

## MAKING UP IN HARD TO DO

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There is a photo of Pope John Paul II, which many of us will never forget.<sup>i</sup> He is wearing his white robes. He is sitting on a small chair, leaning forward, hands on his knees, listening intently to the smaller, unshaven, swarthy man in front of him. The room in which they sit is barren, except for their chairs and a bed to one side with the mattress rolled up at one end. The windows are high and barred. The Pope is a picture of divine compassion. The man about whom he is concerned, upon whom all his attention is focused, is Mehmet Ali Ağca, who 2 1/2 years earlier tried to kill him. He met with his would-be assassin for 21 minutes, shook his hand and forgave him.<sup>ii</sup>

I found the photograph, and find it still, to be very moving. I suppose we could be cynical about it. We could say that he only did it for the cameras, or that he only mouthed the words of forgiveness and didn't feel it in his heart. Or even that it is his business to forgive people. After all, he is the Pope. Nonetheless, I hold it to be genuine.

I imagined that few, if any of us, have ever had an assassin tried to put a bullet through our heart. Nonetheless, I'm sure that we have all felt our hearts pierced by the pain of one who hurt us deeply. I'm sure that at some time or other we have all been stabbed with a knife sharper than steel. And what is worse, sometimes we have been that assassin ourselves, wounding another deeper than words can cry. And sometimes, too often, the one we have wounded, or the one who has wounded us, has been someone we love. How hard it is to forgive those, particularly those we love, for the hurt they have inflicted upon us. How even more difficult to ask those we have harmed to forgive us. Making up is oh so hard to do.

We have in the letter to Philemon, the only personal letter of

the apostle Paul still preserved, a glimpse into an attempted reconciliation between two people. The context of this letter makes the message easy to miss. The context is slavery. Philemon, although he is a Christian through the influence of Paul, is a master of slaves, and Onesimus is one of his slaves. Onesimus has stolen something from his master and run away. Subsequently, Onesimus has been in the company of Paul, and he has been converted to Christianity. After that, Paul, who is in a prison in Ephesus, has found that Onesimus is very helpful and useful to him. Nevertheless, Paul decides to send Onesimus back to Philemon with this covering letter, in the hope that they will be reconciled to one another, and that Onesimus will be received not as a thief and fugitive, nor as a slave, but as a brother in Christ. The context is slavery. But the message is reconciliation. In Christ we are brought together and made brothers and sisters. Paul hopes that what has been separated will not only be united but transformed, that a relationship of master and slave will be transformed into one of family as brother embraces brother.

How do you think Onesimus felt about Paul's idea to return to his master, Philemon? In their time, slavery was an accepted institution. Slaves were chattel. They were bought and sold. They were punished, even killed, at the whim of their master. A story is told of a slave who broke a crystal goblet and was thrown into a pool to be eaten alive by lamprey eels. Another was roasted in an oven for making the bath water too hot. Slavery betrays humanity. How Philemon, a Christian, actually treated Onesimus we don't know, but we do know that it betrayed love. It was hateful. How could he return to that? After all, it was from this enslavement that he had fled in the first place. Even more, the risk was so high. The penalty for a runaway slave was at the very least branding on the forehead with the letter F, which stood for fugitive. At the worst, the penalty would be crucifixion. How do you think Onesimus, fugitive and thief, felt about returning to his master? Resentful? Resistant? A little anxious? Fearful? Petrified? Even thinking about making up is hard to do.<sup>iii</sup>

Onesimus, Paul recognizes, cannot run away forever from his slavery. He will always feel hunted. He will never feel

comfortable and at peace. He will always be shackled. Like you and I he cannot escape the landscape. We cannot escape the environment in which we live. And his environment is one of institutional slavery. To be free, he must be freed by the one who holds the chains that bind him, namely Philemon. Likewise, he cannot escape the inscape of his own guilt for stealing and betraying the trust of his master.<sup>iv</sup> Making up is hard to do. But it leads to freedom and peace of mind.

What about Philemon, who would receive Paul's letter? How would he feel? How would he react? Certainly, we want to repudiate the institution of slavery. Nonetheless, within that context, we can understand a little about how Philemon felt. He had been betrayed. He had been on the receiving end of thievery. Although I understand from the commentaries on the letter that it doesn't have the same feel in English as it had in Greek, that is, we miss the humour and friendliness of it, if I were Philemon, I would feel like telling Paul to butt out. "What goes on in my household is my concern, not his. I don't like being preached at. I don't like being manipulated. I will deal with Onesimus as I see fit. I am his master. He owes me.

