

Children's Message

Preached by Carolyn Bohler
Redlands First United Methodist Church
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I have some frogs here... What do you think might happen if I kissed one?

Recent movie, *The Princess and the Frog*....

Prince named Naveen is made into a frog by a Voodoo magician.

He needs a princess to kiss him, in his frog state, to turn him back into a prince.

He sees a beautiful girl named Tiana who he assumes is a princess, so he asks her to kiss him. Since Tiana isn't officially a princess, what happens instead is that she turns into a frog.

As frogs, Tiana and Naveen fall in love and though they try to find a way to turn back into humans, they are content to stay frogs since they have each other.

When they kiss, after they are married, lo and behold, they turn into prince and princess, because Tiana is married to a prince, so she's a princess—so her princess kiss turns the frog Naveen into a prince again....

Exciting about Tiana... first Disney cartoon princess who is black, African American from New Orleans... Asian princess, Native American princess, White princesses... way of showing in stories how beautiful everyone is...

“Nobodies, Princesses and Frogs”

Philemon 1: 1a, 8-22, 25

To us, Emily Dickinson is certainly a somebody—a renowned poet. Yet not one of her poems was published when she was living. She was reclusive; we still do not know much about her life. How appropriate, then, that she would write this poem:

I'm nobody! Who are you?

Are you nobody too?

Then there's a pair of us—don't tell!

They'd banish us, you know.

How dreary to be somebody!

How public, like a frog

To tell your name the live long day

To an admiring bog!

I wonder whether or not Emily Dickinson knew deep inside herself that she was a somebody, somebody who would touch millions of people, including most of us, with her poetry—after her death.

Occasionally, as Emily Dickinson's poem suggests, somebody *wants* to be a nobody and dreads somebodyness.

On the other hand, there are plenty of somebodies who are seen by others as nobodies, but who do long to be given a chance to reveal their somebodyness. The black playwright Charles Gordone received the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1970 for his first

major work, *No Place to be Somebody*. Twenty five years after he wrote it, Gordone, who wrote that play over a 7-year time period when he was a bartender in Greenwich Village, described his play as being "about country folk who had migrated to the big city, seeking the urban myth of success, only to find disappointment, despair, and death."

Emily Dickinson was a somebody professing to enjoy nobodiness. Charles Gordone wrote about people who know that they are somebodies, but who have "No Place to be Somebody."

There are others who do not think of themselves as somebodies. They think that they are nobodies primarily because many people in their context treat them as nobodies.

You and I know that EVERYONE is a somebody. On this Human Relations Sunday, amidst Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Week-End, we're celebrating everyone's somebodiness with a big "Amen!" We're also going to be sure that we acknowledge this somebodiness--about ourselves as well as all others.

How many of you recall Lena Horne singing along with Kermit the frog on Sesame Street? Kermit--facing his greenness--wondered at times whether it would be nicer to be red, yellow, or gold. As he sang, he dove deep into his own reservoir of self-esteem and emerged with this conclusion: "I am green and it'll do fine. It's beautiful. And I think it's what I *want* to be."

Something helped Kermit to value being green--a supportive community of puppets and people who all affirmed each other as they were.

Somebodies who think that they are nobodies and even somebodies who know that they are somebodies need supportive advocates. Supportive advocates. **Advocates—those who recognize and name another's somebodiness and take action so that their worth and value is claimed socially.**

The Apostle Paul recognized the worth of Onesimus and advocated on his behalf. This brief letter to Philemon was written by Paul when Paul was an old man. Like other letters, it was a letter not just addressed to Philemon, but also to those who worshiped together in a little house church. I love this little letter; it's perfect for Human Relations Sunday.

Paul forthrightly asks Philemon to free Onesimus, who is Philemon's slave. Some translations of the Bible add a subtitle that suggests Onesimus was a "runaway" slave, but there never was any evidence for that and now there is agreement among biblical scholars that Onesimus had not run away. It is more likely that Philemon *sent* Onesimus as a young slave to help Paul with his ministry, since Paul, who was in prison, needed help.

Paul and Onesimus became good friends. In fact, Onesimus converted to Christianity. This is a delightful little letter in many ways. One very important feature is the meaning of the name "Onesimus," which literally means, "useful." Paul intentionally makes puns with this name, and we can hear those even in the English translation. Paul says "I have begotten him useful."¹ It is likely that Paul renamed the slave Onesimus, "useful." In other words, Paul made him "useful."

Paul seems to have considered keeping Onesimus, but then decided it would be better to send a letter to Onesimus' master, Philemon, asking Philemon to free him.

This is an amazing request, and it is a marvelous testimony that within Christianity there is a strong role model for one advocating for another to be released from slavery. Paul uses magnificent psychology, writing in such a way that it would be very hard for Philemon to say no.

Paul says he wants Onesimus to serve as a brother in the Christian faith, no longer as a slave. He uses the pun on his name again, saying “I want some benefit from you.” “Benefit” means “useful.” Paul is saying, “I want Onesimus.”

Then Paul ends the letter of request to the slave owner to free his friend with this comment, “But of course you’ll do even more than I say.” That’s like college-aged kids saying they need \$100, but they know you’ll send even more. After that, how can you not send at least \$100? How could Philemon say “No” to freeing Onesimus?

