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Sermon Transcript: Community

How you doing? I'm pretty good. Are you—are you good? Let's try to put some numbers to it. What do you say when you think about your personal spiritual standing with God? Your personal—spiritual standing with God. How would you rate yourself on a scale of 1 to 10? Let's put a number to it. Everybody get there? You just—you don't have to say it out loud. True confession.

Here's what I noticed: the tens are talking out loud. The ones had their mouths shut. Don't you—did you notice that one? All right, everyone. Just hold it in your head. You got it? All right. Now, here's—this is fun. Let's do this: I want you to add two to whatever number you came up with that puts you over the top. Just think about that. What if someone were to have that kind of rating? What does that look like? Is there someone from your past, or someone that you know in this congregation right now, or just someone you know out there in the world that you would put at that level of spiritual standing with God? Put a face to that. Not just a—don't just think of the number. Put a face to it, how you would see that.

This will be even more fun: now, subtract two from your number. I know this seems like a math contest, but you can do this. I believe in you. Whatever your rating for yourself was, subtract two from that. Do you know that person? Can you think of someone who's like, you know, just in your mind, just like not quite—maybe could step up? I don't know. For some of you, this is very difficult. And for some of you, this is very easy.

The Letter to Philemon

This kind of wrestling with spiritual standing is exactly what the book of Philemon is about. Oh, and let's get this out of the way, too: How do you pronounce the name of this letter? Is it *Philemon*? Is it *Philemon*? Is it *Phil-uh-mon*? Right? Like, basically, there are about five or six different ways to pronounce it. It just matters how Greek you want to be or how English you want to be. There's only one pronunciation that I'm just going to tell you *no*, and it's *pi-lemon*. It's not *pi-lemon*. That's just a rude ordering at a bakery: "Pie, lemon." Yeah, that's not a letter of the Bible.

This is a letter that Paul wrote to Philemon talking about Onesimus, and this slave that was owned by Philemon evidently ran away. Something didn't go quite right because he's talking about, "You know, if he owes you a debt, you know," so something—there was some type of fallout. And at the very least, the big fallout was Onesimus ran off, and at some point finds himself in jail with Paul, ministering to, helping with Paul. And Paul has said, "Look, Onesimus is now a Christian, a follower of Christ. And so when he comes back to you, I want you to receive him not simply as a slave, but more than a slave: a brother."

And this would be a problem in this time period. See, right now, you've got this idea of like social order. And I notice I didn't have you rank your social order, you know, right? But in the social order, there were households where there would be—there's a family, and there's slaves. And that's a complicated thing. And that's not cool now, but back then that's the way the social order was. And there would even be households like the household was completely Christian: the family there, the—the slaves and servants of the household as well. It was just part of everyday life.

What's really interesting is that we don't really know: Was Paul asking Philemon to—to set Onesimus free, to receive back this runaway that was his servant and bring him back and treat him like an equal in the household, no longer a servant? Was he going that far? Was he asking Philemon to break the Roman social order in the situation? We don't really know. Or—or was he saying, "Look, I—I just want you to think about this in a spiritual way, that something has changed and that you're going to have to exercise some forgiveness." Because keep in mind, even for Philemon to—to receive back Onesimus and not severely punish him for running away was a huge break from the regular social order of the time. The community would have looked down upon Philemon for the—for having lost this servant of his, and then to receive him back without any type of correction. It would have cost Philemon something to do that.

Just how far is Paul's request going here? What's interesting is that he's playing it soft: "I'm not going to order you. I just want you to think about what's the right thing to do, Philemon." But we know that Paul is one who's pushing the boundaries. And is he just talking spiritually, or is he talking something more, something really radical here?

The other passage we read is another writing of Paul's that was from at least 10 years earlier. And he writes to the Galatians, and he says, "In Christ, when we are in community through Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, nor male or female, nor slave or free." And he's pulling that same argument, but not—not explicitly, but just calling upon the action that maybe comes out of that in this letter to Philemon. It's a very interesting letter. It's—it's the only letter that Paul writes that he never mentions the death or resurrection of Jesus, but he's mentioning the consequences of that. And he says that we're now in community. You and I and Onesimus, we are in community together.

