

“A second chance”

September 9, 2007

Text: Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Philemon 1:8-21

I.

Have you ever been in a situation where you know you’ve messed up? For whatever reason, you haven’t been at your best. You’ve embarrassed yourself ... perhaps even totally humiliated yourself ... and you’re dying for a **second chance**?

I remember the first sermon I preached when I was a seminarian in training. It was at the Beth Eden Baptist Church in West Oakland, a predominantly black congregation. I was preaching at the Sunday evening service ... not too many in attendance. But the delivery of my brief sermon was horrible.

- Two or three times, I’d lost my train of thought ... I’d sort of frozen ... stumbled through some awkward sentences.
- I’d tried to speak more extemporaneously than I was capable of at the time, with minimal notes.

When I finished, I knew I’d missed the mark—that I’d done a poor job of preaching God’s Word. Everyone was trying to be supportive, of course. But what I most remember was the pastor’s response. He didn’t utter a critical word ... only that I would be preaching again, at the same Sunday evening service, next week.

A second chance. An opportunity to redeem myself. You can imagine my motivation as I prepared my sermon for the following Sunday. The second time around, things went well and my confidence was restored.

II.

No doubt, we’ve all had our moments when we’d give anything to turn back to clock ... to have another chance, another opportunity.

In sports, it happens all the time.

- A basketball player who misses a critical free throw during the closing minutes of a game. He/she can’t wait for the next game to make amends.
- A baseball player with an important at bat ... men on base, a run behind, ninth inning, two outs, and you strike out. The player can’t wait for his/her next at bat, for a **second chance**.

- A golfer missing a critical putt in one of the closing holes of a tournament. In the 2006 U.S. Open, Phil Mickelson needed only a par on the 72nd hole to win his fourth major tournament. Not only did he not make a par, he made a double bogey, totally blowing the hole and the tournament. Very likely, he'll be in a similar position again. And I can guarantee you, he can't wait.

A second chance ... another opportunity to be successful.

Or, it may be in a KEY relationship ... with a spouse, a child, a parent, or a friend. I run into people all the time who married too young, got divorced, went their separate ways for a time, and then—later—remarried ... and they're happy.

How often do we hear of people who—after a divorce or their spouse dies—they go back and marry their high school sweetheart??

We're all going to have less than perfect days now and then—times when we simply make bad decisions. Perhaps we were too immature at the time and we acted hastily.

In virtually all realms of life, as human beings—as a culture, as a people—we need opportunities to start again ... the opportunity for **a second chance**.

In that sense, our faith calls us to be a people of grace, a people who can forget and forgive; a people who can allow freedom and love to work in our spirit and to move us to new places in our relationships ... and new meanings in our lives.

III.

In our reading this morning from **Philemon**, Onesimus had been a slave of Philemon.

1. For whatever reason, however, Onesimus had left Philemon and had ended up in a city where the Apostle Paul just happened to be in prison (probably Ephesus, but it might have been Rome).
2. There is strong speculation that Onesimus had run away, an action that—as a slave—could bring him no small punishment.

Nonetheless, although we can never know the circumstances, once Onesimus and Paul's paths crossed (perhaps Onesimus, too, was a prisoner), under Paul's guidance, Onesimus became a Christian. And as he grew, both as a follower of Christ and in his friendship with Paul (no doubt, he was Paul's assistant or helper in some way), Paul developed a protective affection for him.

But now it was time for Onesimus to leave ... to be released from prison, perhaps—but in any event, to move on with his life. And Paul wanted to encourage Onesimus to resolve whatever had happened between him and Philemon, who was still his legal owner.

Very likely, Paul's fervent hope was that Philemon would manumit Onesimus—grant him his freedom—an action that was not uncommon in Paul's day.

In the ancient world, slaves were property—in a very real and sometimes brutal sense. (It's been estimated that there were probably some sixty million slaves in the Roman Empire at the time.)

A master could do pretty much whatever he wished with his slave. But as a Christian and as one of Paul's co-workers (Paul had himself evangelized Philemon and brought him into the Church), Paul had high hopes that Philemon would be gracious towards the new convert, Onesimus, and he appealed to Philemon on this basis:

1. They were all Christians, Onesimus, too ... and as Christians they were all free in Christ.
2. When we become a Christian, it's a new day. In Christ, there is a new ordering of social structures, a new rendering of the inter-relationships between people.

There is no longer Jew or Greek, wrote Paul to the Galatians, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. You belong to Christ, was Paul's declaration. That trumps every other tag of one's identity.

It was Paul's high hope that Philemon would view Onesimus in this light. What Paul wanted for Onesimus was nothing less than a new life, a fresh start ... **a second chance.**

IV.

There's an element of forgiveness in granting anyone a second chance in life. However, as Americans, we have a history of being a forgiving people (we're also a generous people, by the way). For countless millions of immigrants over the years, coming to America was indeed a second chance.

1. We're a nation—a people—that believe in second chances.
2. We believe in forgiveness.
3. We believe in new beginnings.

That may well be one reason why the Christian faith caught on so well in the history of our great nation. In our way of life, beginning with our Constitution and our Bill of Rights, freedom and opportunity are for all people.

We understand that we're not perfect and that we're going to make mistakes. But, again, we're a people who believe in new beginnings.

In America, again (it's one of our finest qualities as a nation), everyone deserves a second chance, a chance to redeem ourselves, an opportunity to learn from our mistakes or

shortcomings, to rise up from our past and paint a new picture of who we can become in the tomorrows that await us.

Onesimus needed such a **second chance**. Whatever it was that came down, he was a Christian, now, and being a Christian has very special meanings and implications.

To be a Christian is to commit one's self to a particular way of life—certainly to a life of humility and sacrificial love ... to a life where there is a dying to one's ego and to one's self. (*Deny yourself, pick up your cross and follow me*, said Jesus—again and again in the gospels). To be a Christian is to see every human being as a child of God—created, in freedom, in the very image of God.

V.

Friends, our lives as Christians are defined by freedom—freedom to choose. Every day, we make choices.

1. Choices for the purposes of LOVE or choices for something less.
2. Choices for LIFE, or choices for something less.
3. Choices for CHRIST, or choices for another way.

Under the secular laws of his time, **Philemon** is under no obligation to forgive **Onesimus**. Nor is he—clearly—under any obligation to free him as his *slave*—he who is now his brother in Christ.

Ultimately, **Philemon** has to choose. And so do we all, don't we? Indeed, our lives are a series of unending choices.

In Moses' final speech to the Israelites, after all they had endured together ... all the ups and downs ... all the tests of faith, the courage under fire. After Moses had brought down the Commandments from the mountain top—not just once, but twice.

To be sure, they had been to the edges of life and death together.

In his final speech, with passion in his heart and deep conviction on his lips. Moses pleaded with his people:

*I call heaven and earth to witness against you today ... that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. **CHOOSE LIFE ... so that you and your descendants may live, CHOOSE LIFE.***

Loving the Lord your God, obeying him, holding fast to him ... for that is life for you.

VI.

There it is. It couldn't be more clearly stated.

There's life in forgiveness. There's life in renewal. There's life in new beginnings.
There's life in **a second chance**.

Are there people in our lives, friends, to whom we need to extend a forgiving hand?
People with whom we need to restore relationship—give **a second chance**. Are there
people who we wish would grant **a second chance** to us?

The Word from the Lord for us today, friends, and every day, is to **CHOOSE LIFE ...
CHOOSE LIFE**. And may the blessings of God's hope and joy pour over us in
abundance!

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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