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November 9, 2025
Job 2:7-13 & Philemon 1:1-7
We Belong to God: Building a Caring Network

The letters from the apostle Paul, and those who wrote in his name, have a characteristic style and structure. The letters open with a greeting, often a formal address that identifies Paul as the sender followed by the recipient(s) of the letter – an individual or a church community. Paul then offers a prayer or expresses gratitude for the gifts of the recipients. The most substantial part of the letter follows – known as the body. The letter typically ends with personal greetings and a blessing or instructions.

Most of the time when I read from these letters, I skip over the “letter-y” parts like the opening greeting and thanksgiving and the ending blessing so that we may dig right into the church problem or theological issue that Paul is addressing. Not so this morning. The letter to Philemon is a just one chapter, only 335 words long, the shortest of Paul’s letters. We will delve into the contents of the letter in a bit, but hear now Paul’s greeting and prayer of thanksgiving using *The Message* version of scripture.

Philemon 1:1-7 (The Message)

I, Paul, am a prisoner for the sake of Christ, here with my brother Timothy. I write this letter to you, Philemon, my good friend and companion in this work—also to our sister Apphia, to Archippus, a real trooper, and to the church that meets in your house. God’s best to you! Christ’s blessings on you!

Every time your name comes up in my prayers, I say, “Oh, thank you, God!” I keep hearing of the love and faith you have for the Master Jesus, which brims over to other believers. And I keep praying that this faith we hold in common keeps showing up in the good things we do, and that people recognize Christ in all of it. Friend, you have no idea how good your love makes me feel, doubly so when I see your hospitality to fellow believers. **The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.**

It was a NY Times article from about a month ago that put a bug in my brain that I haven’t been able to shake. I found myself nodding along and saying to myself – “amen, amen.” Now I am not going to ask you to raise your hands if you have felt yourself in this situation... but maybe some of you will relate like I did to culture and lifestyle writer Melissa Kirch’s column. She wrote:

“I can’t remember when it started, but over the past several years, it’s become a common comedic refrain among busy people of my acquaintance to declare how much they love it when someone cancels plans. What a gift, a last-minute reprieve! One moment you thought you were going to a movie and dinner after work, the next

you have a totally unscheduled evening with which to do whatever you'd like. Get in your jammies early and watch TV? Order in? The night's your playground! The plans you made eagerly, once canceled, reveal themselves to have been a distasteful obligation on par with returning a router to the cable company.”¹

The article was titled *Following Through* and subtitled *We love it when people cancel plans, but the cost may be steeper than we realize*. The article goes on to talk about how technology has made it easier to cancel plans, especially asynchronous communication like texting. It avoids the awkwardness of having to make your explanation or excuse sound plausible to someone's face (or at least ears) when it is really not.

Kirch references an article from a few years ago by author Brad Stulberg, who wrote about the importance of “showing up, even if it's a drag.” Stulberg says that “The ultimate goal in keeping plans, he says, is creating community — a necessary component, we're reminded over and over, to happiness and longevity. This may involve giving up some control of our time in the short term in the interest of giving our lives meaning in the long run.” For Stulberg, obligations are “a mutual contract of responsibility” in the service of our larger goals for our lives.” I included a quote from Stulberg as our words of preparation in the bulletin this morning that speak to the ambivalence we sometimes feel about obligations. It ends with beautiful phrase – the title of a book by spiritual teacher Ram Dass – “we are all just walking each other home.”² We are all just walking each other home.

As members of The Presbyterian Church of Okemos, we believe that in life, in death, and life beyond death, we belong to God. The Church exists to invite everyone to join the lifelong journey of faith that is life in Jesus Christ. We desire to build a network of caring relationships between families, friends, and strangers. We are all just walking each other home.

Our scripture passages this morning reflect the value placed on networks of caring relationships and provide models for us to emulate. I shared during the Children's Time and Time of Wonder about the power of friends coming to our side when we are going through tough times. That is what we hear in the story of Job – at least in this portion of Job. Spoiler alert - if you haven't read the whole book of Job, Job's friends aren't always as supportive as they are here. But in the passage this Mitch read this morning, they get a lot of things right. First of all – they show up! They travel from a distance and meet up and go to Job to comfort and console him after his losses of home, business and family. I'm sure they all had a lot of things in their life that they needed to tend to. And yet, they drop these because their friend needs them. Second, when they see Job from a distance and realize that Job is in worse shape than they first thought, physically affected from head to toe, instead of turning around

¹ Melissa Kirch. *Following Through*. We love it when people cancel plans, but the cost may be steeper than we realize. *NY Times*, Oct. 11, 2025. Online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/11/briefing/following-through.html>

² Brad Stulberg, *The Case for Obligation*. *NY Times*, May 20, 2023. Online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/20/opinion/the-case-for-obligation.html>

and fleeing, Job's friends follow through. No texting that something popped up and they need to cancel their plans. They go to Job, weeping at the sight of their friend. And third they offered their presence in the midst of Job's suffering. They sit with Job on the ground for seven days and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great. Too great for words. Sitting in silence was the custom at that time when someone is mourning. For Job's friends, maybe it felt like an obligation - "a mutual contract of responsibility" or maybe they realized that we are all just walking each other home. And this was their opportunity walk with Job on his journey. Job's friends model for the power of presence, the power of showing up. Job was lucky that he had built a network of caring relationships.

