

Philemon 1,10-25

September 16, 2007 – PENTECOST 16, 20th Anniversary of New Life Worship Pastor Mark A. Cordes

Twenty Years Refreshing Hearts

‡ Spontaneous, not forced (vv.1,10-16)

‡ Confident partners in Christ (vv.17-21)

In the name of Jesus, our eternal Savior, dear fellow workers with God:

It was an unlikely place to start a church. For the first three years of New Life worship we met in the gym at Snail Lake Elementary School about a mile north of where we are today. Sometimes it could be quite a challenge preaching a serious sermon on the stage under the school mascot, a cute little snail in tennis shoes. But I'll never forget that first service on Sunday, September 13, 1987. After almost a full year of ringing nearly 1300 doorbells and following up on hundreds of homes, we could finally gather with about 200 people to praise Jesus as the Savior of all and begin **Twenty Years Refreshing Hearts**.

But how often do you hear of anyone “refreshing” someone’s heart? A former member used to tell me how trips to the North Shore of Lake Superior reminded her of Psalm 23: *“He restoreth my soul.”* Maybe you’ve had your heart refreshed when someone you thought you offended went out of his or her way to let you know everything was okay. And yet even though we may not think of this, it really has been a privilege and pleasure to enjoy **Twenty Years Refreshing Hearts** at New Life Evangelical Lutheran Church in Shoreview, Minnesota. What God has here begun, we pray He will continue to bless as today we launch a five-year preparation for our silver anniversary.

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Someone might ask, “Why do you need five years to prepare for a church anniversary?” An easy illustration would be the appetizers we’ll enjoy today. “Why no potluck?” some might ask, because this pastor’s request came too late to organize. The busy press of duties all summer hid this day away in the bright sunshine of everyone’s family vacations and work...work...work. But as usual our New Life Women of Faith helped out. An active ministry like ours at New Life challenges busy people intent on **Refreshing Hearts** of each other and our neighbors too. Look for an Anniversary Committee signup sheet in coming weeks. Then instead of something the pastor wants us to do, God’s people can come up with great ideas **Spontaneous, not forced**. Grateful hearts share God’s love and love to serve.

Paul’s letter to Philemon is one of my favorite Biblical examples of God’s desire for His people’s **Spontaneous** acts of love and devotion first for Him and then for each other. Did you hear Paul’s unlikely place for writing? His “prison letters” (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon) were written under house arrest during Paul’s first imprisonment in Rome. Yet Paul’s **Refreshing** attitude did not refer to himself as “a prisoner of the Roman Empire,” but *“a prisoner of Jesus Christ.”* There’s your first clue for conquering trials and tribulations. Instead of complaining, look at the opportunity to serve your Savior Jesus Christ as Paul did. He had a nearly impossible task to perform with this letter.

Most of us find it difficult to ask a favor of anyone, sometimes even our closest friends. We’re taught to be self-reliant until we find ourselves in a wheelchair or flat on our back in hospital bed. Then we worry about not being a burden because we’re taught from childhood to stop being a baby and get out of our diapers A.S.A.P. But imagine you’re under house arrest and a runaway slave shows up for a visit. We don’t know how Onesimus met Paul, but Onesimus found his Savior as so many did in the Apostle’s witness to the Jewish Messiah. And don’t think Onesimus was just looking for an easy way out. He could have escaped quite quickly from prisoner Paul. Instead, in a way truly **Spontaneous, not forced**, Onesimus kept visiting until his whole sad story was known including the fact that he could have been executed under Roman law for running away and maybe also stealing from his master Philemon.

How do you handle problems when they pop up? Wait for them to just disappear? Tell Onesimus to go away? Wring your hands and make sure the guards are keeping watch at your prison door? For every time we've isolated ourselves from someone else's problem or ignored our own to the detriment of others, we have our Lord's forgiveness and His righteousness shining through servant-slaves like Paul. He's writing on behalf of someone he considered his fellow-slave. How winsome the way of the Lord.

"To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker..., I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains." This spiritual "son" came to faith by the Holy Spirit through Paul's faithful teaching. To get the play on words that follows, remember "*Onesimus*" means *useful*, but Paul admits this runaway was not living up to his name: "*Formerly he was useless to you.*" But see how his faith has grown: "*Now he has become useful both to you and to me.*" It's our sad story as sinners if God did not refresh our hearts by His Word and sacraments. We would uselessly live for ourselves until we died eternally in hell's burning dump. But God would not wait and watch us get what we deserve. Instead He helps as we see Paul stepping up like Christ, full of mercy and good fruit: "*Philemon, our dear friend and fellow worker...I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced. Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good— no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.*" Hearts refreshed by the Good News of sins-forgiven respond in faith-born love, **Spontaneous, not forced.**

✠ **Confident partners in Christ** (vv.17-21)

Here's a whole new way to see your fellow Christians at New Life. Especially when problems arise, think of how kindly Paul says to Philemon, "*So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.*"

The more active you become in sharing your faith in ministry through a Christian congregation, the more you see the reality that your fellow members, especially the pastor, are by nature weak and frail jars of clay. People don't volunteer as quickly as you want. And sometimes when you ask, they even refuse to help or just ignore your request. I'm not describing our congregation, but some individuals of our local pastors' conference from the five years I served as conference secretary. Are New Lifers like that sometimes too? My personal worst memories of flubbed up ministry came from two lame attempts to save a little work for two individual members, a very busy brother and sister in Christ. In both cases they wanted the information and the responsibility that went with it, but I was getting in the way. I sold them short and our Savior's love in them as well. Likewise, members sometimes misjudge our Lord Jesus and His power in me when they think they should not tell me about some dumb thing I did or said.

That's why if something bothers your heart and mind more than once or twice, use a visitor card to say, "Can we talk?" or whatever. For that sister and brother, I thank God, they let me know about my mistakes. Neither felt comfortable doing so. But because they trusted the Lord, we are now more **Confident partners in Christ** than before. God uses our struggles to strengthen our faith in Him and our love for one another – as long as we stay close to His Word and sacrament. If you let human error keep you from Bible study or Lord's Supper, your pastor or fellow member may do the same dumb thing to someone else out of sheer ignorance. But if you seek the Lord's help in prayer, you will confidently "*refresh my heart in Christ*" and end up doing "*even more than I ask.*"

Confident, Spontaneous – praise God for His conquering love in Christ – **Twenty Years Refreshing Hearts.** Amen.