name, Onesimus had turned out to be a drag for Philemon. He had stolen from his master, run away, and caught a ship across the Mediterranean. And then, in the providence of God, the runaway slave who had once belonged to Philemon found his way to *Paul*, who was sitting in chains in Rome: Paul, who was also Philemon's spiritual father.

Listen to how Paul opens the letter:

> Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved friend and fellow laborer . . . Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints. (Philemon 1, 3–5)

Paul, sitting in bonds in Rome, is still making mention of Philemon always in his prayers. He has heard of Philemon's love and faithfulness. After his conversion, Philemon had moved to Colossae and had become a key figure there, a business owner with wealth, sharing it with the community, blessing the people of God around him. Paul continues:

> . . . that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother. (Philemon 6–7)

"The sharing of your faith." The Greek word for *sharing* is *koinōnia*: the same word we get *koine* Greek from, the *shared* common tongue. *Our faith that we are participating in together.* Here is a Jew writing to a Gentile and calling him *brother* in a faith they share, a

relationship that could not have existed before Pentecost. Before the shared Spirit of the Father, before becoming sons and daughters of the same Father, this letter could not have been written.

"I Could Command, but I Appeal"

Now Paul begins the request:

> Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you (being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ) I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains, who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me. (Philemon 8–11)

This was being read out loud in Philemon's house, where the church gathered for worship. *Everyone* in that room knew Onesimus's story. He had stolen. He had run. Roman law would have given Philemon full recovery; he could have had Onesimus executed. The room had to be tense as Paul's letter unfolded. And right at that point of tension, watch what Paul does with the name. *Onesimus* means *useful*. "Who once was unprofitable to you" (there is the obvious play on the name; *useful* had not been useful) "*but now is profitable*. Now is Onesimus to you and to me. Now he is what his name promised he would be."

Listen to what is being claimed here. The God who formed you and knew you when you were unformed, the God who had a plan and a vision for your life, will retain that vision to the end of the age. When we think we are beyond the pale of God's help, beyond his vision, lost in darkness, the darkness is light where God is. He sees us. We cannot get beyond his plan for us. Begin to think that God will not let go of you: that whatever it takes, in this life or the life to come, he will redeem you fully, and that Christ will be fully formed in you without exception:

"Being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6).

"He will *perform* the work," as the King James puts it. He will finish what he started in you and in me. Paul keeps going:

> I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart, whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel. But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary. (Philemon 12–14)

"He is my own heart." And then the principle: *no compulsion*. Paul refuses to twist Philemon's arm. He could have demanded; he chose to appeal. In the kingdom of God, when we are working with one another in faith, we should not command. Our role is to *connect people to God*. The shared connection is a powerful thing in itself. I cannot possibly know how God is forming and shaping you, or what vessel of honor you are going to be in his house. I am going to let *him* shape you.

"Perhaps He Departed for This Reason"

> For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave: a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. (Philemon 15–16)

"Perhaps he departed for this reason." Onesimus meant his running away for evil. *God meant it for good.* In that day, you could not have charted the journey from Philemon's house in Colossae to Paul's cell in Rome, but somewhere in the twists and turns of a sea passage and a land passage, this runaway slave found his way to Paul. And in finding Paul, he found Christ. And in finding Christ, the relationship to his old master could be reconfigured forever.

Listen carefully. Your children. Your children's children for a thousand generations. Our prayers are going up for them today, and we do not know the twists and turns that are going to lead them back to the people they need to find. They may be in a dark place today. There may be people in your life from whom you are estranged, with no reconciliation in view. But the twists and turns of their life and yours may bring you together again someday. *Everything eventually gets reconciled to Christ in God* (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:28). Let the one who began a good work continue the journey. Trust him to bring you to the end.

The relationships in our lives that we treat as merely temporary, merely fleshly, merely tied to this present age (*master-slave, parent-child, employer-employee*) when we view them only through that lens, we minimize them. We hurt them. Paul refuses that frame. "Receive him *forever*, no longer as a slave but as a brother." In Christ, even a master-slave relationship gets refigured into a family relationship that outlasts the present age.

