

THE DONKEY AND THE FIRE

The Old Testament passage talks about being nice to our neighbours, and the Gospel lesson is Jesus' familiar summation of the commandments, which is, "Love God", and love your neighbour as yourself.

We affirm this; we know this stuff. Love is good,..... and all is normal.

Moreover, it is gratifying and soothing to have our beliefs confirmed. Most of us are here because we like the flavour. People tend to stop coming if they repeatedly are upset or uncomfortable in the worship service.

To be sure, this is sanctuary, and we want to feel safe and be comfortedbecause it is a harsh world out there.

And, so we desire to hear what is familiar,.... what we already know, and what confirms our own opinions.

For example, each Sunday, revivalistic churches will preach that the lost must be born again, even if a heathen hasn't been in church in 30 years.

Why,..... because the message is familiar and reassuring for the born-again in attendance.

And,..... nothing is gained..... or lost.

Most of the time, a worship experience is like that: we leave as we entered, and we had a nice, satisfying time.

Yet, the Gospel message / the passion of God strives to move us. It is like a spark trying to set our hearts on fire.

But, movement / change / being fully alive doesn't come easily, even Jesus couldn't budge the Pharisees.

In the Matthew text, the Pharisees tried to stump Jesus, but Jesus' response was completely accurate. They knew it, and they thoroughly knew the answer, too. Yet, I don't believe they "got" it.

Interestingly, the label Pharisee is what everyone else called them. Pharisee means "separatist"... or "one who is separate". They were labelled that because in order to keep pure / in order make their religion feel good, then needed to avoid contact with outsiders / those who were Not pure.

They were legalistic, and their understanding of obedience to God was to follow the laws..... as they defined them,... all 613 of them.

Yet, simple obedience / being dutiful is a far cry from love.

Still, how could God fault them,.... if they were without blemish, yet... lacking the love? They tried to do what was right for the sake of duty.

And, to deal with the loving thy neighbour part, well that was simple for them.

They didn't call themselves Pharisees; they called themselves "Haberim", which means neighbour.

So, when the scriptures and Jesus state to love your neighbour,... well..their neighbours were a select group–themselves!

The Pharisees read and heard this message of love countless times, and it seems, from the Gospel account, they never did get it / really get it.

Who is our neighbour?

Jesus taught everyone could be our neighbour, we are to love all we come in contact with. The story of the Good Samaritan makes that clear.

In addition, we can't grasp this message without understanding love.

When Jesus said we are to love God with our heart, soul and mind, well.. ... that means our all.

In those days, heart meant the place of thinking and feeling.

Soul ...was the life / the being aspect – our nature.

Mind, is similar to “might”, the word used in the OT, and that suggests our choices and thus our actions.

The point being, we become love; we do love, and love is not obedience or admiration, nor is it infatuation.

Love is a verb.

Love pours out / reaches out for the other, be it God or our neighbour. Love is movement, and love moves us... as we love.

Physics was not my best subject, but I do recall that movement usually means friction. Friction is another way of saying resistance.

Therefore, movement, which includes change, growth... and love involves friction..... and in the feeling domain..... that generally is defined as pain.

Do you follow my chain of thoughts?

I'm trying to show that love includes pain,..... and maybe that could be the reason..... we struggle with love / truly loving?????

Plus, I think there is a correlation between love and really living.

Life is also dynamic.... there's change and growth in living. Being frozen, stuck or stagnant is not living. That's closer to dying.

God wants us to live. That's in the Gospel message too, and at the core of it / the essence is love.

Love is the fire that generates living in abundance.

Therefore,..... there is pain in loving, just as there is pain in living

Yet, pain is pain,..... and we tend to try to avoid pain,..... even if it means choosing not to live.....

Interesting.

My brother once had an old donkey, and he was a typical donkey. He was extremely stubborn. If he didn't want to move, then it was nearly impossible to get him to move.

I suppose he was comfortable where he was, and didn't want to risk changing positions???

One time he escaped, and somehow crossed a fairly busy road.

He was not in a safe place, and it was getting dark, and animals usually get hit by cars when it is dark.

My brother and I pulled and pushed the donkey in vain.

We tried to bait him / persuade him with some treats to eat. That got his attention, but it wasn't enough.

Even a few firm smacks on his rear didn't work.

Finally, the combination worked.

The added pain and incentive got him moving.

It was also a pain for us to try to get that thing to move.

I didn't really love that donkey, but I loved my brother,... so the pain was okay.

I sometimes wonder if that is how God feels.

It must be painful, at times, loving us humans,... because it seems to take so much repetition, work and effort.... to get us moving.

There are many things that can cause us to get stuck in a rut, to be unmoveable.