Likewise the Apostle Paul had a strong network of caring relationships. We often think of Paul, the itinerant pastor, preaching, and ministering in the name of Christ, growing the church, little by little. And yet Paul's letters reflect that he did not do his work alone. I think we actually do a disservice to Paul by not sharing more the opening and closing of his letters, for they are chock full of collaborative spirit and caring networks.

Paul is writing on behalf of himself and compatriot Timothy to Philemon, his good friend and companion in this work of Christ. The letter lacks a lot of context, but scholars have postulated that Philemon was a well-to-do Christian, Apphia was his wife, and Archippus was a close friend. Philemon's home served as the meeting place of a house-church. Paul was seemingly involved in the bringing Philemon and his family and friends to Christ.

As a well to do man, Philemon owned a slave named Onesimus who had run away. Onesimus was a recent convert to Christianity through Paul. It is not clear how Paul met Onesimus – scholars don't think it was in prison, maybe through seeking help as a fugitive. Or maybe Onesimus went searching for Paul because he had heard about him from working in Philemon's household. However, in the body of the letter we learn that Paul is seeking to have Philemon allow Onesimus to continue his ministry work with Paul.

This is no small ask Paul is making. Paul is asking that Onesimus not just escape punishment for running off, but also be freed from his slave duties. Furthermore, and this is a big furthermore, he is asking Philemon to accept Onesimus as a beloved sibling. Paul says in verse 7: "Receive him as you would receive me." This is a big ask of Paul – a really big ask. The kind of ask you can only make of someone with whom you are close. It was Paul's desire to build a network of caring relationships between families, friends, and strangers. To be the church to each other. Interestingly, we don't actually know whether Philemon released Onesimus to work with Paul. There is a reference to an Onesimus in the book of Colossians as one who served with Paul and an early church historian referred to an Onesimus who became a bishop, so maybe. Especially since Paul gives thanks for the love that Philemon has for Jesus and praises him for his hospitality.³ Paul says, "Every time your name comes

³ Raymond E. Brown. Philemon. *An Introduction to the New Testament*. Doubleday, 1996. pp502-510.

up in my prayers, I say, “Oh, thank you, God!” I keep hearing of the love and faith you have for the Master Jesus, which brims over to other believers. And I keep praying that this faith we hold in common keeps showing up in the good things we do, and that people recognize Christ in all of it. Friend, you have no idea how good your love makes me feel, doubly so when I see your hospitality to fellow believers.”

Paul was a master builder of networks of caring relationships. His letters are full of references to friends he has met along the way. And importantly, Paul spends time praising them and giving thanks for their ministry. Paul recognizes that as followers of Christ we are all just walking each other home. Because in life and death and life beyond death, we belong to God. And thus as children of God, we belong to each other. And belonging is a bit like “a mutual contract of responsibility” – the definition of an obligation Brad Stulberg gave.

Yesterday, November 8 was my 4th anniversary here at PCO. My first sermon following the affirmation of my call was on November 14, 2021 and it was titled “Belonging.” I began that sermon with a portion of the mission statement and shared that when I read this statement in the Ministry Information Form (or MIF) as part of the call process, it immediately captured my attention. I shared that I thought it is a bold statement, that it is a grounding statement. It is a statement of conviction. It is a statement of hope. And more than anything, it is a statement of an **embodied** promise because we belong to a larger story than just ourselves. We are part of deeper, richer narrative of collective stories we hear in scripture. Names that may be familiar to us like Abraham and Sarah, Noah and Moses, Hannah and Ruth, Job and Paul – people who experienced joy and profound sorrow, success and frustration; people who tried to be faithful, but had their moments of doubt and disobedience. And stories of the people, old and young who bore witness to God’s faithfulness. To “belong to God” in life and in death and life beyond death is first and foremost a recognition that we belong to a larger story. A story of the ways friends reach out when one is suffering like Job’s friends did, the ways we minister together, as Paul recognized his network of caring relationships. And like Paul, I am so grateful for the caring relationships here at PCO.

Next Sunday, November 16, we will all have an opportunity to share our gratitude for the network of caring relationships we have built here at PCO as we dedicate our gifts of time, talent, and financial resources to the church. The financial funds pledged help us to make a realistic budget and plan for the ways we invite everyone to join the lifelong journey of faith that is life in Jesus Christ. On behalf on the Stewardship ministry, I ask you to prayerfully consider your commitment to furthering PCO’s mission of worship, faith formation, stewardship of our facility, service to the world and our care for each other.

If you have not received a stewardship packet, please pick one up on the table outside the sanctuary doors. It includes a stewardship booklet sharing the ways we have used your financial gifts this past year. It also includes a pledge card and time and talent sheet where you can share your gifts of caring for others, as we walk each other home. Join me in prayer.