"Put It on My Account"

> If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me. But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account. I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay, not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides. (Philemon 17–19)

"If he owes you anything, put it on my account. I will repay." Here is something striking. Of Paul's thirteen letters, this is the *only* one in which Paul does not explicitly mention the cross of Christ and the work Jesus did to forgive sins. Every other letter says it: *Christ bore our sins on the cross; through his blood, all the indebtedness counted against us was wiped away in him.* In every other letter, that is the engine of the theology. In Philemon, it is not stated. It is *enacted*. Paul writes himself into the very position Christ has taken for him. *Put it on my account. I will*

repay. Paul becomes, in this little personal letter, an ambassador of Christ in the literal Pauline sense:

"Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us" (2 Corinthians 5:20).

We are anointed, Christ-figures in the earth, bearing our cross. "Take up your cross and follow Me," Jesus said. We are not just lumps of clay with no formation, but if we will not be formed, then we repent, and when we take action God reforms us. And I cannot tell you how many times in my own Christian walk God has found some lump of imperfection in me and begun to knead it out, to work out something different, something reformed. That is the journey.

And here is the wonder of the Philemon story: a vessel of honor named *Onesimus* (a runaway slave who had been estranged from his master *socially*, *economically*, and *spiritually*) gets redeemed and restored as a brother through the patient intercession of an aged prisoner. Three relational lines were broken; God reconciles all three. And Paul says: *let me be the redemptive force here. I will pay whatever he owes.*

Can we do that for our children? For our spouses? For our parents? For those who work for us and for those for whom we work? If our domain is eternal, if the Spirit that has been given us is eternal, then every action we take has consequences beyond the present moment. We evaluate every word we say through the lens of an eternal consequence. We do not look for our payback in *this* life, but in the one to come.

> Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you. (Philemon 21–22)

"Prepare me a guest room; I'm coming to see you as soon as I get out of this place." That is the confidence of a man who knows what God is doing in his friend.

Christ Is All and in All

This is how the Pentecost plan plays out. Pentecost was the high note. The death and resurrection were the deepest note before it. The disciples thought he was going to redeem Israel, and *wah, wah*; he was crucified. But then *but God*: he came out of the grave, exalted to heaven, poured out his Spirit, and now it is on all flesh, of all nations. We are on a high note. *And then*, over time, things happen. We are about to read in Acts 4 and 5 and 6 how the Pentecost community begins to encounter its own brokenness. Ananias and Sapphira treat holy things flippantly. The Greek-speaking widows are getting overlooked at the common table while the Jewish widows are being fed. How do we handle that? The church from Pentecost on solves the problems of broken humanity through the Spirit. *That is what the Spirit was given to us for.* And that is what the thirteenth week after Pentecost reminds us: even in our best relationships, there is brokenness. And there is a Potter.

One last verse from Colossians: the church Philemon attended, the letter delivered the same trip as Philemon was. Paul writes:

> If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth . . . where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all. (Colossians 3:1–2, 11)

"Christ is all and in all." When we recognize that our identity is no longer in these hierarchical traditions but in our one shared relationship with Christ, we start to think differently. And then Paul, in the next paragraph of the same letter, addresses every relational pairing in the

household (*wives, husbands, children, fathers, bondservants, masters*) and gives each one the specific exhortation they most need. To the bondservants:

> Bondservants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh, not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but in sincerity of heart, fearing God. And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ. (Colossians 3:22–24)

Why this exhortation? Because slaves serving unregenerate masters could, by their overabundant labor, *actually overturn the hierarchy*, they could be the redemptive factor that brought their masters into the kingdom. Those slaves were not living for this life. They had been animated by the life to come, and now they were serving their masters in such a way that caused those masters to be redeemed.

And here is how Colossians ends, just before the final greetings:

"I am sending [Tychicus] to you for this very purpose, that he may know your circumstances and comfort your hearts, with Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you" (Colossians 4:8–9).

There it is. *Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you.* The runaway slave is now the trusted courier of an apostolic letter, traveling back into the very community where his theft and flight had originated. The marred vessel has been reshaped. The clay was the same; the form was new.

See the power of God to take the ill-formed and put it all back together. To reform and to form again, using the same clay to build what we need to be, to fulfill his plan for this world. Let us join him in that. He will perform what he has begun in you. He who has begun a good work in you *will* complete it.