

“Hero or coward?”
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by Rev. Patrick David Heery

Ever since the late 90s, and especially in post-9/11 America, there has been a new kind of hero on television. It’s the kind of hero you love to hate and hate to love. This hero doesn’t ride into town on a stallion or wear shining armor. This hero’s complicated, gritty, selfish, willing to do bad things for good reasons. This hero’s sort of . . . a villain.

Witness the rise of the antihero. Tony Soprano, the mobster who’s in touch with his feelings. Walter White, the meek chemistry teacher and family man turned drug lord. Vic Mackey, the violent Los Angeles Police detective who’s worse than the criminals he hunts. Dexter, the serial killer who kills only other serial killers.

Of course, we’ve seen these kinds of heroes before: Dirty Harry (or pretty much any character ever played by Clint Eastwood), Michael Corleone, even Han Solo. They made their appearance during the turbulent protest era of the 1960s and 70s. And now they’ve shown up again when we’re having a hard time believing in virtuous heroes and their capacity to save the world. Now we want heroes who share our own internal conflicts, our own moral compromise.

If that’s the kind of hero we’re looking for, we should love Paul. He’s a complicated fellow. And nowhere is that more evident than in his Letter to Philemon.

The traditional interpretation is that Onesimus is a runaway slave.

But all we really know is that in the world of the Roman Empire, Onesimus isn’t counted as a man; he’s seen as property—a slave belonging to a wealthy Christian leader named Philemon. Paul’s writing to his friend Philemon because Paul’s had a vision. He’s seen Jesus in a slave who’s become a Christian brother to him. So now Paul’s sending Onesimus back to his so-called owner with the request that Philemon greet Onesimus with love.

Now, some preachers are going to tell you that Paul’s a hero, pleading for the freedom of Onesimus. Other preachers are going to tell you Paul’s a coward, too afraid to denounce slavery itself or risk alienating a wealthy and powerful ally.

The truth is that Paul’s probably some of both. He’s an antihero.

And like any good antihero, he lets us down. Never once does he denounce slavery as incompatible with the gospel. Never once does he explicitly call for Philemon to free Onesimus, let alone the rest of his slaves.

If he's seen Jesus in Onesimus, then it would seem he's sending him again to the cross, sending him back to the clutches of slavery.

Make no mistake: this letter was used to justify slavery in the United States—used to justify the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, requiring all escaped slaves to be returned to their “masters.”

Now that may not be what Paul had in mind. Paul is a prisoner. He can't effect his own freedom, let alone someone else's. So maybe he's being strategic and doing the best he can.

He masterfully crafts his rhetoric to win Philemon over to his side. He is tactful, polite, even obsequious. He compliments and charms. He leverages the power and pressure of the community to guarantee Onesimus's safety by having the letter read publicly in the church. He levels the earthly hierarchies that validate slavery by talk of brothers and sisters and coworkers. He calls Onesimus his child, his very heart. He insists that Philemon cannot separate earthly from spiritual freedom—in other words, he can't regard Onesimus as his spiritual brother while clapping him in irons.

All this points to a heroic and clever strategy to see Onesimus freed. But the fact is that, while Paul unleashes in other epistles a torrent of condemnation on plenty of other sins, the sin of enslaving another child of God just doesn't seem to muster the same passion. He, as a Roman citizen, is part of a world that takes the existence of slavery for granted, and for all his theology and divine visions, Paul can't break with that worldview. He has benefited from that world. It has provided him rich and powerful patrons like Philemon. And for all his language of brothers and coworkers, Paul's still treating Onesimus like property. You don't return *people* to their owners; you return objects.

At the end of the day, if Paul has to choose between Philemon and Onesimus, it's not Philemon he's going to sacrifice. It's Onesimus—for the sake of the greater good, of course.

We are no strangers to this moral compromise—these “immoral mathematics,” to borrow a phrase from another TV show of antiheroes, “Hell on Wheels.” Oh, we're experts at calculating just how much we can afford to risk. We'll speak out for the freedom of our fellow human beings, but not usually to the point that it costs us church members... or business partners... or friends... or money... or maybe even just our plans for the evening.

There are exceptions of course. This church, after all, wouldn't exist if it weren't for the exception of Rev. Henry Fowler and 66 Presbyterians who refused to silence their strident call for the abolition of slavery—a call that forced them to leave Second Presbyterian and found a new church, this church.

Still, if you're like me, you've known moments of compromise, moments when you've held your tongue or refused to go all the way for justice. And somewhere there has been an Onesimus who has suffered as a result.

Now I'm not up here to judge Paul, or you, or myself.

What I'm here to say, what I've heard in the whispers of this letter, is that taken individually, we are all cowards, and sometimes we are heroes. But no matter what righteousness we pursue, it inevitably gets muddied by our own flawed, limited selves.

But what if we don't have to fight this battle alone? Over and over again in this letter, Paul's language speaks of friends and coworkers, of love and brothers, of the community of saints.

Over and over again, Paul's subtly reminding Philemon that none of us can walk the path of discipleship alone. We need each other. We need others to be our courage when we have none. We need others to wake us up to the parts of God, and of life, and of faith, that we are blinded to because of our own limited experience or privileged social status.

Think about it. What happens if Philemon really does what Paul counsels? What happens if he consults not only his self-interest and immoral mathematics as a slave owner, but also his community, his church, his God? What happens if he turns to Onesimus, the one bearing this letter, and sees at last a brother, a person, and listens to him, listens to his story, to his faith, to his experiences as a slave?

Paul alone cannot free Onesimus. But maybe he and Onesimus and the entire church together can. And maybe together they can free Philemon also, free him to be a better and more faithful man.

A hero won't be enough (the only one that ever mattered was crucified and resurrected 2,000 years ago). An antihero won't be enough either. But a team—a community of coworkers, under Christ, being mutually transformed and set free by one another—now *that* may just be enough.

It was enough nearly 2,000 years ago in a dark, dank cell of a prison when a Roman citizen and a slave, over talk of God and freedom, became brothers. And it may just be enough still today.

Amen.