

Martin's Example

A Sermon on John 1:43-51 and 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 by the Rev. Philip Major
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One of my favorite parts of living in Syracuse is going to the Regional Farmers' Market on Saturday mornings. The food is often less expensive and more delicious than what I might find in the grocery store. Just look at this head of lettuce, harvested in Central New York in the middle of January. At the Regional Market, I get to know and trust the farmers, beekeepers, bakers, and the people who grow the plants that make my garden beautiful.

At the Farmers' Market, I see the great variety of people in our community. Some were born here, some came from other states or distant lands, and some came here as refugees, fleeing persecution or civil wars, as my great-grandfather did 140 years ago. Some people at the Market have little money and some have plenty. There are people of all political parties.

I am struck that there is tremendous diversity in our community and in our nation, and yet we agree on many of the rules for our community and our nation. Most people agree that all adult citizens, 18 years old and older, should be allowed to vote in elections. Most people, in every state in the nation, agree that women should be able to make their own decisions about their healthcare.

Our nation is stronger when we are able to change the rules that govern us. Most people agree that people should be allowed to marry the person they love, regardless of whether the marriage is a same-sex or opposite-sex marriage, and regardless of whether the individuals come from the same ethnic group. It hasn't always been this way.

Our community and our nation are stronger when we have rules that are agreed upon and followed, and when our laws can be changed by the people or their representatives. There are times when a group of people chooses to intentionally, and in an organized way, break or challenge a law in order to get people to pay attention to a law that really needs to be changed. One of the longest-running examples of this was the Women's Suffrage movement, where several generations of women challenged restrictions on their rights to vote. The purpose of civil disobedience is to change the law for the good of the entire community. Except for these well-chosen acts of civil disobedience, our communities are stronger when people are following the rules, and weaker when people disregard the rules. Rules and norms of behavior are the foundation for trust, generosity, and harmony in our communities.

In 1 Corinthians, one of Paul's concerns is to respond to situations where members of the church are breaking the rules and norms. Paul's letters to the Corinthians give us the best opportunity in the New Testament to understand the actual situation and details of the earliest Christian communities. Paul wrote at least five letters to the church in Corinth, though we only have copies of a few of them. These letters were intended to be read aloud to the entire congregation, sort of like sermons. And we know that at least a few members of the church in Corinth wrote letters to Paul, telling him the latest news of what was happening in the congregation. By paying careful attention and studying all of the letters Paul wrote to the Corinthians, we can identify the specific challenges faced by this congregation.

In his typical, well-organized way, in the middle chapters of 1 Corinthians Paul collects several specific problems together and addresses them more or less systematically. In the first part of chapter six, Paul responds to a situation where a member of the congregation has taken another member to court, rather than seeking a resolution within the church. This might not seem like such a terrible idea until you realize that it was a rich and powerful man who was taking a much less wealthy, less powerful member to court. Paul is fairly aggressive in dealing with the rich, powerful man because a church where members are suing one another in court is a sure way to break the relationships of trust and generosity Paul is trying to cultivate in the community. There is no law prohibiting members of the church from suing one another, but there is a norm, an unwritten rule, that we handle our disagreements within the church, except for the worst violations of the law.

In chapter five, Paul addresses a different, equally serious issue, which is that a member of the church is having sexual relations with his stepmother. Apparently, someone had confronted the offender and the man's response was 'All things are lawful for me'. We can guess he said this because Paul quoted the offender in his response, here in chapter six. "All things are lawful for me" To which Paul responds, *but not all things are beneficial.*

As with the member who took another to court, the long-lasting problem is that this member is breaking the norms of the community. We have laws for a reason and we have norms for a reason. Norms of behavior help people build trust, harmony, and generosity. Think of it like a foundation. People who are breaking the norms are breaking the foundations of the church community in Corinth.

I've inserted a little diagram in your leaflet. The letter 'B' represents the broken norms. The letter 'N' in the middle circle represents the norms that are followed in healthy communities. In the passage from chapter six, Paul is trying to move the Corinthians from the outer circle, which is the place of broken norms, into the middle circle, which is the place of building a healthy community by following norms.

In Jesus' encounter with Philip and Nathaniel, Jesus is inviting them to move deeper into the center of the spiritual journey. In my little diagram, I've marked this with the letter 'I', which stands for 'intentional'. Jesus is inviting them to take the next step beyond following the norms, into a life of seeking and following God's intentions for us. Philip and Nathaniel were perfectly respectable guys before they crossed paths with Jesus. I'm pretty sure Philip and Nathaniel were not suing their friends in court or having sexual relationships with their relatives. They were following the rules. Jesus invites them to move deeper in the spiritual journey and follow God's intentions for us. If you know the story of the New Testament you know what it looked like for Philip and Nathaniel to follow God's intentions for us to love one another and to share a message of hope.

But there is a much closer example for us. It's an example given to us by Martin Luther King, Jr., whose birthday we celebrate tomorrow. When Martin graduated from Boston University with his doctorate in 1955 and began his full-time work as a pastor, he faced an America where broken laws and norms created a system of racial oppression.

So Martin and others in the civil rights movement were starting from a place on the outside ring, from the place of brokenness. The law might state that all adults were allowed to vote, but the people in charge prevented black citizens from voting through the systematic terrorization of their communities. Partly as a result of Martin's leadership, America began to move from a place of brokenness into a place of norms and rules that promoted equality. Martin must have been a fan of St. Thomas Aquinas, because he was always reminding us that our efforts to build a nation of laws that promote justice and equality are part of our spiritual quest to conform to the moral laws of the universe.

A stronger community of laws and freedoms wasn't enough for Martin. As a follower of Christ, Martin's goal was not for people to follow the rules; Martin's goal was for us to love one another. Martin spent time explaining the three different words for love in the Greek language, because he wanted people to understand what Jesus was talking about when he gave us a new commandment to love one another.

In his Christmas Sermon from 1967, Martin explained the meanings of the first two Greek words for love: *eros*, or romantic love, and *philia*, the deep, personal connection between two old friends. Martin then explained the third kind of love, *agape*. Martin said *Agape is more than romantic love, it is more than friendship. Agape is understanding, creative, redemptive good will toward all people. Theologians would say that it is the love of God operating in the human heart. When you rise to love on this level, you love all people not because you like them...you love them because God loves them. This is what Jesus meant when he said, "Love your enemies."*¹

In addition to being one of the greatest leaders of America, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. was one of the great leaders of the church. Martin brought the message of God's love, as embodied and articulated by Christ Jesus, to people outside the church. From my perspective, this is why he is the only individual we recognize with a national holiday. Confronted with the brokenness of America, Martin's first concern was to help us move from a place of brokenness and separation, into a place of community and healthy norms, where people could begin to get to know one another, and trust one another. As it was for Jesus, Martin's ultimate goal was for us to build on the bonds of trust that are the fruits of healthy communities, and follow God's intentions for us to love one another as brothers and sisters.

¹ "A Christmas Sermon on Peace", found on p.256 of [A Testament of Hope](#), ed. by James Washington.