It could be simply a bad habit or addiction that has frozen us / kept us from really living. Or, it could be the entrapment of a routine... just doing the familiar to avoid the pain of change. Sometimes that trap comes from cultural rules.

More often than not, fear and the absence of love are the reasons we are immobile / unmoved.

No matter the reason, God still reaches out to us,..... trying to spark us to live / to love. The lessons in the Bible are evidence of that.

Sometimes that spark finally takes – the light goes on.

Sometimes, it takes the combination of God / of love reaching to us / calling us out.... with... the ugly consequences of not truly living in love / of being stuck like a donkey. Stubborn solitude is very painful.

We humans are suppose to be very intelligent, yet it is amazing how long it can take for us to see / to be enlightened.

I've read passages many times, then one day, it hits me: OH, that is what it means for me.

Not long ago, Jessica, my daughter, sternly asked, "Why didn't you ever tell me that?"

I smiled, and replied, I've said that many times in the past, but... of course she disagreed..... because she never really heard it.

For whatever the reason, she blocked my advice.

For example, we are all familiar with the Golden Rule, correct?
– do unto others as you would have them do to you.

It sounds simple, and it makes sense.

Well,..... it's not so simple because if you regard "others" as your neighbour, then love must be part of the formula.

There was an occasion when I was treating my neighbour as I would want to be treated, and I was dumbfounded that it wasn't working.

Like a Pharisee, I was doing exactly what the rule said. The problem was that my neighbour was NOT me.

I needed to translate my message and actions so that they would be received as I would have wanted to receive the message.

I failed to take into account the other person's fears, different perceptions and values.

And,..... figuring all that out, and making the effort to properly package / translate my "doing unto other".... would demand a lot of work. It would have been painful.....

It would have taken..... love.

I fell short,..... and consequently the result was more painful for everyone involved.

The Golden Rule isn't so simple.

I'm reminded when I used play catch with my dad.

I would tell him to throw the ball hard or throw it real high, and I'll catch it.

As an eight year old, I thought he was doing just that..... but he wasn't..... There was love involved, instead. He was adjusting / altering what "hard" and "high" meant in order to meet my needs.

Loving our neighbours can be hard work –effort that requires love.

The Leviticus passage gives us an example / a demonstration of what loving our neighbour involves.

The text begins with the call to be holy as God is, in other words, we are to emulate God's nature.....
LOVE.

As Jesus noted, all the laws hinge / hang on LOVE.

Verses 15-18 are not nice fluffy axioms, but are guidelines for a civil suit. They are directions on how to settle a dispute, a grievance in the context of a court.

The legal avenue, if done correctly, is a peaceful way to solve problems.

Here are the stated conditions:

Favouritism is NOT allowed. Both parties must be at equal levels / have equal power.
In that culture, and in ours, the judges (the legal system) was controlled by the wealthy and the powerful.

It is unfair and unloving to be in an advantageous position, and that includes giving bribes to tilt the scale.

So, loving a neighbour requires that both self and the neighbour contend / interact as equals.

Also,

There will be no false accusations— in other words, stick to the facts, and never do character assassination. Devaluing the other is unfair and unloving. Moreover, getting a witness to support the devaluing was not allowed either.

Next,

Anger, hate, seeking vengeance is not allowed... because it distorts the evidence, alters the motivation.....and... well..... isn't very loving.

Vengeance / seeking punishment... is not doing justice.

And, of course, verse 18 has the cogent mandate to love the neighbour as self. In love, there will be fairness and justice..... and much less pain in the long run, for all.

Yet, the process of doing love can be painful, too,..... because it may require radical change—radical change that turns our world upside down.

For example, our prisons are full of poor, powerless and marginalized people, and there is a reason for that. Our society/ system is not fair and loving. How can we change that?

People across the US and Canada are “occupying” cities.... to get the message across that the system is NOT fair, and the unfairness is hurting people.

The poor are not treated as equals with equal opportunities.

And, those in power refuse to level the playing field..... because they would lose power.

So,..... we'd rather spend billions on prisons and the police, and we'd rather spend billions and billions on military weapons, ... because we want to be even more powerful.....And, all this means we don't care about our neighbour.... unless our neighbour is just like us.

I wonder why that is?

There has got to be another way..... a better way.

But,.....loving God completely, and loving our neighbour is not easy, in fact it's painful.....

One aspect I haven't mentioned..... is loving self.

Loving self is NOT self centeredness, nor is fearfully building walls or feeding our lusts.

I believe self love is the keen awareness that we are worthy of love and that God loves you and me.
We are loved if we take in that love.

Receiving that spark of insight ignites a passion to love / to risk / to come alive and to cultivate what is
life giving.

Did Jesus' answer to the Pharisees change anything..... or everything?
But, then again, it wasn't like they never heard it before.....

I suppose they weren't ready to have their heart set on fire, and... so it goes.