

## Living as Creations of God - Reflection on Psalm 139 and Philemon 1: 1-21

Offered by Rev. Debbie Stockdale

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This morning we are reflecting on what it means to be made by our Creator. What are the gifts and what are the responsibilities that come with the wonderful knowledge that each of us is God's special creation and that, no matter where we go or what we do, we are God's? Are any of you knitters? Artists? Woodworkers? Writers? Those who create things know the special bond that connects you to that which you create. Look at these prayer shawls. Each one was knit or crocheted with love in every stitch. The knitter is sending their love out into the world to help an individual, they don't know who, through a difficult time. The shawl reminds the recipient that they are loved and held even when the going gets rough. Every time the shawl is wrapped round their shoulders, the individual knows that somewhere, someone they don't even know, cares about them. They are also reminded that God the Creator is with them, wrapping them in strength and love, lending them courage for the journey of life.

Imagine each of us being knit together in our mother's womb by our Maker, the creator of all that is. The image is powerful and compelling. Imagine God the knitter, working to create each of us with her gentle labour of love.



Being knit together by our Maker, we are forever connected to Her. The yarn that we are made of is infused with the Spirit of God. Look at your hands. Each fingerprint swirl is unique, yours alone. In the very fabric of your being is the essence of God's creative presence. As a crafter is

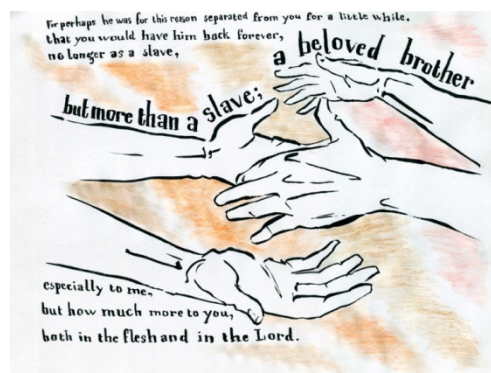
ever connected to that which they created, so is God connected to us. I think the psalmist who wrote Psalm 139 must have been a crafter to able to say with assurance:

*If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there God your hand shall lead me.*

God, the knitter, knows us and loves us and is with us always. Good news indeed.

We see an example of what that means in our lives in the story from Philemon. God knit together Paul and Philemon and Onesimus as well as everyone else mentioned in the story. Each one is a disciple of Christ, who is our best example of what it means to be children of God. In the story we see how the Spirit of God works in people for good. When we acknowledge we are God's, we have the ability to change the world for the better. This is not always easy or simple but by relying on the strength that God lends us and leaning on the courage that comes from knowing we are not alone, we can make a difference.

Paul, the writer of the letter, is in prison. He has been arrested for spreading the word of Christ, for sharing his faith with others. He is not isolated though. He is allowed company. We know this because a runaway slave named Onesimus has found Paul and has been converted by Paul to be a follower of Jesus. Onesimus has shared his story with Paul including confessing that he stole something from Philemon, the owner from home he ran away. Philemon is also someone who Paul converted to follow the teachings of Jesus and now is the leader of a house church in Colossae. Paul loves both Philemon and Onesimus and is now writing to Philemon in hopes of persuading Philemon to free Onesimus and forgive him for stealing.



Paul knows that he is asking a hard thing of Philemon. The law and the culture of the time gives Philemon full power and control over the life of Onesimus, who has no rights at all. If

Philemon forgives and frees his slave, he will be setting a precedent. Other slaves may well now expect similar treatment. Other leaders in the community who own slaves are sure to pressure Philemon to stick to the status quo and may even ostracize him and refuse to do business with him for acting as Paul asks him to. Do you suppose that Philemon ever suspected that his practice of slave ownership would be impacted because he became a follower of Jesus?

