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Sermon Transcript: Faith and Love

A couple of years ago, we had the opportunity to host a German exchange student in our house, and we were eager to have Ma join us because we had had her brother Zuran just a couple of years before. And so, it was fun to welcome his younger sister to be there with us. And this visit of the exchange students from Germany extended over the Easter holiday. So we knew once again, just like it was the case for her brother, we were going to have Ma for Easter and that was fantastic. And so we were all excited and we wanted to make it special for her and have activity and have a real Easter egg hunt at our house and everything. And then we found out that there was this question coming up because the German exchange students were asking their host families, "Where are we going for church for Easter?" and a lot of the host families went, "We weren't planning to go to church for Easter." So, I mean, for all the talk about Europe becoming this godless wasteland for Christianity, it was the Europeans coming over saying to the Americans, "When are we going to church for Easter?" And so, a number of them found themselves kind of looking around and then they saw my kid and said, "Hey, your dad's a pastor, right? Yeah. My German student wants to go to church. Can we come to your church?" "Sure." So, I knew that there was a couple of the students coming and so I don't know what happened. I was just like, "Hey, we're having an Easter dinner after church and you can tell these couple of friends that they can come, too." I don't think I even checked it out with my wife before I did this, but I was like, "Yeah, we got the ham from Costco, so we knew we had plenty of that," and we got a lot of frozen stuff in the freezer downstairs from Costco. We're a Costco family, so we'll be okay.

And here's the thing I didn't realize. They had a group chat going. So then word got around. So it wasn't just a couple of Germans and their students were here. We had a whole—what's a gaggle of Germans where they all were sitting over there? That's why I keep looking over here. They're all over there. And they were here on Easter and they had talked about not just coming for church, but there was a dinner at Pastor Rob's house. And so they go, "Is it okay if this so-and-so comes as well?" And I was just like, "Sure, sure." So it was, "Oh, it's a lot bigger crowd now." Okay. But did I mention there was a group chat? The group chat was bigger than the group that was here for church. So, we had people who didn't even come for church who had heard about the dinner. And so, I just kept saying yes. And we had so many Germans I felt like 1940s France. I just surrendered and they came in and it was—they were awesome. It was great. It was great. And we just started grabbing chairs from every room. We got office chair on wheels, you know. We had the piano bench. We put every extension we could find in the table to make it bigger. We're getting other little foldout tables. And so the giant table and a half and they're all over the place. And then we're like, we don't have enough Easter eggs, cuz I mean we came with this cute little game where like you're going to solve this mystery and it's—we had these little puzzle pieces inside of eggs and you had to find them around the yard. But it's like, there—we thought this was just for Ma and we've got the gaggle was coming. So, we went down to the—well, I call it—it's utility room, but I call it the junk room. Like, most of you have a junk drawer. Fess up. How many of you have what you would call a junk room? Yeah. Well, thankfully, we don't throw away much, including old plastic Easter eggs. So we went down and found a bunch more eggs and we made up a whole another layer to the mystery and cutting up pieces of paper, stuck it in there and then we had all these eggs all over the yard. So then we unleashed the Germans and the students out in our yard and there

were eggs everywhere and they brought it back and and they solved the mystery together and it was just—I don't know why I did it. But then right before the meal started we stopped and we had a prayer together.

And as we prayed together and I looked around at this just crazy collection of foreign exchange students and then all these other local students who didn't have a place to celebrate Easter that day and we were praying together, I got a little glimmer into maybe part of the why. Why is the big question to always ask ourselves when things happen in our lives with this letter to Philemon? I don't—some of you might even have this thing memorized by now. I know Joe sent me an email this week. He's like, "Hey, Pastor Rob, I think I remember this passage." Yeah. Yeah, Joe. We're reading it again. But like so much of the Bible, you can read it again and again and yet still miss things. And for the last couple weeks, we've been talking a lot about the what—what was being asked of Philemon. Paul was writing to Philemon and saying, "I have Onesimus here." And he was—maybe he's a runaway slave or maybe he's a relative who wronged you. There's a lot of interpretation. Either way, things not good between Philemon and Onesimus. And Paul is saying, "I need you to accept him not as a slave but as a brother, as a member of your family." And so he's—and then we've been some time thinking about what does that mean for us? What is a similar challenge for us and what it means to really be a community of faith? We've talked about and we talked about what does it mean to do good deeds and Pastor Alex talked about the good deed sometimes involves some forgiveness, involves maybe a little holding back from the way we normally would act.