Yet Philemon is also a Christian under the Lordship of Christ his master. In Christ, Paul is his brother. Philemon knows that what Paul is saying is right. If we are Christian, then something more than justice under the law is required. Mercy is required. Something more than a return to a master-slave relationship is required. In Christ we are equal and one. We are brothers and sisters. Love is the order of the day.

One summer as we travelled, we thought frequently about the safety of our home. Recently we had been burglarized and we were rather uneasy about leaving our house untended. As we remembered it, all the feelings we felt came back. We felt violated. Our privacy had been invaded. Our humanity had been betrayed by someone unknown. Yet I was also aware that as Christians, our primary concern must not be vengeance but reconciliation. In an article to the *Richmond Hill Liberal* newspaper at that time, I wrote that some means should be provided to bring offenders face to face with those they have

violated. An example is the Mennonite Victim Offender Reconciliation Program. Yet even while advocating such idealistic views, I knew in my heart how difficult it would be if we were ever brought to the point of being face to face with the one who had entered our home uninvited and taken that which is beyond price and cannot be replaced.

Who can deny then that the meeting of Philemon and Onesimus would be difficult? Making up is hard to do.

Nonetheless, through Paul's influence, they try to make up. They are brought face to face.

From Philemon's perspective, he has been reminded by Paul, and persuaded once again by him, of the greatness of God's reconciling and redeeming love in Christ. As Jesus said in this morning's gospel lesson<sup>v</sup>, which we did not read, we are to love him more than our very selves, more than our loved ones and families, more than life itself. We are to be possessed by the powerful love of Christ that transforms us, enabling us to love those we love in a deeper, freer way than ever before and to love those whom we do not even happen to like. Thus so, the transforming love which Philemon felt in his heart, a love which accepted him as he was and loved him freely, motivated him and would enable him to run with open arms<sup>vi</sup> and to accept one who was formerly his slave as his brother in the Spirit.

From Onesimus' perspective, he had come to be persuaded of Paul's persuasion that God can be trusted, that nothing in life or death can separate us from the love of God in Christ, and that God's love is always working for good, healing our wounds and bridging the gaps that separate us from one another.<sup>vii</sup> To return to Philemon could mean gruesome death but he trusted God. He trusted that the same love of Christ that beat in his heart and warmed his life and transformed his person beat also in the heart of Philemon. Their differences, his betrayal of Philemon through stealing and Philemon's betrayal of him through slavery could be overcome. They could become more than they were. They could be transformed into brothers.

Making up is hard to do, but in their reconciliation, which is

wrought in the love of Christ, there would be a blessing too great for words.

Whatever happened to Philemon and Onesimus? Were they ever reconciled? Did they ever become brothers? Or is this just idealistic wishful thinking? How does the story end?

Some scholars think that Philemon sent his new brother back to serve Paul, and that it was Onesimus himself who collected and preserved the letters of Paul for posterity. Even more, some believe that he went on to become the beloved Bishop of Ephesus, and that this letter of Paul, preserved for all time, was Onesimus' testimony. "See what I was, a thief and a fugitive, slave and a criminal. Now see what the grace of God has done with me."<sup>viii</sup>

Did Philemon forgive Onesimus? And did Onesimus forgive him? Were they reconciled as brothers in Christ? I say yes. Did the Pope really forgive his assassin? I say yes. Can we forgive those who hurt us? I say yes. Can we seek the forgiveness of those we hurt? I say yes. This is our faith that through Christ the impossible can happen. We can be reconciled to those who have hurt us and to those we have hurt. We can be transformed into brothers and sisters. May this truth guide our living. And may God's love in Christ transform our lives. So may it be. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Taken December 27, 1983.

<sup>ii</sup> "Papal Visit Guide," *The Toronto Star*, Thursday, September 6, 1984, p. 26.

<sup>iii</sup> William Barclay, "Slave and Brother," *The Men, The Meaning, The Message*, G. R. Welch, 1976, pp. 88-93.

<sup>iv</sup> "Inscape" is a phrase used by poet Gerard Manley Hopkins by which he meant the inner nature of a think, the essence which leads us inevitably to the source of its creation in God, as opposed to the landscape that is the decription of the "outside."

<sup>v</sup> Luke 14: 25-33.

<sup>vi</sup> Cf. Luke 15: 11-32.

<sup>vii</sup> Romans 8: 38-39 and 28.

<sup>viii</sup> John Knox, *Philemon Among the Letters of Paul*, University of Chicago Press, 1935. Also John Knox, *Chapters in a Life of Paul*, Abingdon Press, 1950, and William Barclay *op.cit.*, pp. 91-92.