

THE MAN WHO WAS NO GOOD

INTRODUCTION

Here this morning in the intimacy of our Fellowship Hall, I should like to introduce you to a young man who lived many many years ago in the ancient city of Colossae. All the information that we have regarding this young man is to be found in Paul's Letter to Philemon. I read that letter to you in its entirety several minutes ago. The name of this young man was Onesimus. Some of you may have met him before; others of you may be meeting him for the first time. He was a young man who had his dreams and his visions just as you and I have our dreams and visions of what we would like to accomplish in life. But the thing that made this young man different from you and me is that he was a slave. Tradition says that he was sold into slavery because of a debt. Anyway Onesimus stood on the sidelines and watched the game of life until one day he decided that he had had enough of the slave's life; he took matters into his own hands so to speak and made a break for freedom.

He slipped out of the slaves' quarters late one night and into his master's quarters where he proceeded to help himself to some of his master's gold. Thus armed, he then stole out through the window, hugging the dark shadows and made for the open country. From there he hurried one to the city of Ephesus. And not feeling quite safe in Ephesus, he made his way on to Rome, that great jungle of humanity where all sorts of human vermin could find a safe home. While in Rome he saw how right was often trodden under foot by might, and he saw too how one could get ahead by cutting corners and compromising principles. And thus in time he perhaps came to look on life with a cynical eye.

Then one day I would imagine that a character from the underworld of Rome came up to him and said something like this: "By the way Onesimus, there's going to be a show in the Colisseum tonight that you ought not to miss. Why don't you come along with me?". "Well I'd like to very much" replied Onesimus, "only you see I'm a runaway slave and the police might recognize me if I were to go". "Yes, I know you're a runaway slave" replied the character from Rome's underworld, "only this is a show you really ought not to miss. They have some Christians over there who have been eating three meals a day for some time, and they also have some lions who haven't had a bite to eat in over a week. They're going to put the two together in the arena, and believe it should be quite a show." "All right you've talked me into it" said Onesimus. "Since my master in Colossae was a Christian, I'll go and see a few of them eaten just out of respect for him." And so Onesimus went to the show at the arena.

After it was all over, and as he was leaving the arena, I imagine that there walked at his side a man whose eyes reflected the light of inner peace and contentment. He looked somewhat different from the others who were making their way from the arena. He had watched Onesimus as he sat in the arena and then to test him he made the sign of a fish on the pavement which as you know was a password among the early Christians. They used the word "fish" because of its spelling in Greek. It meant to them "Jesus Christ, Son of God".

The young man understood at once and it half angered him and he turned to the man standing at his side and said, "No, no....I'm not one of them. I'm not a Christian". "I'm sorry you're not" answered the other man, "because it has meant everything to me. I have a friend here

in town that I'd like you to meet. He's a fighting man; he's traveled a great deal; he's a smart man too. Not an inch of his body that doesn't wear a scar. He's in jail right now, but I could arrange it so that you could meet him. "

A few days later this runaway slave, partly because he was homesick and partly because he was just plain sick at heart want to see this man who since then has become a friend to many many people down through the ages. His friends called him Brother Paul. We call him St. Paul. And with a great skill that amounted to genius, Paul introduced this slave to Jesus Christ and soon afterwards he became a Christian.

Later on I can imagine this runaway slave Onesimus going back to visit Paul at the jail, and I can imagine him saying to Paul: "Brother Paul.....I'm not what you think I am. I stole the money that brought me to Rome. And now that I've been made a Christian, I feel uneasy about the thing I did and feel that perhaps I ought to go back and straighten it out with my master. What do you think I ought to do? Should I go back?

And I can picture Paul looking at him with great tenderness and saying: "Yes....Onesimus, I think that is what you ought to do. I think that is what Jesus would have you do. But remember this too that if you go back you'll probably be put back into chains and will remain a slave the rest of your life." And perhaps Onesimus said to him: "Yes, I've thought of that too.....but I had rather wear a ball and chain around my ankle than to wear one around my conscience."

"Good" "Tell me your master's name. I might be able to write him a note that would help you." "His name is Philemon, and he lives in Colossae". "Oh" said Paul, "I know him". Then having written a brief note, he gave that note to this young man who had been so notoriously no good. He gave it to a slave who had a thousand opportunities to duck down some back alley and forget it. But he refused to do so. Therefore today you and I can still read that letter if we chose to.

This beautiful letter reaches its climax with these words: "I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whose father I have become in my imprisonment. (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me) I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart". In other words Paul was saying something like this (if you'll allow me the liberty to paraphrase it). "I got hold of a young slave over here the other day who was no good. He was worth nothing to himself. He was worth nothing to his friends. He was of very little value to society. And I'm sending him back. He will count for something today and tomorrow because through me he met Jesus Christ and he's now a different person. This has made a great difference in his life". This is what Paul was saying.