But I want to spend some time on the why. Why would Philemon do this? Why would Philemon forgive whatever wrong was done? Why? Well, Paul definitely is pushing here, right? I mean, he says, "I'm not going to command you. I could, but I'm not going to command you. But think about it, Philemon, because you know, we've got some shared history and some common beliefs here." One thing—I don't know if you noticed this in today's lesson, but did you notice that the letter was not just addressed to Philemon, it was addressed to a couple other folks? And then lastly, the church that's in your house. Paul wrote this letter asking this huge act of faith from Philemon and he CC'd his church.

You know what it's like when someone CC's—look, there was a time—now I didn't—we don't have this going on in the church anymore, but in the early years I was here there were moments where people would send an email to one of the other staff and then they'd CC me and I'd be like, "Why did I get copied on this?" and then I read it carefully, I'm like, "Oh, they think that when they ask this from Stephanie and CC me, that's going to put the screws to Stephanie to do what they want." And so, but come on, before we get too judgy, how many of you have done a deliberate CC on an email trying to send a little message? Want to make sure you're aware of what so-and-so is or is not doing.

In a way, Paul has pulled this on Philemon: copied the church. And by the way, the church that he copied, it's the same church that the letter to the Colossians was written. The letter to the Colossians is the same church community that Philemon is part of. That's why there's so much similarity between these. And there's a common observance and all that Paul leans on in the letter to Colossians as well as in this letter to Philemon is that same message to the church where he says, "I notice the faith that you have in Christ Jesus and the love that you have for all the saints"—and just so you can speak Pauline, when Paul says all the saints, that's his phrase for the church people, like you are all the saints of First United Presbyterian Church. I know some of you don't feel like saints. I know some of you don't act like saints. But Paul would call you all the saints of First United Pres. So when he says, "I know of the faith you have in Christ Jesus and your love for all the saints," it's the love for one another in the church. "I know that." And instead of pressing you on that, I'm gonna lean on that faith and that love.

The first thing he says is, I'm not going to command of you, but so that your faith can be effective. Ooh, it's just a little phrase in there, but it's got a big punch. It kind of implies that if you're not able to extend the love, make the circle bigger of what you consider family. And make no mistake, he's asking a family level of love here for Onesimus when he comes back because he says, "I—Onesimus has become like a son to me. I'm like a father just as I am to you. And so I ask you to make him your brother." Okay. Now, we don't have time for this today, but anybody remember the prodigal son? There's the father and the two sons, and the father has to tell the other son, "You—okay, we don't have time to get into that." I'm just telling you, if you want to bake your noodles some more, go think about the prodigal son and then read Philemon and you're going to go ooh or you'll go huh? And you'll call me. It'll be okay. But there's a whole thing I wish I could talk about.

Anyway, now here's the thing. So, he's saying that in order that your faith is going to be effective, you need to receive him as one of your family, making the circle bigger such that the same kind of love you have for this family, he gets in on even though he's wronged you. Because I'm telling you, Philemon, that's what it would mean if your faith was made effective. And this love—this love that you have for all the saints—this is what I'm basing on is that you'll have that same love for Onesimus. This is such a big ask, making this circle bigger and bigger and bigger. But this, look, this should seem familiar to you. If you just look at your Needs Among Us handout, what's the logo for our Needs Among Us ministry? It's a series of different shades of blue circles getting bigger and bigger and bigger. And when we talk about this ministry, what we say is that the love that we have for all the saints, we want to have it for more. We're Needs Among Us and we're always trying to make the us bigger. And if our faith is to be effective, then we make that circle bigger and bigger all the time. And that the journey of our faith and our learning about what it means to be truly loving as disciples of Jesus Christ, it means every single one of you is spending your lifetime, is spending the drops of your baptism across your heart on making the circle of your love bigger. That's—it is such a radical challenge that Paul is giving Philemon here. This is no little thing. But the gospel is radical. The gospel asks you to look outside of your inner little circles and to not see the next layer out as an extension or a stretching. It's to see it as the same. To understand that if you truly lived the gospel, we wouldn't have any circles. It'd just be one big circle that everybody's inside of. But you're human. Oh, you're human. You can't do it. And God knows that. And so, what we're meant to do is to be stretched and to consider our faith and to want it to be effective, to consider our love and to want it to be generous. And so because of the way God has loved us and because of the faith that we have in Christ Jesus, we just stretch the circle a little bigger. We're not all going to get to saintthood, but just a little bigger.

