

Difficult Waters
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In 2005, the novelist David Foster Wallace stepped to the podium at Kenyon College's commencement ceremony, greeted the graduating class, and began his address like this: "There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says 'Morning, boys. How's the water?' And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes 'What the [heck] is water?'"

I think this is a sermon about that water. It's about the contexts in which we live and move and have our being, but that are also so close to us, so completely encompassing of our lives that they're mostly invisible to us. Invisible, at least, until some older, wiser fish swims by and asks, "So, how's the water?"

I thought I could begin by asking you to raise your hand if you've ever read an entire book of the Bible in one sitting. But I won't. Part of the cultural water Episcopalians swim in is that under no circumstances do we raise our hands in church. Which would be a very strange thing for people swimming in other streams of the Christian Church to hear. But, you have read book of the Bible all the way through in one sitting if you didn't nod off during the reading from Philemon. That was the whole thing. 335 words. The length of what Robyn would like my clergy blog posts to be, but that they always ramble way past.

But, epistles swim in invisible waters themselves. Or here's a different metaphor that might help. It's been said that reading an epistle is like overhearing one half of a phone conversation. You can badly misinterpret what you hear if you don't have a sense of what the person on the other end of the line is saying, right? So it is with all scripture, but especially with the letters of the New Testament. We have to know their context. We have to know what and whom they were responding to. We've got to know the water they were swimming in to make sense of them.

Paul's letter to Philemon is a prime example. It was written to the leader of an early house church, and its subject seems to be the return of one of Philemon's slaves. A man named Onesimus. Pro-slavery southerners used Philemon to defend the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. They argued that since Paul sent Onesimus back to his master, without questioning the institution of slavery or Philemon's right to own Onesimus, the Bible sanctions slavery.

Christian abolitionists read the epistle very differently, but let's sit for a moment with the fact that Paul did not call slavery per se into question, regardless of how effusive he was about his new so called son in Christ, an enslaved human being named Onesimus.

Some of the water this letter swims in is the nature of slavery itself in the first century Roman Empire. Raymond Brown tells us that this society was highly stratified from top to bottom. At the upper echelons would be Romans who had been appointed to administer the provinces. Next would be the local privileged class, whether according to wealth or heredity. Then local shop owners, small land owners and craftspeople. Then men and women who had

been released from slavery, either by purchasing their own freedom or by the action of their masters. And at the very bottom would have been the vast number of enslaved people upon whose labor the empire depended. People who might have become slaves because they were prisoners of war, or had fallen into debt, or were simply born to other slaves.

Such was the world in which Paul wrote this letter. It was stratified from top to bottom. And, perhaps most significantly, those strata were simply part of the way things were to most people. Like gravity. Or weather. Or traffic. Or taxes. Inescapable facts of life most folks just dealt with as best they could, never really imagining the world could be different.

Paul lived in this world, but with him something was different. Like most of the first Christians, Paul believed that the world as he knew it was coming to an end. He thought a great apocalypse was near. The death and resurrection of Jesus meant the kingdom of God was breaking in and would soon establish an entirely new order. God's order, not Rome's.

And Paul's frame of mind makes a difference. Because the choices we make will always have a lot to do with what we think the future holds, won't they? If you think you're going to close on the sale of your house next week, you don't call a contractor about remodeling the kitchen. There's no time for that kind of renovation, no matter how badly it's needed.

So, the fact that Paul didn't seem interested in incremental political reform doesn't necessarily mean he thought slavery, or even the whole of the stratified Roman world, was a good and godly idea. In his mind, there was no time for that kind of renovation.

But, even if you and I don't share such an urgent, apocalyptic mindset, Paul ended up showing us something that's true whether we think we have a minute or a millennium to go to work in the world. He showed us that even as the world goes on in its violent and unjust ways, we can live according to a different way right now: the way of Jesus; the way of love. In fact, he showed us that Jesus's way of love, strange and foolish as it seems to this world, was made precisely for life in a world that's broken in the ways this one is, not just some perfect world that's still to come.

A couple of weeks ago, Ardelle and I heard Alice Walker speak at the Mississippi Book Festival. And at one point she was talking about being a person of integrity and the forces that oppose doing so. She said, "We are fractured by this culture so that there will be more of you to sell things to." In other words, our culture, like all cultures, wants to tell you who it needs you to be to extract what it wants from you, not so that you will be the person God created you to be. She said our work is to learn to live from our God given essence. A rosebush or a pine tree doesn't try to be anything but what they are. We need to relearn how do the same. And then she said, once you've turned away from this fracturing culture and become a unified self again, then you must develop a larger capacity to love. "Love," she said, "is the only thing that will save us from what's looming."

After we returned, I went back and read *The Color Purple* for the first time in maybe 25 years. It's stunning the way Alice Walker refused to turn away from the way violence and abuse and suffering make their way through a community and across generations. She's unflinching about what's worst about the water that is this world. But, if you remember, love is how the book ends. She actually took some flak for portraying the abusive, womanizing Mister as a chastened, humbler old man on the porch with Celie, whose life and self he'd nearly destroyed countless times over the years. Alice Walker took some flak for letting even somebody as damaged as Mister develop a larger capacity to love. Maybe even more

remarkable is that Celie came to be so grounded in her true identity, rather than all the hurt and violence she'd suffered, that she could actually receive love. Even Mister's.

It's true. The culture Paul was swimming in sometimes leaked into his letters in unhelpful ways. And, let's face it. He must have been a piece of work. But in his little letter to Philemon we may see the brilliance of his larger project. Which was to turn from a stratified world of violence and domination, and form communities of faith in Jesus's way of love.

"I am bold enough to command you," he writes. And we know from other letters that he's plenty bold. "Yet, I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love." Paul's an old man now, writing not from the comfort of his study. You caught this, right? Paul is an old man writing in shackles from a Roman prison. But even there his imagination won't be kept captive to the rule of fear. It's been swimming in different waters altogether. Paul doesn't even mention those who have imprisoned him. All he can talk about is this slave named Onesimus, worthless in the eyes of the state, but a beautiful soul whom Paul has come to love like a son. "I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. Welcome him as you would welcome me. If he owes you anything, charge that to my account. Brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord!" "Refresh my heart," he says. "Love this slave whom I love."

It's been a wrenching few days here in Memphis, with the news of Liza Fletcher's abduction. Liza has so many friends and family here at Calvary who are holding out hope, but living through a nightmare no human should ever have to endure. What is wrong with this world that such a thing could happen? Add to this the murder on Thursday of Lucy, a coworker of our daughter Kate in New York, and another friend almost losing her daughter to an eating disorder, and it's just one of those weeks when a lot of us want to step entirely out of the dark waters we're swimming in. We might even be wondering, Does love even matter? Is love even useful in a world as fractured and violent as this one seems to be?

It may feel like it's not. But our Christian faith says we need the way of love only more, the more our world breaks apart. Because we do know that we sure can't survive times like these unloved and alone. It's been said that grief is love with nowhere to go. Which is to say first that grief is a form of love. And maybe also that to have even one person with you in your grief and fear is to give that love at least this one place to go.

We need places for our love to go, especially in waters like these. We need the family and friends whose love we depend on and swim in and try to let remind us of who we truly are at our beloved core. And it may even be that in times like these we need, not polite and perfect and put together saints, but Celies and Mister's and even an old Roman Jew writing giddily about his love for a slave in the darkness of a prison cell. Don't you think that if Jesus's way of love is what was needed then and there, that way of love, in all its forms, may be the only way through the waters we swim in, here and now, as well?