And I think too that when Paul said that he put his finger on something that's very important. Indeed the first question we ask about anything or anyone is usually this: what's it good for? Or what's he good for? What can he do? Is he good for anything? And isn't it true too that if something or someone is unable to give a reason for itself in terms of some kind of service, that you and I reserve the right to junk it, to put it to one side. For every person

is expected to help make the useless into the useful or make what is already useful into something of greater usefulness. This is what life is for.

LIFTING THE LOWER
INTO THE HIGHER..

Now this matter of lifting the lower into the higher is a fascinating thing to think about. I remember some years ago visiting Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in Concord, Massachusetts. Of course I was interested in the graves of Louisa May Alcott and Nathaniel Hawthorne and other notables who are buried there. But there was the grave of another person, not nearly so well known, that interested me as much as these other graves. This man was out walking in the forest years ago when he met a little winter grape. That grape was so insignificant that if it had been erased from the map nobody would have seriously missed it. But this man saw the little worthless thing and believed in it. He began to cultivate it and when he left it, it was the Concord Grape that we know today.

Not so many years ago a man named Luther Burbank died. Burbank once declared that "Every weed is a possible flower". What amazing confidence he had in the vegetable kingdom. To prove his point he once took a wild cactus plant and transformed it into a thing of beauty with flowers. He found a foe and made it into a friend. But of course when it comes to people I feel that our Lord is the supreme artist. Whatever and whoever he touched was transformed. In his fellowship fluctuating Simon became a rock. Demon possessed Mary became a new person; and Saul the greatest menace to the early church was changed into its greatest missionary. He came and continues to come so that we might have life and have it in abundance.

HOW DO WE GO ABOUT THIS TASK

Of course some of you may be saying "How do we go about this task?" How do we lift the lower into the higher? The best place to begin is with ourselves. As you know we can't transform society until we have transformed people. We can't do the best for others until we become our very best. Perhaps a story will help to illustrate what we have in mind.

I read a story recently about a young boy who had no interest in his educational opportunities. According to his own statement, he never expected to learn how to read. Such an achievement in his opinion was useless and ~~stupid~~. Needless to say, he was the despair of his family. His brothers and sisters nicknamed him "Muttonhead". He accepted the name with utter complacency, being quite satisfied with himself.

One day something happened. A beautiful little girl from the city (two years younger than himself) came to visit him in his backwoods home. She was from the world of culture and learning. She knew very little of his way of life. And therefore in his own field, Muttonhead was the master. He at once began to show her his prowess with horses and cattle. He was a good rider. And as he put on one skillful stunt after another, her eyes fairly sparkless with amazed admiration.

Of course in the warmth of such admiration he grew and grew and grew until he became Hercules and Samson and Goliath all bound up in one package. But it was too good to last. One morning she was unable to come down for breakfast, and she called for Mutton head. When he arrived she said to him with great confidence "I sent for you to read me a story". "What's that" he said "You want me to read you a story". "Yes" she replied

handing him a book. Of course that was fatal. Mutton-head was unable to read from the book she handed to him. He stuttered and stammered and made all sorts of excuses, and failed completely. She laughed at him at first and then after all of the laughter had left her eyes a look of pity filled them up.

It was a humiliating experience. He found her pity all the more painful because he had just been experiencing the thrill of being a hero. So deeply did it shake him that he said to himself and to no other: "Some day I am going to know as much as you". Naturally nobody quite understood why this backward boy made about four grades the next year. But this isn't the end of the story. Some five years later when he was coming home from school, he passed through the city where this girl was then living - a beautiful young woman. He went to call on her. About leaving time she picked up a Latin book and said to him: "My Latin exam is tomorrow. I wonder if you could help me with one or two passages". According to the story, Muttonhead had no trouble with the Latin and translated the passages quite easily. Later on after he had left and was walking down the street alone, it's reported he almost broke his arm patting himself on the back.

Of course the point of this simple story is that is we are to become our best, we must not only work, but we must work in the power of a vital religious faith. God needs us and he gives to everyone his work. There is something unique about each person who is sitting here this morning. He knows us and he knows what we are capable of becoming and it's good for us to remember this that we can never become our best apart from him. Whatever he touches, he touches to transform and to transfigure and to enrich. It is God and God alone who can bring us to our highest possibilities.

This I think is the lesson that Paul taught Onesimus centuries ago. It isn't possible for us to tell exactly what happened to Onesimus when he returned to his former master. But one thing we can be sure of and I think it is this: his story has enriched in some measure all the subsequent centuries. And I would like to think that at this very hour here in this place where we are worshipping, Ché is reaching from that long gone yesterday to put into our hands this priceless letter. He is telling us too how we may experience the transforming power of God in Christ.

Some time ago Mary Pickford wrote a little book, the title of which was "Why Not Try God?" Why not? We've tried everything else, and a lot of us are still miserable and unhappy. Why not try God and see how he will lift the lower into the higher and change the useless into the useful.

LET US PRAY: In the moments of quietness, help us to draw closer to thee. We are coming to realize more and more that with thee we can do all things, but without thee there is so little that we can accomplish. Go with us as we depart from this place and may our every word and every deed reflect the time we have spent in thy presence this day. Amen.