I struggled to think, "How can I get across just how radical and pushy Paul is being with Philemon?" And then I went, "I have an idea. I'm going to get pushy with you." Yes, that might work. It's like—it's like I'm going to write a letter to you and copy all the rest of the church. I mean, we did have you sign in, so I know everyone who's actually here today. So, consider yourself all CC'd up. And if your faith is to be effective, and if love is to be the principle by which you exercise your faith, then I have an ask. And it's not to receive back a person who has wronged you personally and caused you shame. It's to take the circle of whatever love you've got for this Christmas season and to take that circle and to make it a little bigger. And literally on the boundary of this space of worship where on the literal boundary between us and that outside world upon that glass are little letters like a letter to Philemon, a little letter filled with an ask. A family that is in a state of crisis right now and could use someone with effective faith and a willingness to share love to include them in your family.

I think for most of you, you're going to give some kind of gift to your family members. What would it look like to let one of these families become part of your family? Now, I realize that some of you might be saying, "Pastor Rob, you don't realize how much I spend on my family for Christmas. I can't do that for one of these families."

I'm just going to toss some things out here. This is the part where I poke and jab a little bit. So, get ready for it. One is if you're spending that much on your own family members that there's no room for one of those families, it might be a moment for you to reconsider how much you're spending on your family, that there's nothing left for someone in such deep need and crisis. Now, I don't know the circumstances of your life. I don't know what burdens you're carrying. And there may be something that's just so overwhelming that you just cannot. It's just too much. It's just too much either a financial or a time-free. And I want to honor that. I don't want to be such a bully with the gospel that you feel that way.

But let me just say this. Then how about you join together with another one of these saints around you, another family, another person? Because if every three families that are here in this room right now went out and grabbed an envelope, we'd run out of envelopes. We'd run out. I want to run out today. I want to run out because your faith is effective and because love is worth making the circle bigger because God made it big enough for you to fit in it. Maybe you can make it big enough for them to fit in it for you and those people can be part of your family for the holidays, not for the whole time. Look, it doesn't mean you're inviting them over to sleep in your house on Christmas Eve and wake up in the morning. And I—it's just yes to get gifts, but maybe also to look—maybe to take children or grandchildren with you so they can participate in the buying of these gifts for these families. Maybe it's putting the names up of these family members on your fridge so that every day your family can pray for them the way you pray for your own family. To pray for those children as much as you pray for your own. To pray for those moms and dads as much as you pray for your own spouse or brother or sister, sibling, friend who's like family to you. To put them on the same level. That's a Philemon kind of ask.

So, two or three of you get together, then you only have to treat them like a third of a family member then. And that sounds degrading, I guess, but look, we're just trying to make the circle a little bigger. That can work. And they can be prayed for. Your gifts can include a note that says, "I want you to know that my family prayed for your family every day leading up to this day. And we're going to continue to pray for you through Christmas because we're part of the same family of God."

Now, I know, look, Pastor Rob's lost it. All right? And maybe I have. And also, maybe I don't fully appreciate the burden or the challenges you're having in your life right now. I want you to know if all this just sounds still like too much, even sharing it with two or three other families. If that's still too much for you for whatever reason, I know that what you can do is take that Needs Among Us slip you have and you can check that box that says that you'll pray for them. And we have some prayers—prayer requests that we're going to be asking people to pray for. But after we get through those, we're going to take the names of all of these family members and give them out to anyone who signs up to pray. And you can pray for that person. Maybe you have a young person in your family. And wouldn't it be neat if your young person in your family could be praying for someone the same age who could really use those prayers? Your family of three praying for another family of three. Your family of five—whatever. At the very least, what I believe is that you could sign up to pray. And that I'm not going to pull back from because I believe it would take 15 seconds every day. 15 seconds. And I believe that every single person in this room has a faith that is effective enough and has love that can grow enough to fit in 15 seconds. And if I'm wrong about that for you, then I want to

know that because I want to help you. Because if you're at a place in your life where you can't extend the circle by 15 seconds a day, then we want to be your fellow saints loving you. And we want our faith to be effective enough to be effective for you.

I hope that after this service that line gets so long that Keely's fingers are literally sore from all the typing in of your information to sign you up. And here's what I asked from Keely and she told me this before this. I said, "Are there more families that Brightpoint has beyond the ones that we've been here?" Because we have 45. That's a crazy number, people. We don't normally do 45 around here. Wouldn't it be great if we run out of envelopes and the people on Zoom right now get mad and we have to go get some more families from Brightpoint? Would you be happy to hear that about your family? Or would that make you sad and depressed? Wouldn't that be awful if we reached more families? How many of you would honestly be glad in your heart to know that the families here started to include all of those families? How many of you be glad for that?

It's entirely within your ability because of the faith you have in Jesus Christ, because of the love that you have for all the saints.

Go and be the people of God.

Hallelujah and amen.