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Text: Philemon 1:11-21

## “Blessed to be burdened”

Rev. Dr. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite president of the Chicago Theological Seminary and a regular contributor to the Washington Post’s Religion column tells the following story in a recent newspaper column. She said that she was at a reception some years ago where she witnessed a conversation between two prominent theologians. One scholar is Gustavo Gutierrez, who hails from the Third World nation of Peru and is a proponent of Liberation Theology. The reception is actually being held in his honor. The other man is an American theologian who teaches at a seminary in Boston. The American professor, after having piled his plate with food from the buffet, makes his way over to Gutierrez who was seated at the far side of the room.

“So, what’s this Liberation Theology all about?” he asked Gutierrez.

Gutierrez looked up briefly and replied: “It’s all a matter of the stomach.”

“The stomach?” the American professor asked slightly askance.

“Yes,” Gutierrez replied. “Theology is done differently when your stomach is full than when it is empty.”

Gutierrez’ words are intensely appropriate as we delve into the thorny and always controversial arena of human sexuality, specifically homosexuality, and the response of the Black church. As far as issues go, this one is guaranteed to galvanize a congregation in one of two directions. The majority claim that homosexuality is a sin. An infinitesimal number among whom I am to be counted, argue that homosexuality is

simply a label to describe a minority of the human family that expresses love and desire for intimacy with members of its own gender.

Consequently, homosexuality like heterosexuality is a theologically neutral condition of the human organism akin to left-handedness, or O-negative blood types. However both sides of the human family –homosexuals and heterosexuals - are equally capable of being destructive and malicious in their relationships with others. Conversely, they are just as able of maturity, fairness and respect in their behaviors as well. There is nothing intrinsic to homosexuality that makes it evil, and there is nothing internal to heterosexuality that makes it automatically a force for all that is good, right and proper. It is simply a statement of fact that heterosexuality defines the majority context for members of the human family.

If we accept the idea that homosexuality and heterosexuality are conceptually and morally neutral, then why does the majority perspective in the Black church declare that homosexuality is a most egregious sin? Why do normally progressive Black intellectuals and theologians oppose homosexuality instead of seeing it as a normal and natural part of the personhood of a minority? And is there anything worthy of Christ in this assertion? Or is it really a matter of the stomach?

The institutional Black church has been feeding at the trough of its own self-importance for too long. It worships and jealously guards its place in the American mainstream. To maintain its place at the Emperor's table, the Black church has decided to side with the prevailing values of American Empire including its homophobia. It seems that the Black church has forgotten that it has been blessed with a burden. God has called us to serve ALL members of God's diverse family.

One of my professors at Howard University School of Divinity, Bishop Joseph Taylor, with whom I took a class in Church Administration and Leadership, told our class that ministry is “one beggar telling another where to find bread.” Well, if that is our definition of ministry, then the Black church, in its conservative anti-homosexuality stances, has failed this test and is in need of repentance. The Black church has chosen to ape the behavior of the over-fed religious functionary who sits high with a bloated belly and casts aspersions on those that are not in the mainstream. This is totally separate from the vocation of being a channel of Christ’s prophetic voice. Following Christ means that the Black church must not covet the mainstream. Instead we are called to speak truth to power as the tireless advocates of the outcasts, the hungry, the malnourished and the powerless. The conservative Black church today is part of Pharaoh’s network. They eat from the same table. We have failed the only test of discipleship that Christ urged on all of us. Jesus called each of us to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. That is the burden each follower of Christ is blessed with.

In the Biblical text we encounter the apostle Paul who has written a letter to the slave owner Philemon. Paul wants Philemon to do the right thing, and follow God. This would require that Philemon disobey the Roman Empire’s fugitive slave laws and treat Onesimus as an equal. Onesimus is the classic outsider. He is a slave in Roman society where slavery is the law and where Philemon, as the owner, has the right to sentence his former slave to death for running away.

But at verses 11&12 Paul declares:

“Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. I am sending him – who is my very heart – back to you. “ (NIV).

This is a curious exchange for its time in the middle of the First Century. But its import is pregnant with significance for us today. Being a follower of Christ is not synonymous with a religion called Christianity. The two are separate and distinct entities.

The first question we must ask ourselves as a community of Christ that lives within the norms of the American empire in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is who are the Onesimus' in our midst? If Paul were writing this letter today to whom would it be addressed and on whose behalf would he be advocating?

And could Paul, as he so confidently wrote in verse 21 be:

“Confident of (our) obedience...knowing that (we) will do even more than (he) asked?”

What kind of witness should we, who claim that we are followers of Christ, have to the gay, lesbian and trans-gender communities in our midst?

Paul's letter to Philemon begins with grace and peace (verse 3). Why does Paul's letter begin in this way? What point is Paul making?

