

Fishing For Love

By Kelly Erikson

Diana Ross proclaims, "What the world needs now, is love, sweet love." This is undoubtedly true, but the question still remains as to how to find this love. Maybe that approach is the problem. Humans instinctively pursue love for themselves, rather than demonstrate their love to others. This is possibly due to the fact that loving others is often difficult. Martin Luther King Jr. outlines his view on how to love the unlovable in his "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence." Although King was addressing how to love one's enemy, his steps still illustrate an effective approach to love. The relationship between Norman and Paul in *A River Runs Through It*, by Norman Maclean, demonstrates King's ideas on love.

The first step that King suggests is to recognize that humanity is full of imperfections. King notes that some of his studies "helped me to recognize the illusions of a superficial optimism concerning human nature and the dangers of false idealism" (King 99). King believes that having a false hope in perfection is very damaging. It is better to recognize the imperfections and learn how to love in spite of them, rather than ignore their existence. In *A River Runs Through It*, Norman Maclean does just that. He agrees with his father's belief that "man by nature was a mess and had fallen from an original state of grace" (Maclean 2). He knows that his brother, Paul, is an alcoholic and an addictive gambler. He acknowledges that truth, but it is important to note that he did not lose hope. Rather, he uses that knowledge to love and help Paul.

However, recognition that his brother is less than perfect is not in itself love. Anyone can find the imperfections of another. It is what one does with that knowledge that is important. If one wishes to help another by confronting him or her, King says that it "is directed against forces

of evil rather than against persons who happen to be doing the evil” (King 102). One needs to differentiate between the person and his or her actions. Norman acts in accordance with this belief. After picking his brother up from the county jail, he understands that his brother is in a lot of trouble. He also knows that it is because his brother is an alcoholic and gambler, but he separates the acts his brother has committed from who Paul really is. He remembers the strengths of his brother too. He continues to help Paul because he loves him.

Paul needed to be confronted about his addictive behaviors. In order to do this, Norman went fishing with him. This shows more depth to Norman’s love for his brother. He was trying to remind his brother that he still knows the true Paul, the fly fisherman Paul. It also shows that he wants his brother to remember his strengths, so he can regain his true identity. King says that confrontation “does not seek to defeat or humiliate the opponent, but to win his friendship and understanding” (King 102). That is precisely what Norman does through fishing with his brother. During one of their conversations about Norman’s brother-in-law Neal, Norman asks Paul how he should help him. Paul answers by suggesting fishing. Norman says that the brother-in-law doesn’t like fishing. Paul then says, “But maybe what he likes is somebody trying to help him” (Maclean 47). Although Paul was talking literally about Neal, he may have also been speaking metaphorically for himself to show appreciation to Norman for his efforts.

King describes the Greek definition of agape love as “disinterested love. It is a love in which the individual seeks not his own good, but the good of his neighbor.... It begins by loving others for their sakes” (King 104). This is the kind of love that Norman had for Paul. Toward the beginning of the story, he seems at a loss at how to help his brother. When Paul was at the jail, Norman plainly confessed to the sergeant, “I don’t know what to do” (Maclean 24). Even closer to the end, when his father asks, “Do you think you help him?” he answers with, “I try to...My

trouble is that I don't know him" (Maclean 81). By the end, he has a more definitive outlook on how to love. He decides "you can love completely without complete understanding" (Maclean 103). It seems that he realized that all of his efforts throughout the story to understand his brother show that he loved him. That was the most he could do. Anything more would have been too much and pushed Paul away. Ironically, his journey to understand his brother so he could love him more deeply led him only to discover that he didn't need to understand at all.

King's "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence" is included in a book entitled *Stride Toward Freedom*. It was written to instruct others on how to attain freedom through a nonviolent or less forceful manner. It encourages one to stop trying to change others, but rather give them the opportunity to do so themselves. Norman from *A River Runs Through It* has a similar approach to how he loves his troubled brother Paul. Norman never forces Paul to do anything. Instead, he interacts with his brother in a tender, gentle way to open him up. His focus is not on changing his brother, but loving him as he is and helping him attain freedom from his addictions. Whether it's freedom from discrimination or addictions, love is what will make that freedom possible. Although this manner of loving goes against human instinct, Norman shows that loving in such a way can be done. This kind of love, agape, is what the world needs now.

Works Cited

King Jr., Martin Luther. *Stride Toward Freedom: "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence."* San

Francisco: Harper, 1986.

Maclean, Norman. *A River Runs Through It*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976.