The Great Equalizer: A Spiritual Standing of 10

And all the things that the—the modern society of that time used to divide people—whether or not you were a Jew or a Greek, whether or not you were male or female, whether or not you were slave or free—we already know that Paul sits on the side that says in Christ, those barriers don't mean anything. In Christ, we're brought into community with one another. What does that mean?

Well, the good news for you is that I don't know what number you thought of for yourself, but the answer is 10. Not because of what you have done, not because of how faithful you are, but because of what Christ has done. Your spiritual standing with God is a 10. And that good news applies to the person that you gave a lower number to. And it applies equally to the person that you thought of as above you. Do you understand that there's these divisions, these numberings—they don't have a meaning in your spiritual standing with God because of what Christ has done?

And we've practiced this already. Did you notice that when we took communion, there weren't like different lines for like, "Okay, for those of you who, you know, aren't so good this week, we've got the—the tub of old juice and the stale bread line, and then we've got the artisanal elements over here for the saints"? It's the same bread, the same juice, because we are brought together in community by Christ.

Did you notice also when we were remembering the saints, it wasn't like some of them got two rings of the bell, right? Like, "Oh, that one was a really good member. Ding-dong, ding-dong, ding-dong, ding-dong." "That one: dong." You know, you notice we didn't do that, did you? Because at many of these people's funeral services, someone uttered the words to celebrate their life, saying that their baptism is now complete in death. Or another way to say that phrase that we use in our funeral liturgy: their baptism is now

made perfect in their death. That we are made saints of the church not by our accomplishments, not by our faithfulness, but by the faithfulness of God. It's the good news of forgiveness that comes for us, but it's hard to hold on to, and it's so easy to just think of ourselves and others at different levels. And Paul says to Philemon, "Onesimus is on our level because of Christ, and I'm asking you to treat him that way." And I can't tell you exactly what that meant in that context. This letter is going to take us a while to suss out, but I'm telling you, it's deep. It might be one of the shortest you've got in your Bible, but it also might be one of the deepest.

Living Out Community: Voting and Needs Among Us

And what does such a teaching of community mean to you and I this week when we go out and live our lives? Well, first off, we've got an election on Tuesday. And now's the part where your pastor tells you how to vote. This is what everybody's been waiting for: "I want to come to church. Have Pastor Rob tell me how to vote." Well, get ready, you might want to write this down: When you go to vote, I want you to remember that you are not a slave. You are not a slave to a political party, to a political leader, to a little friend group you're in. You are not a slave to any of that. You are set free. And the only Lord that you have is Jesus Christ. And so this is how you need to vote: You need to go in there and you need to vote for what is good, what is true, what is faithful. That's how you need to vote.

Did anybody think I was going to pick Republican or Democrat? Did anybody really—did you really think that? I mean, I'm dumb enough to make a worship service go longer than an hour, but I ain't that dumb. And also, I don't believe that our faith falls on any political lines. What I do believe is that we as people of faith are to understand that we're part of community and we're going to participate in advancing what is good, what is right, what is true. And guess what? That's going to end up in us not all voting the same. But we do what we believe is good and true and right.

You have another opportunity this week to exercise what it means to be part of community, and that's that you know of a place where next week there is a Needs Among Us Sunday. And anyone who walks through those doors and joins us in worship has the full privileges to ask for help for whatever need they have. They are on the same spiritual standing as every single one of you, even if it's their first Sunday coming here. And you have the power to tell someone that you know that's carrying a heavy burden, that's got something that's just weighing them down—you know of a place where there is spiritual community, and their needs will be heard, and the next week we will share those needs and we will put them upon our hearts and we will see where the Spirit takes a tug at those hearts, and we will respond. Because we are part of a spiritual community of one: There is one bread, one body, one cup, one faith, one baptism, one people of God, not divided. And anyone who comes in has that. You have that opportunity to participate in community by inviting people to come in and experience community.

So it seems that Philemon—Philemon, Philimon, not *pilemon*—has something to teach us all, and that's that even today there's an opportunity to show what community really means to people of faith.

Amen.