WE’VE COME THIS FAR BY FAITH

Rev. Groover, beloved members of Charles Street Church, beloved members of Village Church…

Wait… That’s not what I want to say. That’s not how I want to begin.

May I start over?

You see, when we worship together—or whenever we gather—I don’t see us as two congregations. I see us as one beloved community.

So may I start over?

Rev. Groover, Church, it is such a joy to be here and a true privilege to preach in this setting and on this occasion, when we celebrate the mission and vision of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and this year, when we mark the 150th Anniversary of the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. A true joy and privilege.

If someone were to tell you that the scripture to be read at this service was to be an entire book of the Bible, you might have thought, “Whoa…I’ll need to bring a snack. This is going to be a long service.”

But that passage from Philemon read earlier is the entire book. We read the whole thing. Philemon is the shortest book in the Bible. It fits on less than a single page. It is a letter written by the Apostle Paul while he is a prisoner in Rome. It is the only letter we have from Paul written to an individual.

We don’t know much about Philemon, the recipient of this letter. We do know he was a Roman citizen, as well as a Christian, and that Paul thought very highly of him. Paul praises him for his faith and for his love. Paul says with sincere appreciation, “I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.”

We also know that Philemon was a slave holder and, in fact, that is why Paul is writing to him. In prison Paul has gotten to know one of Philemon’s slaves—named Onesimus—who had run away and, for whatever reason, is now in prison with Paul. Paul has also come to love Onesimus very much. At the time Paul writes this letter, Onesimus’ prison term is up and Paul is sending him back to Philemon with this letter in hand. Onesimus is going to take this letter from Paul and he is going to hand it over to Philemon.
when he returns to Philemon’s household. It is a recommendation letter, a character reference letter from Paul to Philemon about this returning runaway slave Onesimus. I picture Onesimus clutching that letter very tight… or, no, maybe he holds it with light fingers, knowing how precious it is.

Now, let me say, there is something wonderful about this letter and there is something curious and even disturbing about this letter. Written by Paul, delivered by Onesimus, received and read by Philemon… there is something wonderful about this letter and there is something curious and even disturbing about it.

Here is some of what’s wonderful about this letter. Paul clearly loves Onesimus. He says that during their time in prison he has come to think of Onesimus as like a son to him. And he goes on to say that in sending Onesimus back it is like he is sending his own heart. And those two affirmations are very closely related, I think.

When you have a child it is like sending your heart into the world. Parents: you know what I mean, don’t you? When you have a child it is like you are sending your naked and vulnerable heart into the world. So when Paul says that he loves Onesimus like a father loves a son, in sending him back to Philemon, of course it’s like sending his own heart, his own naked and vulnerable heart. So it is wonderful to see reflected in this letter just how much Paul loves Onesimus.

And there is also something wonderful about what Paul says to Philemon about how he should receive Onesimus. He says, receive him “no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother.” In other words, receive this slave Onesimus, not as an object to work on your behalf, not as someone beneath you, but as someone to whom you are tied as brothers in Christ. This slave is your brother. In Christ, these distinctions fall away for, as Paul elsewhere writes, in Christ, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). And that’s a world-changing affirmation. Truly revolutionary.

But if there is something wonderful about this letter, there is also something curious, even disturbing about this letter. Have you noticed it? On Paul’s behalf, I feel almost ashamed to point it out. In Paul’s letter to Philemon there is one thing he did not say. Did you hear it? Did you hear what is missing? Nowhere in his letter does Paul say, straight out, “Free Onesimus.” He had an opportunity to say that, a golden opportunity to say that in this very letter, but he did not. The opportunity came. The opportunity passed. The opportunity was gone.

So why doesn’t Paul simply say, “Free Onesimus. He is like a son to me. He is like my own heart. Free him!” Well, perhaps, Paul thought that Philemon would do that, would free Onesimus. I mean, after all, if Philemon follows Paul’s orders, he will receive Onesimus like a brother and how can you hold a brother as a slave? So maybe he thought Philemon would get there on his own, without needing to be told that you don’t hold a brother as a slave. But that doesn’t seem like a good-enough excuse. If ever there were an occasion for a simple declarative sentence, this would be it. A simple declarative sentence: “Free him.”
But here is another possible explanation for why Paul failed to say that. When Paul said that in Christ there is “no longer slave or free,” it came like a revelatory flash. Likewise, when he wrote to Philemon, receive Onesimus “no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother,” it was that kind of revelatory flash, a revolutionary insight. He got it in a flash—that revelation, that insight. But here’s the thing: he did not yet understand the full implications of his own revelation, his own insight. Only hundreds of years later were the full implications of Paul’s insight realized. In fact, we still have not fully realized the full implications of Paul’s insight that in Christ there is “no longer slave or free,” that in Christ all such distinctions are to fall away—all prejudice, all inequality. We are still trying to fully realize and to fully live out the implications of Paul’s revelation, his revolutionary insight. And we’ve got a ways to go.

At Village Church our denomination is the United Church of Christ, which has deep roots here in New England. In New England, our churches are best known as Congregational churches. Our forebears in the faith are the Puritans and Pilgrims and wherever they settled in New England they started a Congregational church. That’s why you see a Congregational church in practically every New England town—because the Puritans and the Pilgrims settled here and they always built a church. So when someone tries to place our tradition—our denomination—I’ve learned to say, “Well, we’re the ones who brought you Thanksgiving.”

Anyway, in 1620, when the Pilgrims were about to head off to Massachusetts, their pastor, John Robinson, sent them off with a sermon, in which he said, “The Lord has more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy word.”

In other words, the word of God may stay the same, but our understanding of it unfolds over time. Sometimes it can take time for the implications of the truths revealed in the Bible to be fully realized. So Paul didn’t realize the full implications of his own insights. But, thank God, “the Lord has more truth and light to break forth out of his holy word.”

