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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

September 7, 2025

Proper 18, Year C, Revised Common Lectionary

[Deuteronomy 30:15-20](#)

[Psalms 1](#)

[Philemon 1-21](#)

[Luke 14:25-33](#)

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As a kid one of my favorite series was C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*. I read it over and over, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* and all the rest. As a college student I discovered his nonfiction: *Mere Christianity* with its rational case for faith, *The Problem of Pain* wrestling with suffering and God's goodness, and the satirical *Screwtape Letters* about a demon tempting a man away from God.

I loved Lewis then. I still do; but as an adult it got complicated. Rereading Narnia I noticed the stereotypes: Narnia is an idealized England with castles and teatime, its enemies the Calormenes are cartoon Middle Easterners with turbans, scimitars, and so-called "swarthy" villains. Alongside this casual racism are some equally unfortunate attitudes toward gender. The character Susan is written off once she becomes a teenager and gets interested in "lipstick and nylons." In his nonfiction Lewis wrote a rather nasty essay against women in the priesthood, or as he insisted on calling them, "priestesses."

The fact is, C. S. Lewis was a man of his time: an Oxford don with his pipe and tweed jacket, in a milieu where those attitudes on race and gender were pretty mainstream—though already challenged. He failed to transcend his age. Because of that I know colleagues who have little use for his writing at all. Yet I'll admit I still think he's one of Anglicanism's best popular theologians. He's commemorated with a feast day on our church's calendar. By all accounts he was a man of kindness and great integrity. And I still read him on prayer, and the various forms of love, and the nature of temptation, and the problem of suffering. And I look elsewhere for guidance on race and gender and many other aspects of contemporary life.

I'd like to think if C. S. Lewis were alive today he'd be more progressive on race and gender; maybe, maybe not. We are all formed by our cultures, even as God calls us to stretch beyond them. God's truth is eternal, yet human beings often take centuries to grow into it. The gospel keeps pressing us toward transformation.

At the same time not every new idea is from God. Tradition has its wisdom too. As individuals there are those whose temperament naturally leans more conservative, in the best sense of valuing tradition that has been handed on and being cautious about change that might destroy what is good. And there are those whose temperament naturally leans more progressive, in the best sense of pushing forward towards greater justice. As Anglicans we value both those impulses. Our faith is ancient and traditional even as our practice is marked by change and inclusion. I've heard it said our approach to progress is like a rowboat: we face backward toward the past even as we move into the future.

Now Philemon was a respectable and wealthy man in the first-century Roman Empire. And his life was changed by Paul's preaching: he joined the Jesus movement and hosted the local church in his home. So Philemon had already internalized some of the message of Jesus we heard in today's gospel about counting the cost of discipleship, carrying the cross and following Christ. But I wonder if he imagined what the gospel might really cost him.

Philemon had a slave named Onesimus. And Onesimus escaped, and made his way to another city, probably Rome, which happened to be where Paul was preaching by this time—and Onesimus too heard Paul's preaching and became a Christian. Now an escaped slave would ordinarily face severe punishment or even death. But Paul writes to Philemon that he should take Onesimus back, not only without punishment, but "no longer as a slave, but as a beloved brother." Underneath the flowery rhetoric of this letter, Paul is strongly twisting Philemon's arm—through a letter that would have been read out loud, in public, in the church meeting in Philemon's home—not only to forgive Onesimus, which would already have been unheard of and caused him incredible loss of face in his society, but actually to set him free.

We don't know for sure what happened after this letter. But it looks like Philemon did it; freed Onesimus. In another one of Paul's letters Onesimus is mentioned as a helper. And a few decades later, St. Ignatius of Antioch mentions in a letter that the bishop of Ephesus is named Onesimus.

Now Paul lived in a culture where slavery was taken for granted. And we don't see Paul calling for the abolition of slavery on a societal scale. In his world that was still unimaginable. Paul and Onesimus and Philemon still lived in their own place and time. Yet within the constraints of that culture they discovered that the gospel was calling them to live in a way that was radical, where a slave could become a brother, where every single person was equally beloved and equally important in the eyes of God.

I imagine Philemon as a man with a fairly conservative temperament, a respectable householder, maybe a bit of a C.S. Lewis type with whatever was the equivalent of the tweed jacket and pipe. I wonder if he had any other slaves and if he freed them or not, or if Onesimus was the only one. Whatever the case, the gospel stretched him further than he expected.

And I wonder what this story has to say to us in our time; what the cost of discipleship is for each of us; and how we are called both to live in the culture we live in and also to transcend it. We are not so far from Philemon's world. Only 160 years ago, human beings were owned in this country. That legacy still shapes us. We see it in our headlines as monuments are removed and reinstalled, as district lines are drawn, as race continues to play its enormous part in our society's power dynamics whether it is acknowledged or ignored.

And gender: in the past sixty years our society has undergone a revolution—women's roles, same-gender marriage, the increased recognition of trans and nonbinary people. These conversations are still fiercely contested, often with cruelty and "othering." There are real debates worth having about biology, gender, and society. But too often listening and respect are drowned out by mockery and bullying.

And I wonder what our descendants in 50 and 150 and 2000 years will think of us, and what in our moral world that we take for granted will seem unconscionable to them. As we celebrate this season of Prayer for Creation I wonder if perhaps one of the next things God is calling us into is a transformation in our understanding of our relationship with the other species that share this world with us.

Now I'm a clergy person in a progressive mainline denomination, and like most of my colleagues in our place and time, I tend toward a liberal perspective on most of these issues. I don't wear a tweed jacket or smoke a pipe; I listen to public radio and drive a Prius. And yet I find myself thinking that perhaps what we need to hear from in our society right now are two types of people. Those who like Bishop Onesimus have come from marginalized backgrounds and risen to share their gifts of leadership; and those who like C.S. Lewis and Philemon whose temperament leans toward a conservative perspective, who treasure old ways and venerable traditions, and who are also committed to integrity and kindness, and who can maybe still be the respectable householders they've always been and also be open to radical compassion and respect for every human being.

And meanwhile like Paul and the first-century Christians, we are not able to transform our entire culture overnight. But also like them, we can model a way of life right here in this community of faith that is in our culture but not fully of it; that's shaped by our baptismal covenant, to seek and serve Christ in all persons and respect the dignity of every child of God; a way of life that is radically equal, radically loving, radically transformed.