

THE DONKEY AND THE FIRE  
[written in oral form]

Matthew 22:34-40  
Proper 25, Year A

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Once again, the skeptics and doubters attempted to trap Jesus.  
They were seeking a "zinger" to post on social media.

This time it's a "tag-team" attack. The Sadducees had just failed, so the Pharisees took a crack at Jesus, using a lawyer to speak for them.

There was a minor controversy about the priority of the laws. Some suggested they were all equal, but most agreed about the primacy of Loving God.

Still, Jesus took it to another level-- to a clarification they failed to grasp.

I do not think the Pharisees fully understood Jesus' answer.

I do not think they comprehended that the laws depended on love and to the extent and depth of love.

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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 work, then needed to avoid contact with outsiders / those who were Not pure / Not like them. They kept separate. 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 / to be obedient to God.

Dealing with the *loving thy neighbour part*, well that was simple for them.

They did not call themselves Pharisees; they called themselves [Hab er im] "Haberim", which means *neighbour*.

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

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The Pharisees read and heard this message of love numerous times, and it seems, from the Gospel account, they never did embrace Jesus' definition of neighbour.

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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.

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Number one: we are to love God.

Jesus referenced the Scriptures when he 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 means our will / our choices and thus our actions.

Therefore, we choose to receive Love, to do love and be love.

This is critical to understand: we choose to receive and be love.

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Love is a verb.  
Love is NOT infatuation, lust, desire or a sexual drive.

Love reaches out / it blossoms / Love flows outward,... to God, to our neighbours, family and friends.  
Love is movement, and love **moves us**.....as we love.

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

Therefore, choosing to be open to love / to receive love.....could make us feel uncomfortable / uneasy,... because we change, and we know love is a risk. It means change,.... and there could be pain, too.

Yet, this should come as no surprise. Life is full of hardships and pain, no matter our choice.

Obesity is hard.            Being fit is hard.  
Communication is hard.       Not communicating is hard  
Marriage is hard.        Divorce is hard.

Life will never be easy. It will always be hard,... but we can choose our hard.

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Love seems like the better choice, yet we often put up barriers to love.    Sometimes, we do not make an effort to love our neighbour.

Maybe love frightens us???    ~~~~~

I wonder if we have redefined divine love to mean a set of beliefs and life style patterns.....we call being a Christian. ?????

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Real love is divine; it is powerful, and it will move us.

Perhaps, we just do not want to change.

It could feel safer to self protect and not change, even though we know better.    So, maybe our default decision is to be static.

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

I suppose he was comfortable where he was, and did not want to risk changing positions???

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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 lure him to move with oats. That got his attention, but it was not enough.  
We tried a few firm smacks on his rear, safely away from his hind legs. That did not work either.  
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.

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I did not love that donkey, but I loved my brother, and the donkey was important to him.

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I wonder if God thinks we are stubborn, too.

Loving us humans must be painful and frustrating for God, because it seems to take so much repetition, work and effort.... to get us moving.

God wants us to love, but....for intentional or unintentional reasons, we too often resist.

And, I do think we have embraced a restricted / limited understanding for love. Therefore, our claim of possessing love, that limited love, can block being open to divine love, falsely thinking "I already love."

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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 effort.

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When I first examined this text, I regarded it a bit like a formula.  
I think the Pharisees did that, too.

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Number one, You shall love God.....completely,.....okay... check.  
Number two, You shall love your neighbour as yourself. ... will do.... check.  
"All good..... makes sense..... wonderful theology for making God happy."

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Love is not an ingredient in a recipe.

Love / God's love involves everything....including ourselves.... and it is transcendent,..... powerful..... more than just an emotion, and.....

.....actually, I cannot explain it.

~~~~~ [long pause]

Love is divine.

God reaches out to us with love,.....and sometimes that spark finally takes – the light goes on.

Maybe it is the combination of God instilling a better vision.... combined with... the pain of not truly living in love that moves us. Stubborn solitude is very painful.

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A campfire comes to mind.

One prepares the fire with easily flammable material.

Air movement is needed to pull in Oxygen.

Then, the spark / the heat is added, and a fire begins.

And so does the warmth and allure.

It takes preparation and focussed tendering, and those are choices.

A campfire needs to be carefully nurtured.

To be sure,.....nothing happens without the spark.

Similarly, we chose to invite love.... or .... not.

And,... love needs to be nurtured, too.

A campfire is controlled, but I am not sure we can control love.

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The point I am trying to make is we need to be open to love.

We need to do the ground work.

We need to be receptive, even vulnerable.

Moreover, we cannot conjure love up. We cannot fabricate love.

As the saying goes, "We fall in love."

?Remember falling in love? ??? There is a helpless quality to it.  
Remember? Remember how so much changes?

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In many different ways we can invite in transcendence / awe / love.  
Going out to view a sunset,.....making that choice to go is essential, in order to be overwhelmed with the majestic beauty.

I think that sense of awe is the tingle of divine love.

Other examples could be, a movie that sparks you and touches you deeply.....  
Or, a book.....or a worship service.....or a person close to you... or a stranger.

It could even be a passage in the Bible that you have read many times before,.....but something happened... and it came alive.

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To be sure, a beautiful sunset or the autumn leaves cannot be experienced while sheltered in a basement.

Choice / a desire to receive is required.  
And, keep in mind..... we cannot conjure up love.  
We can only receive it.....

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Thomas Merton was an American, Trappist monk, and a writer, theologian, a mystic and a scholar of comparative religion. Later in his life he became a social activist.

He constantly sought to be closer to God. He was open to and searching for Divine Love.

On March 18, 1958, Thomas Merton was running errands in downtown Louisville, Kentucky when he had an experience that would change his life and influence countless others.  
The spot is marked with an historical marker.  
>>Kevin please show the sign.

I know of no other sign that marks a mystical experience.

~~~~~[ look at it]

Merton described it this way in his book, "Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander:

"In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the centre of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people,... that they were mine and I theirs ,, that we could not be alien to one another...even though we were total strangers.

It was like waking from a dream of separateness / of spurious self-isolation in a special world,....the world of renunciation and supposed holiness.  
This sense of liberation from an erroneous difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud.

I have the immense joy of being human, a member of a race in which God became incarnate.

As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, Now I realize what we all are.  
And if only everybody could realize this!

But, it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun."

>>Kevin, please remove the image now.....thanks.

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This touch from God / this Divine love changed Merton.

Of course, the giddy euphoria did not last, but the indwelling love did, and so did the change.

The experience challenged his concept of a separate 'Holy' existence lived in a monastery. From that point on he focussed more on social activism.

He was filled with divine love for all of humanity and for being fully human. He discovered we are not separated from each other or from God.

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That experience in Louisville happened in the middle of an ordinary day.

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We do NOT know when love will come to us.

We do NOT know when God will set our hearts on fire.

We should know.....that it is good to be ready for the spark.

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Love causes us to wake up.....to be alive.

Love causes us to wake up.....to be alive.....

Love causes us to love.....and that is Divine.

Let us be prepared.

Let us receive God's love.