

Philip's Above The Law?

A Sermon on 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 by the Rev. Philip Major
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For those of us who love and care for the church, Paul's letters to the Corinthians are a treasure trove. Paul founded the church in Corinth about twenty years after Jesus' death and resurrection. As Paul travelled around the Mediterranean, establishing new churches in the years that followed, he exchanged many letters, probably six or more, with the Corinthians. The one we call 1 Corinthians is probably the second of these.

There are two great things about these letters. The first is that Paul addresses conflicts openly, the kind of conflict that has been and will be present in every church that ever exists. The second is that Paul's response to these conflicts and the other needs of his churches is completely rooted in the good news of Jesus Christ.

This is what we find in our reading from chapter six of 1 Corinthians. If you read the rest of the letter you get a pretty clear picture that there are lots of fights brewing in this congregation. There are fights about which kinds of spiritual gifts are most important, fights about the right kinds of food to eat, fights about sexual morality, even fights about where people will sit when they have a church supper. Paul tackles these issues one at a time, and puts the saving love of Jesus Christ in the center of each of his answers.

But no matter how eloquent and faithful Paul is, there are many parts of these letters that can be quite confusing for us. There are several reasons why the nine verses we read today are confusing. First, this is the concluding paragraph of these early chapters. In this passage Paul refers to all the other arguments he's made in the first six chapters. Second, Paul brings up the idea of bodies in this passage. We think of our bodies as the physical parts of ourselves. But when Paul says the word 'body', he is talking about the whole person. This is really important because Paul will take the arguments that the Corinthians are having about bodies and use it to create the most powerful metaphor ever used to describe the church. This passage is the beginning of Paul's idea of the church as the Body of Christ.

Third, Paul engages with the Corinthians by quoting them five times during these nine verses. This means that many of the words we hear aren't so much Paul's words; instead we hear Paul repeating things the Corinthians have written or said to him.

Some of the Corinthians have argued that they are above the law, saying, "*All things are lawful for me.*" Paul's replies, "regardless of whether they are lawful, *not all things are beneficial.*" Does this sound relevant to you? Can you think of something that is lawful for us, but not beneficial? Paul's letter to the Corinthians is powerful for us because our situation is very much like theirs. Unlike some of Paul's other churches, the Corinthians were not being persecuted. Corinth is a booming seaport with a great library and exciting cultural life. Some of the members of this church are powerful people, and they feel great freedom to do as they please. It's kind of like they think they are above the law. Sound familiar? In thinking that they are above the law, they end up acting *below* the law. They have lost all standards of behavior.

Paul is, to put it bluntly, yanking these people back to reality. At the same time he is trying to get them to see the new kind of community they are called to be as disciples of Jesus Christ. As disciples he expects them to do, not less, but more, than is required by law. So he asks them questions, questions that have answers that should be completely obvious.

He asks, *Do you not know that your bodies (that is your whole selves) are members of Christ?* Let's try this with our congregation in modern language: Do you know that you are members of the Body of Christ? I hope the answer for you is a strong yes.

But Paul wants to make it clear that being members of the Body of Christ is a choice. They will have to decide. So he asks a question intended to embarrass them in order to get them to make the right choice: *Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute?* Paul is getting pushy here and answers the question for the Corinthians with a resounding "Never!" Then he continues, *Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her?* About this time you might be wondering whether consorting with prostitutes is actually the main problem for the Corinthians. It isn't. Prostitution and fornication are Paul's way to get everyone's attention as he gives them a clear choice between right and wrong ways of living. Just like with us, Paul's questions get the Corinthian's attention, and just like with us, Paul's questions unify the Corinthians in their response.

But Paul is not content to just get his congregation back to basics regarding the legal boundaries for civic and social behavior. Paul uses the momentum and unity his congregation has gained in providing

completely obvious answers to the three questions we just heard, in order to help them give a resounding “yes” to his final question: *do you not know that your whole self is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you?* Paul is pushing his congregation to true discipleship.

Disciples of Jesus Christ are called to go beyond the basics of adhering to normal social behavior, civic and even religious laws. As Jesus’ disciples we are called to be a dwelling place for the spirit of God in the world. As Jesus’ disciples we are called to be Christ’s hands and feet, bringing the sustaining, healing power of God’s love to a world in desperate need. What does this look like? What does it look like when Christians act above the law, seeking to create a space in their midst for the Holy Spirit to work in the world? (WAIT!)

Picture this with me. Picture a congregation that made the commitment to tithe their plate and pledge income to outreach. This congregation would take 10% of the money given to the church, and give it away, to help people outside the church. Every year they would send thousands of dollars to:

- * provide shelter for homeless people,
- * support teenagers in crisis,
- * support people struggling to escape the grip of substance abuse, and
- * support people in desperate need all over the world. This would be amazing. This would go well beyond compliance with diocesan requirements and national laws regarding non-profit organizations, it would be going above the law.

Now picture this same congregation taking a grant of \$12,000 and using it, not for a onetime project, but to create an ongoing ministry to women in transition. Every week this group of women would make the church building their home and workplace for the day. Every week three or four women from the congregation would guide them on their road to recover their independence and dignity.

Now picture this same congregation providing space, heat, electricity, storage and custodial services without charge to vital organizations in the community. This congregation would provide a home for groups that offer:

- * a high quality preschool program for dozens of young children five days a week,
- * support for people recovering from alcohol and drug abuse,
- * a program that provides a foundation of skills and activities for boys as they seek to grow into adults, and
- * fine arts activities that help children and adults express and create joy in their lives.

Wow! This would be a place buzzing with activity and life.

Now picture this same congregation, the one that tithed 10% of its contributions to outreach, the one that created the ministry for women recovering from tragedy, and the one that gave space and custodial services without charge to other vital organizations, picture this same congregation deciding they were called by God to help provide one essential need: the need for food. Picture this congregation creating their own food closet, a food closet where no one would be turned away for any reason. This food closet would provide food for over 500 individuals and families every year. This would really be a sight to behold. This would be a congregation that didn’t just read the Bible, but was trying to live out the words of the prophets.

But there’s more. Now picture this same congregation collecting and distributing over \$5000 every year to people in crisis. Picture them creating and managing a benevolent fund to help people who, regardless of all of the other support groups in town, just weren’t going to make it to the next paycheck, or to the next warm room they could call their own, or to their next dose of medicine, without support from people who cared.

This picture is almost unbelievable for me. This would be a congregation that went so far above the law that you’d just have to say they were living the Good News of Jesus Christ. This would be a group of people that was sustained by the love of God growing in their hearts. I would never believe that this picture could be true, except it is what I see every day when I walk into St. Mark’s Church. This is the picture that the Holy Spirit has drawn and that you are bringing to life every day.

St. Mark’s Church has made the choice of living above the law. We have made the choice of making this congregation into a temple for the Holy Spirit. Seeking to be a temple for the Holy Spirit doesn’t eliminate our feelings of conflict. It just brings the light of Christ into our conflict.

This year, as in past years, one of our struggles is about our budget. Our budget is tight. We ask “can we really keep on doing this kind of outreach?” We hear God’s call to go beyond the law yet we know there are limits to what we can do. The fact that this is our struggle is the best indication I have ever seen that a congregation is truly seeking to be Christ’s hands and feet in the world.