

**Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa**  
**Sunday, July 9, 2023 – Elizabeth Bryce**

**Reading: Philemon: verses 8-20**

**Sermon: A change of Lenses**

I am getting new glasses! Not really exciting news for most people, I know, but I am hoping it will be a really good change for me. I went to see my optometrist this spring because I was not seeing so well – it was blurry when I trying to read highway signs, or identify a bird in a tree and getting harder to drive at night. I thought I needed stronger lenses.

But when I was tested, my sight was just about the same as two years ago – with the sample lenses I still read all those tiny letters on the eye chart, still read them the best with the same lenses that I have been wearing for the last two years. So why is it so blurry when I am wearing my own glasses? I asked.

The optometrist took a good look at my glasses and the lenses I currently have in them. And she diagnosed that my glasses are just too big. Not from a fashion point of view, so much as the way they fit on my face. She thinks that, because the glasses are too big, I keep smushing them even higher onto the bridge of my nose, and then the progressive part of my glass lenses is too high in the glass, and they actually end up obscuring the finer details when I am trying to look at something in the distance – like a sign on the highway or a bird in a tree. So now I have new (smaller) glasses ordered, which we hope will fit better.

It is actually just a tiny change, just a millimetre or two within the lens of my glasses, but it should have a lot of impact – at least that is what I am hoping for!

Sometimes we talk about our perspectives on the world and how our experience biases or influences our worldview. We say it is “the lens” we through which we see or experience the world around us.

For people who have grown up in a military dictatorship, for example, there might be a lens of fear through which they interpret military vehicles or people in uniform. For people of a certain “depression or war era” generation, there might be a drawer in the kitchen where you save all the rubber bands and bits of string and reusable envelopes – because you never know when you might need them! That experience of living through shortage is a lens that has lasted almost a hundred years!

I became aware of my own limited lens when I worked with one of the local high schools on becoming a community school – so that the students could access social supports like public health nurses and social workers and faith chaplains and addictions counselors right in the school. We thought it would be a great idea to have a special police officer assigned to spend time in the school for the students. Students who

needed advice about crimes they had witnessed or been victims of or even committed. That way the student wouldn't have a police car show up at their house, or they wouldn't need to go to the police station – which I think most of us can agree is pretty intimidating. Do I need to mention that everyone on the working committee that designed this program – including the student reps – were all white people?

A few years later, when I was on the parent council, the school board decided to stop funding that school resource officer, as it was called, who was assigned to schools. Through the lens of some of our racialized school population we had our eyes opened to what their experience of uniformed police officers, in school and out of it, felt like. Their experience of feeling like they were being targeted because of the colour of their skin. Their experience of being told not to hang out with their friends in certain places but to “move along” – as if they were a problem before they even made any mistake. Their experience of doing the same thing their white classmates were doing, but being told it was not allowed – they were not allowed.

I don't want to re-open the whole debate about school resource officers. I like to think that I am pretty aware of racial issues – I've read and learned a lot about racial profiling. I lived out west and experienced it with indigenous people first hand. But I guess I still have the blinders – we all do. My knowledge of problems from one place or one person's story isn't necessarily generalized to challenge similar blindspots in other places. In many ways, we all need to adjust or change our lenses so that we can have a better understanding of the people who are our neighbours, those neighbours who may live right next door, but who probably feel like they are living in a different world because of discrimination based on skin colour, or language or ethnic heritage.

I have been reflecting this summer on some of the themes generated by the United Church of Canada's visioning process. Last week we looked at church growth, which you can see at the head of the fish on the bulletin. This week we are looking at the two segments that look sort of like the fish's gills: Justice and Climate Action.

These are issues in our UC theology that draw new air and spirit into our understanding of the Christian faith. If tradition provides the bones or the structure of the faith, then a commitment to justice and climate action is what seems to bring new life into the community – both in terms of actual believers and also in terms of what keeps those of us who were already here growing into new perspectives, deeper understanding, clearer lenses.

I am using the epistles of Paul to return to some early church wisdom about being followers of Jesus' way. The epistle today is the shortest epistle, so short it is only one chapter long: Philemon. Philemon is not a place but a person, someone whom the apostle Paul has encountered in Colossae and whom he “converted” for lack of a better word, to Christianity.

And then Paul went on his way, as he did.

But the effect of Philemon's conversion didn't stop with changing Philemon's heart, apparently. As we know from other epistles, when the head of a household converted,

generally it meant the whole household was baptized, elders and children, slave and free, male and female and everything in between. Philemon hosted the Colossians house church. So all in the household were expected to attend the worship and be in Christian fellowship to the visiting evangelist, in this case Paul.

Later Paul went on his way, apostling, and he ended up eventually imprisoned in Rome, awaiting a response to his appeal to Caesar to be allowed to preach freely. From the descriptions of Paul's time "in prison" we believe it to be more like house arrest than actual dungeons and chains.

So imagine Paul's surprise when one day, Onesimus, one of the slaves of Philemon's household, appeared at his door, pleading for the opportunity to become Paul's servant, because his faith in Jesus had taken root and he had become so passionate for the gospel. Maybe Paul assumed that Onesimus had been sent by Philemon as a sign of support. In any case, after a time, it seems that Paul became aware that Onesimus was actually a runaway slave. And then Paul had this dilemma on his hands: whether to keep Onesimus with him, because the way of Jesus didn't fit well with the system of slavery. Or, to send Onesimus back to Philemon because that was the law.

Trust Paul to find a third way: He did send Onesimus back to Colossae, but he told Philemon that he needed to change his lenses. Whereas once Onesimus was a slave, both in status and rights, Paul told Philemon that Onesimus would return as more than a slave, instead he returned as a beloved brother.

"I wanted to keep him with me," Paul wrote. "but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced."

Can you see what Paul did there? He made the offer of new lenses to Philemon impossible to refuse.

Paul said to Philemon: That was the old way you used to look at the world: You once had a slave – a slave that ran away, so that he was useless to you. Then the slave encountered the gospel in your house and the gospel freed his heart from its chains. Now when he returns to your house, you should see him in a completely different way. And if you do, I think you will find him "useful" – the name Onesimus actually means useful or beneficial in Greek. Maybe he didn't have a name before that – but now Paul has given him a name that would befit a brother rather than human chattel.

If you consider me the apostle to be a partner, Paul writes, and to be on your level, if you consider you and I to be God's children – then now you should see Onesimus in the same way: he is a partner not a thing, he is a benefit, not a loss.

Refresh my heart in Christ, Paul wrote, for I know you will do even more than I have asked.

When we speak about social justice in the church, often we think it's just about going on marches or writing petitions, but it actually starts much deeper than changing our actions. It begins with changing our lenses, changing the way we see the world – that is what leads to acting in faith.

One of my favourite Christian authors in the US wrote this week about how churches need to maintain their freedom to offer the government independent assessment of their success in caring for the people of the land. This is not news – it goes back to Moses and the prophets, to Jesus and Paul, to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King Jr and Dorothy Day. We may respect the government, she wrote, but the law that is on our hearts is once and for all the law of Christ Jesus – and that frees everyone.

We still see signs of slavery in the world today. But if we, like Paul, put on those new lens looking for love for all, and our faith helps us to express God's justice then, just like Paul, our hearts will be refreshed in Christ Jesus, and new life will be born in us. Amen