The fact that this letter is included in the Bible must mean that Onesimus was freed. Otherwise, the letter would have been destroyed. Now, consider this. There was a bishop in the very early church whose name was Onesimus. Scholars conjecture—why is one third of the New Testament attributed to Paul? Why are so many of Paul’s letters included in the Bible, when hundred of letters existed? Why was this little letter to Philemon’s tiny house church included? Perhaps this early bishop at Ephesus, the very place where Paul’s letters were published, was grateful to Paul for his freedom. Perhaps this one who was at one time considered a “nobody” became truly “somebody,” somebody quite “useful”—a Bishop in the church.

It was not enough that Paul saw somebodyness in Onesimus himself, Paul also **ADVOCATED** for Onesimus’ rights.

This weekend we honor, remember and seek to gain wisdom from a national hero, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who was a far more recent advocate for those who suffered from the residual effects of slavery. King’s “I have a dream” speech is recited often, and it is magnificent—it holds up the goals virtually all of us share. But another writing of his, his *letter to clergy from prison* has some distinct parallels to Paul’s *little letter from prison to Philemon*. Paul and King were both in prison because of their faith stances. King’s letter was from the Birmingham Alabama jail, to clergy who thought King might be too impatient for justice.

“We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim . . . when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, . . . , and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people. . . when you [are] forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness" then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.

Unlike Paul’s, King’s was a long letter, in fact King comments:

“Never before have I written so long a letter. I'm afraid it is much too long to take your precious time. I can assure you that it would have been much shorter if I had been writing from a comfortable desk, but what else can one do when he is alone in a narrow jail cell, other than write long letters, think long thoughts and pray long prayers?” (Kings’ letter was written on bits of newspaper margins until finally he gained a little paper.)

Did not Martin Luther King Jr. help all people realize that all people are somebodies?

People who are not recognized, either by themselves or others as somebodies often need an advocate to help them. Think of people in churches, schools, work, or families who are green and who can’t quite sing along with Kermit that they think it’s

what they *want* to be. Think of those who are scared, or feel unsafe, or unsure, about affirming their particularity. Right now immigrants are a body of people who need to have their safety secured. It takes those who are not green or who don't fret about green cards to advocate for them.

My first appointment after ordination was as chaplain of Simpson College in Iowa, where Bishop Golden, who is African American, was wonderful bishop. He retired in 1980 and told us who were celebrating his retirement of the time when he used to put cream on his face to peel the skin off so that it would appear whiter. He told of times when he would go in and have his curly hair straightened. He laughed and said just about the time that Blacks wised up, realizing that they were naturally beautiful with dark skin and curly hair “whites became crazy—they began lying in the sun and getting their hair curled, just as curly as Blacks.”

Probably most of us do not think a lot about others feeling like nobodies. Unfortunately, we don't think *enough* about people in different situations than ourselves. In fact, I think that stretching our minds/hearts to think of more and more people is one of the wonderful gifts of a church. Yet, even in a congregation, it usually takes one person in a wheelchair on a committee for that committee to remember to deal with accessibility issues. We have to train ourselves to notice green beings or Onesimuses, and we are wise to remind ourselves that we cannot leave it to others to be their advocates. Haitians have lots of advocates now, affirming their somebodiness as we unite in compassion. And, I know of United Methodist seminary and church groups who have gone to Haiti as advocates over the past decades. As countries we all take turns advocating for each other.

Everyone doesn't want to be admired like a frog in a bog. Like Emily Dickinson, some people are quite content not to be noticed much. But everyone needs to be, at least in their own mind and heart, a somebody to themselves. If, perchance we do find ourselves with no apparent advocate, I hope we can remind ourselves in that moment that the most powerful advocate of all, God, begot us just as we are.

We are all useful, beneficial--I guess we could all be named “Onesimus.” We are all somebodies, and we can all be, like Paul or Martin, advocates for those who are treated as nobodies.

Scripture Reading comments

I will be reading almost all of one whole book of the Bible!

It is a short letter written by the Apostle Paul to a friend of his named Philemon.

There are 3 people to keep in mind:

Paul wants Philemon to free one of his slaves who is named Onesimus.

Paul thinks Onesimus should be free because he would be very **useful** to people and to the church.

From Paul and from our brother Timothy - To our friend and fellow worker Philemon,

Your love, dear brother, has brought me great joy and much encouragement! You have cheered the hearts of all of God's people.

For this reason I *could* be bold enough, as your brother in Christ, to *order* you to do what should be done.

But because I love you, I make a *request* instead. I do this even though I am Paul, the ambassador of Christ Jesus, and at present also a prisoner for his sake.

So I make a request to you on behalf of Onesimus, who is my own son in Christ; for while in prison I have become his spiritual father.

At one time he was of **no use** to you, but now he is **useful** both to you and to me. I am sending him back to you now, and with him goes my heart. I would like to keep him here with me, while I am in prison for the gospel's sake, so that he could help me in your place. However, I do not want to *force* you to help me; rather, I would like for you *to do it of your own free will*. So I will not do anything unless you agree.

It may be that Onesimus was away from you for a short time so that you might have him back for all time. And now he is not just a slave, but much more than a slave: he is a dear brother in Christ. **How much he means to me! And how much more he will mean to you**, both as a slave and as a brother in the Lord!

So, if you think of *me* as your partner, welcome *him* back just as you would welcome me.

If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to my account.

Here, I will write this with my own hand: [I, Paul, will pay you back.] (I should not have to remind you, of course, that you owe your very self to me.)

So, my brother, please do me this favor for the Lord's sake; as a brother in Christ, cheer me up! I am sure, as I write this, that *you will do what I ask* - in fact **I know that you will do even more**. May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

¹ Some translations say, "I have become a father" to him