For hundreds of years Christians read Paul’s revolutionary insight that in Christ “there is no longer slave or free” without understanding the full implications of those words. And we’re not there yet, so, thank God, “the Lord has more truth and light to break forth out of his holy word.”

President Obama’s favorite theologian is Reinhold Niebuhr. Whatever your politics are, you’ve got to love having a President who has a favorite theologian. I don’t think every President does, do you? Have a favorite theologian? Anyway, Reinhold Niebuhr is President Obama’s favorite theologian—and conservative New York Times columnist David Brooks’ favorite theologian, as well. Go figure.

Anyway, Reinhold Niebuhr was one of the great theologians of the last century. Most of his career he taught at Union Theological Seminary in New York—Rev. Groover’s alma mater.

I also have a particular indebtedness to Union Seminary because that is where my parents met in 1940. I mean, no Union, no me. Actually, now that I think of it, I should
put it this way: no Union, no “union,” no me. In fact, my parents met in a class taught by Reinhold Niebuhr. So—no surprise here—he is also my favorite theologian. (True story. All of my stories are true.)

In any case, Reinhold Niebuhr pointed out that “slavery is the original sin of America.” Slavery is the original sin of America in that it was there at the very beginning and we’re still living out the implications of that original sin. Somehow it sticks with us—sticks to us—generation after generation. It’s hard to shake the legacy.

Elsewhere Reinhold Niebuhr confessed to being baffled by those who doubted the doctrine of original sin, which he said was the only Christian doctrine that could be verified by mere observation. In other words, you can see it. And it’s true of America’s original sin of slavery. You can see it. The implications are still being played out. You can see it in the differences in educational opportunities. You can see it in the inequalities in the way our justice system treats people of different races. You can see it in the disparity between black and white in the rates of unemployment, incarceration, school drop-outs. Slavery—the original sin of America. You can see it. You can see the implications still unfolding today.

Mind you, great progress has been made. There is no denying that. But with great progress there comes an equally great temptation—and that is the temptation to flag in zeal, the temptation to allow our commitment to fade over time.

You know, there are a number of deadly diseases that the human family has attempted to eradicate, to eliminate from the face of the earth. Polio, malaria, measles, rubella—to name some of the best known. Huge efforts have been made to eliminate those diseases. But only one disease that infects humans has been eliminated—small pox. There is no more small pox. And that’s a wonderful thing because the best estimates are that 400-500 million people died of small pox in the twentieth century. A terrible disease. But no more. After enormous efforts to vaccinate people all over the world, as of 1979 small pox has been eradicated. It was a terrible disease that is no more. And it’s not coming back.

As for those other diseases—they haven’t been eliminated, despite enormous efforts. And there are a lot of reasons for that. But one reason is that when progress was made in eradicating one of those diseases, that very progress caused many to flag in zeal, the commitment to eliminate the disease faded over time. When you’ve made progress, you can all too easily assume that the progress will continue without the commitment, the determination, the zeal with which you began.

And we’ve made progress in addressing the original sin of slavery in this country, but the disease of racism has not been eradicated. So this is no time to lessen our commitment, our determination, our zeal.

Let’s mark some of the steps along this journey toward freedom. The Declaration of Independence states, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” That’s another one of those revelatory flashes. But our country, in its infancy, did not see the full implications of that insight because that very same document institutionalized slavery. It took a Dr. King to challenge us to “live out the full meaning of
our creeds.” Oh, John Robinson, that pastor to the Pilgrims, was right, “The Lord has more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy word.”

Then the Emancipation Proclamation was signed 150 years ago, at midnight, December 31, 1862. With the stroke of Lincoln’s pen, slaves were freed, which is a wonderful thing, worth celebrating, this day and every day. And yet—not everyone knows this, this difficult truth—the Emancipation Proclamation freed slaves only in the states that were rebelling against the Union. In the states that remained loyal to the Union the slaves remained slaves, prompting Secretary of State William Seward to say, “We show our sympathy with slavery by emancipating slaves where we cannot reach them and holding them in bondage where we can set them free.” No, even after signing the Emancipation Proclamation, there was yet more truth and light to break forth.

In 1865, three years after the signing of Emancipation of Proclamation, the 13th Amendment was passed, finally outlawing slavery. But even then, the freed slaves were not given equal rights. There was yet more truth and light to break forth.

In the Civil Rights act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, signed by President Lyndon Johnson, but inspired by the movement led by Dr. King, important rights were secured. And yet, is there anyone here who doubts it? There is yet more truth and light to break forth. We’ve come this far by faith. Oh we can’t turn back now.

This very day President Barack Obama is being sworn in for a second term as President of the United States. It is an historic moment. It is a sign of great progress. It marks how far we have come that an African American man can be elected to the highest office in the land—twice. It’s inspiring. We’ve come this far by faith. But it is also this very progress that can tempt us to flag in zeal, to allow our commitment to fade.

The disease of racism has not been eradicated. We need as much commitment, as much determination, as much zeal as those who came before and brought us to this place. We’ve come this far by faith. Oh, we can’t turn back now.

And, church, a part of this work is ours to do. This partnership, this beloved community I see before me today, part of this work is ours to do—together. The Holy Spirit is up to something here and we need to follow the Spirit’s lead. There is yet more truth and light. There is yet more truth and light to break forth from God’s holy word. There is yet more truth and light to break forth from God’s people. There is yet more truth and light to break forth from this partnership. There is yet more truth and light to break forth from this beloved community.

We’ve come this far by faith, leaning on the Lord. Oh we can’t turn back now.

Can we turn back? No!

We’ve come this far by faith. Oh we can’t turn back now.