

IS LOVE BLIND?

Second Sunday of Advent
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Philippians 1:3-11

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Chug chug chug. Puff puff puff. The little train ran along the tracks. She was a happy little train. Her cars were full of good things for boys and girls. There were all kinds of toy animals. Giraffes with long necks, teddy bears with no necks, and even a baby elephant. There were all kinds of dolls. There were toy trucks, airplanes, and boats. The little train carried every kind of toy that boys or girls could want.

But that was not all. The little train carried good things to eat, too. Big, round oranges...fat, red apples...long, yellow bananas...fresh, cold milk...and lollipops to eat after dinner. The little train was taking all these good things to the other side of the mountain. "How happy the boys and girls will be to see me!" said the little train. But all at once the train came to a stop. "Oh, dear," said the little train. "What can be the matter?" She tried to start up again. She tried and tried. But her wheels just would not turn.

"We can help," said the toy animals. The clown and the animals climbed out of their cars. They tried to push the little train. But she did not move. "We can help, too," said the dolls. And they got out and tried to push.

Still the little train did not move. Just then a shiny new engine came puffing down another track. "Maybe that engine can help us!" cried the clown. He began to wave a red flag. The Shiny New Engine slowed down. The dolls and toys called out to him. "Our engine is not working, please pull our train over the mountain. If you don't, the boys and girls will not have any toys or good food.

"You want me to pull you?" said the Shiny New Engine. "That is not what I do. I carry people. They sit in cars with soft seats. They look out the windows. They eat in a nice dining car. "I pull the likes of you? I should say not!"

Off went the Shiny New Engine without another word. Then the toy clown called out, "Here comes another engine. A big, strong one. Maybe this engine will help us."

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Again, the clown waved his flag. The Big Strong Engine came to a stop. The toys and dolls called out together, "Please help us, our train is not working. But you can pull us over the mountain." The Big Strong Engine did not want to help. "I do not pull toys," he said. "I pull cars full of heavy logs. I pull big wagons. I have no time for the likes of you." And away puffed the Big Strong Engine without another word.

By this time the little train was no longer happy. But the clown called out, "Look! Look! Another engine is coming. A little blue engine. Maybe this engine will help us."

The Little Blue Engine saw the clown waving his red flag and stopped at once. "What is the matter?" she asked in a kind way. "Oh, Little Blue Engine," cried the dolls and toys. "Will you pull us over the mountain? Our engine is not working. If you don't help, the boys and girls will have no toys or good food. Just over the mountain. Please, please help us.

"Oh, my," said the Little Blue Engine. "I am not very big. And I do not pull trains. I just work in the yards. I have never even been over the mountain."

"But we must get there before the children wake up," said the toys and dolls. "Please?" The Little Blue Engine looked at the dolls and toys. She thought about the children on the other side of the mountain. Without toys or good food, they would not be happy.

The Little Blue Engine pulled up close. She took hold of the little train. The toys and dolls climbed back into their cars. At last the Little Blue Engine said, "I think I can climb up the mountain."

"I think I can. I think I can." Then the Little Blue Engine began to pull. She tugged and she pulled. She pulled and she tugged. Puff puff, chug chug went the little engine. "I think I can. I think I can."

Slowly, slowly, the train started to move. Up the mountain went the Little Blue Engine. And all the time she kept saying, "I think I can, I think I can, I think I can....."

Up, up, up. The little engine climbed and climbed. At last she reached the top of the mountain. Down below lay the city. "Hurray! Hurray!" cried the dolls and animals. "The boys and girls will be so happy." "All because you helped us, Little Blue Engine."



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The Little Blue Engine just smiled. But as she puffed down the mountain, the Little Blue Engine seemed to say.....“I knew I could, I knew I could, I knew I could!”

This lovely story warms the heart as a little engine assigned to menial shunting duties rises to the occasion and takes a train over the mountain to deliver much prized goods to children. But, like many children’s stories, there is a deeper meaning that is not, at first glance spelt out in this story.

I guess it doesn’t take long to see that this story serves to instil in us the values of optimism and hard work. Arnold Munk, a Hungarian immigrant who settled in Chicago, wrote this version of the story in 1930 as he no doubt embraced the work ethic that many migrants bring to a new country.

But look at the story more deeply. Notice that the little blue train is female. Meanwhile the Shiny New Engine and the Big Strong Engine are self-important blokes.

