

March 1, 2015 **This Love Changes Everything!©**
2 Thessalonians 2:13-17; John 3:1-21 **Rev. Sharlyn Gates**

Today, on this second Sunday in Lent, as we come here again to hear the Word, to sing our praises and prayers, to be nurtured at the table that our Lord Jesus prepared for us – the sermon focuses on what the title of the theme for this Lenten Season is – “This Love Changes Everything!”

And so we ask, what love are we talking about? What has changed? And how has it changed?

Have you continued thinking about your own faith journey? Maybe you are sharing it with someone close to you. Or, maybe you’ve been writing down parts, or all of it, in a personal journal.

We will look at Nicodemus and how he was changed, but ultimately, the most important thing today is that you realize, in some way, how love has changed you. That’s why I believe it is important for us to be clear about our own faith story.

When we look at our lives – looking back at all the places where we had troubles and joys and realizing how the power of God was right there with us, helping us through, the picture becomes very clear, hopefully. We can see how God led us, walked with us, perhaps carried us and how, just like Paul writes in Romans 8 – “God has worked all things together for good for those who love him.”

I can’t think of one thing that ever happened to me that I didn’t end up feeling like some good came from it – even if the actual thing at the time was not so good.

For instance, my first year in college, right out of high school was just terrible. I was three hours away from home with no car and not much money. I had really never been away from home very much and it was a shock to me. I was already depressed because of a break up with someone I was sure I loved.

Another shock was that I was unprepared for studying and for having the self discipline to keep up with everything. My grades were not good. I didn’t flunk out, but I did not have good enough grades to get my student loan back the next year, even though by the end of the second semester I was beginning to do much better.

I felt like a huge failure. For a number of years I was angry with myself and very disappointed that I had not succeeded. At the time I wasn’t sure God really was helping me through. But as I look back, I know He was!

Each time I felt like I was falling deeper into that dark pit, God put someone in my life who showed me care, and helped me to see the positive side of things. God was with me every step of the way!

That experience was not good. I would still prefer that I hadn't gone through that time, yet I can see how God did take something that seemed so shameful to me, so disappointing, and used it for good.

The way my journey has gone and the timing of going back to school and seminary and then getting my doctorate of ministry was all just the way it was meant to be. I am convinced of that!

I imagine many of you have stories that are similar. Not necessarily about school but something you were discouraged about. It could be a financial issue or job loss; it might be a divorce or a rough time in a relationship. I expect you can see how God used whatever it was and worked in it and turned it into some good.

God's love truly does change everything, right?

Our story in John tells us about a man who was a religious leader. Someone who knew the Law of Moses so well. A Pharisee. His name was Nicodemus.

What an interesting story! Nicodemus – who knows so much about religion – has either heard of, or seen Jesus' miraculous acts. He is impressed with Jesus and he is convinced Jesus must have been sent by God because there is no way he would be able to do the things he has done. You know – things like casting demons out of people, healing blind people and others who are sick or unable to walk.

But, Nicodemus is a little uneasy about showing that interest in Jesus to the world. He is reserving this growing faith for a future time, perhaps. So he makes an appointment to meet up with Jesus after dark when he isn't so apt to be seen.

And he has this very odd conversation with Jesus. At least to him it's odd and really, if we think about it it's a little odd for us too, unless we have it explained – which really isn't that easy to do.

Jesus tells Nicodemus "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

Nicodemus is stumped. "How can anyone go back into their mothers womb and be born a second time?" he asks.

Jesus answer wasn't much clearer. "You have to be born of water and of Spirit." He says.

After more conversation that's just as confusing, Nicodemus is totally baffled. "How can any of this be possible?" he asked. Jesus seems to become irritated with Nicodemus. He kind of makes fun of him a little. "What? You're a teacher of Israel but you don't understand these things?"

Jesus is talking about himself – about belief in the Son of God. We know that our faith leads us to the waters of baptism and that the Holy Spirit comes upon us. In that way, we are born of water and Spirit – a rebirth from the old life into the new life with Christ. But Nicodemus did not yet know all this.

We hear Jesus telling Nicodemus that the Son of God will be lifted up (meaning he will be high on the cross) and that whoever believes in Him will have eternal life. Their sins forgiven.

I think it is interesting how Jesus talks about how many people prefer to live in the dark. They prefer dark over light because they don't want their behavior to be seen. Even though the Light of the World is right in front of them, many still prefer the darkness.

At this, Nicodemus seems to disappear back into the darkness. We are left wondering if he ever got it; if he comprehended anything Jesus was saying. I would guess he was certainly affected by his conversation with Jesus, that it, at least, kept eating at him as he hid from other religious leaders the fact that he was having some faith in this Jesus.

But wait! If we fast forward – for just a minute – to John 19 - to the cross where Jesus hung, we discover that Nicodemus did get it. And he was brave enough by that time to be one of the two who asked to take Jesus' body down from the cross; to have permission to bury him in the tomb owned by Joseph of Arimathea.

This compassion that Nicodemus and Joseph publicly showed out of love for Jesus would surely have been noticed on that day. No more was Nicodemus hiding his faith. They had to have known that every political and religious leader in Jerusalem would know what they had done. Yet, they did it anyway.

At a most dangerous point in his life, Nicodemus, a Pharisee, stood up for Jesus, lovingly taking down the limp body of our Lord and buried him.

Nicodemus was a changed man, after all!

This love – this love of God poured out on us – as Paul writes in his letter to the church in Thessalonica – is a love that changes perspectives; it changes the way we act, the way we see things, the way we care. It changes our lives. This love changes everything!

The writer for the commentary of this Lenten resource we're using writes this: "Because of what happened on Christ's cross, God in grace has poured out his love upon us. It's a love that changes fear to faith, doubt to certainty, guilt to acquittal in heaven's court.

Because of that changeless love, everything has changed for us. We have received encouragement, consolation, and comfort that will not quit. Troubles may swirl around us. Friends may desert us. Storms may descend upon us. Crises may threaten to cripple us. A guilty conscience may accuse us.

But our Lord Jesus Christ himself loves us with a self-sacrificing, ever forgiving, unshakable, unchanging, unmovable, constant love! In that love he bled and died for us. God our Father has promised never to abandon us. (Hebrews 13:5). That love changes everything!

Now, because of this great love that has changed us in so many ways, may we be able to speak those words of hope and grace to others, to share our journey, our experience, so they will understand that it is the greatest thing of all.

"Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us, and through grace, gave us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word." (2 Thessalonians 2:16-17)

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