

Lent 2a: 3/12/17
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A Story of Love

a poem by Roddy Hamilton

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...

John 3:16

*gather around
I have a story to tell
of one who reached inside himself
and took a handful of love
like a pile of stardust
and said: this is for you
it is all you need
it is all you will ever need
there is enough here
to change the whole world
take it*

*many laughed at him
mocked him
and ignored the invitation*

*but some dared to take it
and those who did
noticed something about this love
they found they could do what the gift-giver could do
they could stand with the lost
welcome the traveler
eat with the hungry
they found themselves doing what the man first did to them
give something of themselves to others
they became like the man
offering themselves
and as they offered themselves
others took the invitation
and many still do*

*and many still trust
it is enough to change the whole world*

That gospel we read about Nicodemus coming to Jesus by night is “A Story of Love,” as the poem says.

Think how much Nicodemus, a prominent leader of the Jews, risked by seeking out the young rabble-rousing rabbi Jesus who, in the previous chapter, had just turned over the tables cleansing the temple.

Nicodemus must’ve risked everything he loved – his stature as a religious leader, the reputation and protection of his family, his most deeply held beliefs – in order to visit Jesus. And yet he did it -- even in the cover the darkness. To his credit, Nicodemus did it, engaging in a spirited dialogue with Jesus about things which even he, a learned elder, found hard to understand.

And yet you get the feeling Nicodemus might’ve loved every minute of it. His life was devoted to theological discourse. It wasn’t often Nicodemus was stumped in such conversations. Where did this upstart Jesus get all his wisdom? He knew his scripture, Nicodemus could tell by the way Jesus quoted that obscure reference from the Book of Numbers about Moses lifting up a serpent in the wilderness. Even when it was confusing (what *did* it mean to be “born again”?), it piqued Nicodemus’ interest. And the way Jesus talked about God’s love . . . now *that* felt like a new way of looking at things.

God so loved the world -- the whole world, Jesus said – not just respectable law-abiding leaders like Nicodemus, but everyone else too. The unclean. All those sick people who flocked to Jesus. Poor people who couldn’t afford the necessary temple tax.

Women of questionable reputation.
Widows and children, orphans.
Samaritans, Gentiles, aliens, all manner of outcasts.
Even the created world itself.
That's who and what God loves.

And Nicodemus got the feeling that this included him too.
Jesus didn't discriminate against the poor OR the rich.
Nicodemus might not have understood or agreed with
everything Jesus said that night,
but there was one thing he was sure of before morning broke:
He was loved, without condition.
Jesus who proclaimed God's love for the whole world
loved him, Nicodemus, with his whole heart.

The poem we read says that this love
is "enough to change the whole world".
It's a nice thought, but how can that be?
How can love change a world that is a complicated, violent and,
too often, hateful place?

Well, it changed Nicodemus.
He turns up again in this gospel,
most notably at the cross.
After God indeed gave his only Son, unto death.

Many of the other prominent leaders had sold out Jesus,
standing by as an innocent man was sentenced to death.
Most of Jesus' own disciples had scattered in fear,
leaving only a few devoted female followers.

But after Jesus died the death of a dangerous criminal,
more outcast than any of the outcasts he had ever embraced;
after his battered body was taken down from the cross by Roman soldiers;
even after few others would dare do so,
Nicodemus, again, visits Jesus.

Nicodemus, who had first "come to Jesus by night"

full of questions and curiosity,
came this time bearing spices for burial.
It was Nicodemus
(along with the otherwise unknown Joseph of Arimathea)
who took the body of Jesus,
wrapped it in those spices and linen cloths
for a proper Jewish burial in a borrowed tomb.

And it was from that tomb, three days later,
that love changed the course of the history of the whole world.

But first God's love changed Nicodemus.

That love is for you too.
It is all you need.
It is all you will ever need.
It is enough to change the whole world.
You'll find that you can stand with the lost,
welcome the traveler,
eat with the hungry.

Take that love
so you can give it away.
Like Nicodemus, dare to take it.

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