Paul sees himself as one operating within the framework of a prophetic call from the resurrected Christ whose entire ministry embodies the incarnation of God's saving activity. God made salvation possible by reaching out to humanity in the midst of a long exile. The intent of God's intervention in the world through Christ was to make salvation available to all. It was never to be the private possession of the pious few.

As he wrote to the house church at Corinth at 1 Corinthians 15:22;

“For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.” (NIV)

And at 2 Cor 5:14 we read;

“For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died.” (NIV)

So at the beginning of Paul’s letter to Philemon we see a distillation of what it means to be a member of Christ’s family. The family of Christ was birthed because God intervened in the world as a consequence of God’s own desire to rescue humankind in the midst of a long exile. As a consequence of what God did through Christ, grace and peace (restoration from exile or shalom) are effects of God’s salvific triumph on Easter Sunday.

Now Paul is at pains to help Philemon to understand exactly how a people – the community birthed in grace and sustained in God’s peace – treat their neighbors. The everyday activities of those who are members of Christ’s body are acted parables of the gospel itself. The essence of the letter to Philemon is the principle that the body of Christ must demonstrate its principles in its practices.

At its deepest level therefore, the letter to Philemon is not some piece of ancient literature that speaks through a one to one appeal to a slave owner called Philemon on behalf of his escaped and estranged slave Onesimus.

Far from it. It is a call to service from one follower of Christ called Paul to another community of Christ based in Philemon’s home. Its intent is to remind them of what it means to live together in the power and presence of God.

The thrust of Paul’s letter to this community of Christ and by extension ALL bodies of Christ for all times and places, is that loving, forgiving and reconciling fellowship is the essence of who we are. It is the burden we are blessed with as Christ’s followers. It is our *raison d’etre*. It is the tangible sign of the New Creation. It

means that the kingdom (God's reign) has begun to break-in. This is our sign to a hurting world that the promise of the full reconciliation and restoration is on its way!

Essentially, Paul wants us all to see that our salvation is part of God's intent for us. It is not something that we could have earned or deserved. We became a part of this community because of God's Spirit at work in our everyday lives. It is this Spirit that frees us and enables us as we go about our daily lives in the community of faith. And it remains the promise of our future maturation and transformation. However this maturation and transformation has already begun and continues through each follower of Christ.

As heirs according to this promise, the Black church has inherited a God-given command to embody loving forgiveness to ALL God's children. In our day the gay, lesbian and transgender communities are one part of the family of Christ to whom the Black church has chosen to heap scorn, venom and hatred. It has chosen to exclude this portion of the human family. The institutional Black church has carved out a measure of acceptance for itself in American society but it has forgotten why God "troubled the waters" and set us free from slavery in America and life under the oppressive, Christian, slave societies of the Deep South and its subsequent Jim Crow laws and mores. God's command to Pharaoh: "To let my people go." was a divine commission to the Black Church. It was a call to serve humanity. It was a call to be sent into the world to do God's work. Serving the one true God means a ministry of humility, reconciliation and love for ALL people.

But what has the Black church done? God freed us from Pharaoh by God's own mighty hand and outstretched arm. What did we do? We built a modern golden calf out

of our own pride and arrogance and traded Pharaoh for Caesar. Today we worship faithfully Caesar's God's of wealth, military power, the free market, democratic capitalism, and empire building and we look in absolute disgust upon the poor, the weak and the suffering. Our stomachs are beyond capacity but we continue to pile up our plates at the emperor's buffet. Our love is only for ourselves and for those we find "acceptable" and worthy of our time, attention and affection. The Black church is driven by philanthropy not love. The consequence is that we feel quite happy to hate and preach against the homosexual community and support our prejudices by saying it's God's will. That's how terrorists are created. That's how religious zealotry is born. If Paul were writing this letter today it would be addressed to the Black church in America!

Paul's letter to Philemon is no appeal to Philemon to "let bygones be bygones." Paul is not asking Philemon to adapt a dignified sense of detachment to Onesimus and to sweep his offence under the carpet.

No. Paul's appeal runs much deeper than that. Philemon must abandon his hubris, his sense of self-righteous indignation that he has a right to demand anything of his former slave, and Onesimus has to abandon his fear of his former master's wrath.

Onesimus like Philemon, is one who God loves. Onesimus is one of God's children not on any merit of his own but because God, for some mysterious reason that only God can know, has decided to reconcile the human family in the midst of our exile. The same love that created the world "in the beginning" is the same love that makes Philemon and Onesimus brothers in Christ.