Now, I believe there is little bit of feminist advocacy going on here as the Little Blue Engine, normally assigned to domestic-like shunting duties, rises to the occasion and shows the big boys around her that she is able to do what is required.

And the point made here is the Little Blue Engine doesn’t have to change anything within herself. She's always been able to do what the male trains do. But she's been told she couldn't. So, you see, this is actually a progressive story about gender equality and the importance of everyone being able and confident enough to exercise their skills and talents.

Friends, the point I am making here is that, in some of the most simple stories, there are deeply profound things to learn.

Take the story of Paddington Bear. Published in 1958, the narrative refers to a furry, cuddly, creature with a Peruvian name who is adopted by a nice English couple on London’s Paddington station. While some may see this as a delightful story about a couple who adopt an abandoned animal lost in a major city, a deep and more concise reading of the text reveals that the story of Paddington Bear is really about the immigrant experience in England.

For you see many immigrants entered Britain through Paddington Station right at the time this story was published. Many of these immigrants felt confused, isolated and abandoned. Some felt rejected by the dominant Anglo population.

The story of Paddington Bear begins with him sitting on a suitcase with a note attached to his coat reading “please look after this bear”. Here there is, I believe, a direct reference to the refugee experience as vulnerable people seek protection, shelter and acceptance in an alien land. Paddington Bear is, in many ways, the archetype displaced person waiting for someone to accept and love them.

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One of the things I was taught early in my life was to “read between the lines”. In other words, in the course of living my life I was encouraged to constantly look beneath the surface to the truth of what is really going on.

For example, the nursery rhyme, “Baa Baa Black Sheep”, is not really about sheep. It’s about a medieval wool tax, imposed in the 13th Century by King Edward I. Under these rules, a third of the cost of a sack of wool went to him, another went to the church and a meagre last went to the farmer who produced it.

And the nursery rhyme, “Three Blind Mice”, is not about mice at all. Rather, it concerns Queen Mary I, or “Bloody Mary”. The “three blind mice” were noblemen convicted of plotting against Queen Mary and as a result, she had them burned alive at the stake.

I believe St Paul had these kinds of matters in mind when he wrote to the church in Philippi. In chapter one, verse nine Paul writes: “And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight”.

What Paul is saying here is that, as Christians our love shouldn’t be a blind love. Rather, love needs to be expressed in way that strives to understand the true nature of the situation.

In other words, living a Christian life should not be driven by a heart-felt sentimentality. Neither should it be propelled by a rigid, uncompromising intellectualism. Allowing feelings to dominate the way we love is fraught with all sorts of problems. Allowing pre-set thoughts and non-negotiable conclusion shape the way we live is downright dangerous. Let me explain.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul speaks about a particular kind of “knowledge”. The apostle speaks about the kind of knowledge that is informed by engagement and experience. This stands in stark contrast to the general form of knowledge which involves the accumulation of facts and the processing of information. To have “knowledge” in Paul’s terms is to enter fully into the life and experience of others.

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It is to go beyond oneself. And in doing so, it is to be open to the practice of listening and understanding people from their point of view.

Paul also speaks about “full insight”. This is sometimes translated as “discernment” and it means that we are to develop the ability to see that which is not initially evident. We are to look beneath the surface and carefully reflect on what is really going on.

Here we are to tweak our thinking, we are to fine-tune our actions to the truth of what is really happening. And by doing so we enable ourselves to make proper moral decisions. We learn to act consistently, not according to what we want, but according to what God calls us to be.

In bringing this to the fore, Paul says - don't act according to your first assumptions. Don't allow your initial impulses drive and direct the way you live your Christian life. There is often more, much more to the story than what first appears. There are deeper meanings, there are more profound truths. The Little Blue Engine is not just a story about a train load of toys crossing a mountain!

Friends, in your life as a follower of Jesus, how do you live out the love God has so feely gifted you? How do you love others?

For you see, love is never meant to be blind. Love is never meant to be gifted to be sentimental, impulsive or sterile. Rather, Paul exhorts us to love with “knowledge” and with “full insight”.

So, how will you continue to love? Are you prepared to dig deeper? Are you ready to engage with the other? Are you willing to listen more carefully? Are you ready to seek out and understand what it all really means?

Paul issued such a challenge to his people in ancient Philippi. It's a challenge that is constantly thrown out now. Indeed, it is with us today.

How do you respond?

Amen.