Paul coaxes, cajoles, commands, and flatters Philemon in asking that the slave Onesimus be freed and then be treated as an equal. He asks that Philemon treat Onesimus, *no longer as a slave but as more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.*

Paul asks Philemon to acknowledge that Onesimus is fearfully and wonderfully made by our God, the Creator, just as Philemon is. He asks that Philemon treat him as a brother, not as an object he owns. Paul expects that being a disciple, a follower of Christ and a member of the church, means that broader life decisions are impacted. It is not just whether or not a follower comes to church and worships that makes them a follower of Christ. It is about how we live our lives. Knowing that we are all created by God brings with it responsibility. When we see others as part of God's family, we treat them differently. Knowing we are God's creations and living into this knowledge changes the decisions we make and the actions we take.

How Philemon deals with a slave who has stolen something counts in his life as a disciple of Christ and as a child of God. Paul reminds Philemon that faithful living includes decisions in how he lives his day to day life. Philemon, as a leader in the community of Collosae, was being asked to break the societal rules of the time about what to do with a slave who not only ran away but also stole something. By letting those actions go unpunished, some would say he was rewarding Onesimus for his bad behaviour with freedom and that other slaves will expect the same. Philemon would surely be judged as a bad influence in his community.

Paul uses every angle he can think of to persuade Philemon. He even includes the church family as witnesses, making it harder for Philemon to ignore his request. The issue about how to deal with Onesimus is not a private question to be settled privately between Paul and Philemon; it is a public process, one for the whole church community to witness. Do you suppose the members

ever thought they would be asked to witness and participate in the tough choice that the leader of their church is asked to make? By including the church as witnesses, it meant that this letter, if it was sent today, would come to our next council meeting. Can you imagine the council discussing the personal business decisions of our minister, staff or council members at their next meeting?

So, what do we learn from this letter and from our Psalm that is applicable for our lives right now? What wisdom can be gleaned? What questions do we take away to ponder?

Like Philemon was asked to wrestle with the consequences of being a slave owner, what are the practices in our lives and in the lives of our church community that we can be called to account for when we remember that we and all living things are God's creations and equal under God's loving umbrella. I wonder what Paul might ask of us, as individuals and as a church under his wing.



I think one thing we could be held to account for is our role in addressing the climate crisis. The current climate and environmental emergency has heightened my awareness of my own impact on this world full of God's fearfully and wonderfully made creations. Like Philemon, who owned slaves and likely never thought about the impact his actions had on the life of the slave, over the years I haven't held myself accountable for the impact my willingness to turn a blind eye to the issues our North American lifestyle has had on our world.

Each day in the news are stories of disasters caused by our reckless way of living. Each day there are stories of people trying to claim their continued right to harm the environment because the economy depends on it or because it will limit their freedom to do as they please. Like

slavery continued as a practice for centuries before humanity finally acknowledged it was wrong to enslave people, our world is now denying the inherent wrongness of putting the lifestyle of the privileged over and above the right of all creation to exist.

Every day, we have a chance to look for changes we can make in our personal lifestyles. Every day, we have a chance to advocate for change in our western society. In the coming days, we as Canadians have a chance once more to demand change through our votes. We have a chance to say we demand change, real and deep change, to how our laws are written and how our tax dollars are spent. What would Paul ask us to do I wonder?

The Psalm today tells us that our Creator, the Knitter, knit each of us together in our mother's womb. Not just us though. The Creator knit everyone who lives on this earth. And not just the people. God the Knitter, knit the sparrows and the forests and the very fabric of our world. What does that mean for our individual lives and for the life of our church community?



Jesus knew he was God's child and that confidence let him speak boldly to challenge the wrongs he saw in the world around him. Paul, even from his prison cell, found the strength to continue in his ministry because he felt surrounded by God's love and leaned on God's strength. Paul challenged Philemon to acknowledge he and Onesimus were both God's children, and asked that Philemon and his church to make the right decision and free Onesimus.

I wonder where the knowledge that we are, each and every one, a child of God, will take us? Will we let ourselves be led by our Maker? Will we listen to that connection to the Holy in each

of us that calls us to live as God's hands in the world? Will we lean on God's strength and courage to change the way we live? Let us pray:

God, who knit us together in our mother's wombs, help us. Help us to help each other and our world. Amen