

Mixed

It's less than a page, the shortest book in the New Testament, yet one finds such gentleness and force mixed into the Letter to Philemon. In addressing this slave master, Paul's tone is masterful. He insists that he would never compel Philemon to do the right and costly thing, though he makes perfectly clear what he expects. In fact, he says, "I am confident that you will do even more than I ask." There's a little of both Dr. King and President Johnson in this apostle.

Noting that the name Onesimus means "useful," Paul asks Philemon to consider where a human being is most useful. In the end, of course, Onesimus is set free – free to do the work of God and to become bishop of Ephesus.

It is wonderful to imagine Onesimus and Philemon meeting years afterward, veterans of the great story of their time – a time when ordinary people took part in great things, when simply doing right could make a difference. The early church became a remarkable extended family, unlike anything else in the ancient world, in which all kinds of people mixed.

They would have broken bread together, prayed for one another, called each other brother.

They might not have expected that we would still be here in the year 2008, still less expected to find among Christians such vast inequalities.

*

In its long history, this church has often stood for justice. It stood with those who declared that "all men are created equal," and a hundred years after the Revolution, it stood for that again, hiding escaped slaves beneath this very meetinghouse as a stop on the Underground Railroad.

The church's witness has long been needed in Darien. As it changed from a farming and fishing town to a suburb, the town thrived *because* not everyone was welcome. A 1926 newspaper ad promoted Darien as "a *restrictive* suburb within easy commuting distance of New York."

Even after such practices were made infamous by *Gentleman's Agreement*, they continued under different guises. Newspaper ads from 1964 noted that home sales were "contingent on approval by owner."

In the face of genteel discrimination, this church pushed for open housing. Our longtime pastor, Alfred Schmalz, called upon colleagues to sign a protest of restrictive clauses, but on the Sunday that the statement was to be heard from every local pulpit, Schmalz was the only one to read it.

We would like to take pride in an unbroken history of progressive stands – but in truth, as a church, our record on race has been mixed.

For a while we supported and fellowshiped with Miracle Temple, a largely black church in Norwalk, but that relationship has fallen off. Lately it has been easier to write checks than to get folks to serve in soup kitchens or to help build low-income homes. We are still a fairly white church.

Meanwhile the make-up of this town has changed only slightly. Something is wrong when the largest concentration of color in Darien is at the ABC House. Something is wrong when a desirable community surrounded by diverse people of means remains so overwhelmingly white.

We can no longer say that price alone must be keeping people out – although that it is a shame in itself. Other good places are more diverse than Darien.

Whether it's a fracas at a state championship football game, or the preponderance of private roads, or folks pulled over for "driving while black," this town still sends something other than a welcoming message.

A Filipino mother opens the door to her house and a visitor asks if she's the nanny. An African-American man is mowing his yard when a passer-by asks how much he charges to do lawns. These stories aren't from forty years ago; they belong to today.

Brothers and sisters, now as ever, people of faith need to stand for a different kind of community.

What distinguished the early Christians from other groups was how they had leveled class, overcome race and gender. "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." *Galatians 3:28*

In gathering a wild variety of disciples, Jesus set an example that his followers took seriously. They wanted to end inequalities because they understood themselves to be brothers and sisters. The Letter to Philemon, with its gentle persuasion, is an artifact of that time.

Philemon, to his credit, became known not as a master, but as a brother. And lest Philemon stop with simply doing the right thing, which was setting his slave free, Paul said, "I am confident that you will do even more than I ask."

*

A hundred years ago, Phillips' Milk of Magnesia was bottled in the Glenbrook area of Stamford, a neighborhood largely controlled by Charles and Frances Phillips. Mrs.

Phillips owned a real estate company, which allowed her to give the right people a start in Glenbrook – in special cases, she provided homes for just one dollar – while keeping undesirables out of the neighborhood.

This was before the days of equal opportunity housing. Mrs. Phillips would have NO ITALIANS. When she died, an Italian bought her house – and tore it down.

One of those who had received a home from her for just one dollar was her pastor at the Union Memorial Church. He served for fifty years, and of course he never spoke a word about race.

But God has a way of bringing things to pass. Now Union Memorial is an integrated church, with Indian families, blacks, Hispanics, Italians. The current pastor says, “Mrs. Phillips must be spinning in her grave.”

Well, for a lot of reasons, Darien will not be Glenbrook. But Darien could be Darien and be mixed.

Of course, we’ve all been waiting for it to happen without our effort – just as a lot of folks would prefer to change the subject. Do we want to change the subject? Or do we want to change the reality?

Here’s what we can do: We can acknowledge candidly how things have been. We can pay close attention to our own stereotypes and prejudices, because God knows progressive people have them too. We can reflect on how a competitive culture lends itself to homogeneity. We can ask the business community to make special efforts for minority business owners.

And while others welcome those with means, our congregation can return to its historic role of helping folks in need. Through missions, we can build relationships and welcome people here, to this church building, rather than just send money to where they are.

Perhaps best of all, with gentle persuasion, we might even find affordable housing for more of our neighbors.

Someday we might look back with a smile on this era – a time when ordinary people took part in something larger, when simply doing right could make a difference. Someday we might say that churches helped this town become a remarkable extended family, in which all kinds of people mix.

It’s not too much to ask – and Jesus expects us to do even more.