Persons who are gay and lesbian or transgendered are our brothers and sisters in Christ. Accepting them as full members of the community of Christ is our solemn charge

to keep. It is the burden we have been blessed with. We did not form the church. It does not belong to us. It is God who called the church into existence. It is God who sustains the church by God's own spirit. We are called to serve God at the intersections of ordinary time and space. That's our blessing and that's our burden as the community of Christ.

The Black institutional church in America has lost its way in the world. The church is not a private space defined by walls and naves and pews and transepts. Our love of hierarchies, where Bishops masquerade as CEO's and presiding elders, Senior Pastors, Senior Servants and deacons ply their religious wares inside Gothic cathedrals or mega church auditoriums, has nothing to do with Christ and everything to do with the religion of Christianity and its love affair with the God called Empire.

The church is a community where there is a mutual experience of God's grace. It is an international body of people who exemplify and practice God-created unity. This community is defined by equality between believers who work together to ferret out arrogant, individualistic preoccupations that destroy the unity of the body. The true body of Christ is the tangible presence of Christ in the world. It is a global, multicultural, multinational, multi-lingual, community that is not limited by geographic boundaries and does not define itself around polity, hierarchy, or denomination.

Simply put the followers of Christ are a diverse collection of redeemed sinners, bound together as mutual recipients of God's grace.

Each of us is empowered by the same Spirit and none of us has any monopoly on God. Every member of the human body is charismatically empowered and thus our call

is to work together in the world using our Spirit-empowered gifts to bring about the New Creation that began on Easter Sunday but is not yet fully present.

Just as Onesimus the former slave (useless) became Onesimus (useful) because of an act of God, each of us who claims to be a member of God's family became the Lord's slave. As followers of Christ we must be careful not to embrace the status quo and its rejection of homosexuals. They are God's children who are empowered by God's Holy Spirit to work for God in the world.

It is not our place to convert anyone. We are blessed with a burden to love and serve ALL members of the human family without exception and without judgment for who they are as people. Whether they reciprocate our love, thank us for our efforts, conform to our values, or behave as we do; or whether they embrace lifestyles and values and behaviors that we abhor. None of that matters. God requires that we are to love them selflessly and do our best for them anyway. That is how we worship God. That is our liturgy. It is God who works in the hearts of people by God's own grace and through God's own power and in God's own time. It is God who works through our ministry of reconciliation by God's own spirit. It is God who adds to the church not us. We are to love, respect and serve our homosexual brothers and sisters and extend to them ALL of the benefits and courtesies that come with membership in God's family. God may work through these interactions for our mutual benefit. We who follow Christ will become aware of our deepest vocation as useful servants on fire for God when we love ALL people selflessly.

This is our Godly call to service. It is our blessing and our burden. We are to serve God no matter how awkward or uncomfortable or politically incorrect that may be

from the majority society's point of view. Loving homosexuals in the midst of America's empire, with our present laws against homosexual marriage and with the mountains of prejudice within the clergy and the laity of Black churches throughout the country, is not a popular cause. To take this bold step is to invite criticism bordering on persecution. Any minister who covets a pulpit in any mainstream Black Church would be well advised to toe the denominational line. But the challenge that faces us who have been blessed with this burden is whether or not we are willing to speak God's truth regardless of the personal or professional costs. Do we fear God for nothing? God is bigger than any man made institution and any denomination. God is bigger than the institutional Black church. As ministers of Christ we must speak truth to the powers that be within the institutional church and let the chips fall where they may. In this way we embrace the "old rugged cross," and the narrow way of self denial.

Our decision is no less difficult for us today, no less unpopular a cause to champion than it was for Philemon to accept Onesimus as a brother back in the First Century. Philemon's decision was evidence of a radical faith that was out of step with its time and the practices and values that were then prevailing in the Roman Empire. Standing up for the homosexual and transgender communities today is to fly in the face of the norms, beliefs and religious gluttony of the institutional Black Church within America.

But I like Paul, looking with my eyes of faith, express the same confidence in the Black church's eventual obedience to God that I write this sermon knowing that the Black church will do even more than I ask and accept our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters as full members of Christ's body. We are blessed with a burden that requires each

of us to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8). Let us break bread together, allowing those that are hungry to eat first. Let us take our places at the Table as equals. Leave the rest up to God. Amen.

### **About the author.**

After a successful series of careers in newspaper journalism, insurance broking and public relations, John-Anthony Burchall, 37, obeyed God's command to full-time ministry. He gave up his professional aspirations and is today a full time graduate student. He is married to Leondra and the couple has three children. Son Terin is 15 while daughters Zindzi and Zenani are 12 and 10 respectively.

Currently, Mr. Burchall is entering the third semester of a Master of Divinity program at Howard University, Washington DC. He is licensed to preach in the AME church and is a member of Xi Alpha Lambda Chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. He lives with his family in Fairfax, Virginia.