

WEEK FOUR March 14 Fourth Sunday of Lent: Other People

I don't know about you, but nowadays I latch onto any good news I can find - any story that reaffirms my belief in the basic goodness of humanity.

Well, do I have a story for you!

SCREEN: photo of Chelsea Timmons, Doug and Nina

Meet Chelsea Timmons - that's her taking the selfie - with Doug Condon and Nina Richardson behind her.

Chelsea is a grocery delivery driver in Texas who was making her last stop on Valentine's Day in the middle of a snowstorm at the home of Doug and Nina.

Her car got stuck at the bottom of their driveway.

Chelsea called for a tow truck and decided to wait in her car in the cold.

Doug and Nina weren't having it.

They asked Chelsea in to wait for the tow truck that never arrived.

So, they invited her to join them for their Valentine's dinner.

It soon became clear this was no ordinary storm.

It crippled Texas, knocking out power for millions, including the city of Houston where Chelsea lived.

So Chelsea remained as a houseguest of Doug and Nina for *FIVE DAYS!!!*

Yes, you heard right - 5 days!

When it was all said and done and life returned to normal,

here's what Chelsea had to say about the experience:

"I am so grateful that they were not only able but willing to let a complete stranger into their home in the midst of a pandemic, in the midst of a storm ... with no hesitation. They just opened their doors, opened their home and said, 'Come in and relax.' I'm just so grateful for them and so glad that this is where I ended up out of all the driveways in the world."

Now, among all the messages this story teaches, one of the strongest for me is this:

it wasn't luck or chance that Chelsea ended up in that particular driveway.

God brought her to Doug and Nina's driveway.

SCREEN: Grow Your Faith main screen

This is Week Four of our Lenten message series titled, Grow Your Faith.

For forty days we are looking at ways that God uses to grow our faith - ways such as our daily practices, our highs and lows, and relevant teaching.

And today our focus is on how God uses other people to grow our faith.

It could be for a few days or a few years or longer -

but God uses other people to grow our faith.

If Chelsea's experience is an obvious example,

the one in our first reading today was less obvious.

Now, to really understand our first reading, some background is helpful.

In the Old Testament, there are two books that are basically history books.

They are First and Second Chronicles.

As their name makes clear, they chronicle the history of God's Chosen People.

The passage we heard this morning is incredible in that with just 8 verses, centuries of history are condensed.

We were told that the Jewish people had corrupt leaders who refused to obey God.

Then, foreign armies invaded, destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem,

and took the citizens back to Babylon as captives.

Finally, one day, God sent Cyrus, the King of Persia, who came to their rescue.

He freed the captives and allowed them to return to Judah.

Then he rebuilt their Temple in Jerusalem.

There are two things about what we hear in this passage that I find truly amazing.

The first is this:

SCREEN: Early and often did the LORD send his messengers to them, for he had compassion on his people and his dwelling place. -2 Chr. 36

Or to put it another way, God sent other people to rescue his children.

But they mocked God's messengers, refused to listen,

so disaster struck.

That's the first lesson: God sent others.

And it took them hitting rock bottom, losing everything,
to be open to God's help - help that came from a man named Cyrus.

And Cyrus is lesson two.

He was about as unlikely a savior for the Jewish people as you could imagine.

First he was a foreigner, and second, he was not Jewish.

Yet scripture refers to Cyrus as God's anointed.

He's the only foreigner in the entire Bible that is spoken of this way.

It's incredible to believe that God chose a foreign pagan as the deliverer
of his Chosen People.

It flew in the face of everything the Jewish people believed about
people of different nationalities, races or religions.

So what did it take for the Jewish people to see Cyrus as their deliverer?

Certainly it meant having an openness to others which they didn't have before.

And it meant letting go of the old, narrow way of thinking
which said that God can only work through certain people,
at certain times and in certain places.

Because if God could use Cyrus to help his Chosen People, God could use anyone.

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So what are we being taught with this story?

Well first, just like we read in Chronicles,

God sends other people to save and rescue us.

Whenever we feel like we are prisoners of fear, or worry, or doubt...

whenever we feel lost or confused or uncertain where to go or what to do,
God sends help.

But this reading is also a cautionary tale.

We must avoid the trap the Jewish people fell into,
refusing God's help or closing our eyes to the messengers sent our way,
lest disaster overtake us.

And the best way to make sure this doesn't happen is for
you and I to be on the lookout for God's helpers.

Today's Gospel reading makes this point even stronger.

Jesus had an encounter with a man named Nicodemus, who was a religious leader.

But not just any leader, Nicodemus was a Pharisee - the group that Jesus was constantly at odds with.

The Pharisees saw Jesus as a threat to everything they held dear.

To them, the Jewish religion was all about rules, hundreds of rules - 613 to be precise.

Rules which only they could interpret and enforce so they had enormous power.

Then along comes Jesus preaching that the basis for true faith is not rules or laws but love and mercy.

In the passage we heard today,

Jesus summarized for Nicodemus what believing in him was all about:

SCREEN: God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. -Jn 3:16

Nicodemus is the only Pharisee that Jesus met in his three year ministry who was open to his teaching.

He was open, but also cautious.

So cautious that he sought Jesus out under the cover of darkness so that no one else would know about their meeting.

Why did Nicodemus risk everything for this encounter?

The answer is clear to me.

Nicodemus was seeking the truth.

I believe that deep down, he knew that there had to be more to faith than rules and regulations.

You can sense in his questions to Jesus that Nicodemus is open to going deeper; he's intrigued but also excited.

Excited that at this precise moment in his life when he most needed someone to lead him to true faith, God sent Jesus.

But in order to be led, Nicodemus needed humility and openness.

Every teacher or mentor or coach knows which of their students or players they can reach.

Which ones are truly teachable and which are not.

The best are like sponges, soaking up everything the teacher has to offer.

The hardest to get through to are closed, know-it-all's,
like most of the Pharisees Jesus encountered.

He never gave up on them, he kept preaching and praying
for them to see the light.

Sadly, most did not.

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As I said when I began, our focus today is on how

God uses other people to grow our faith.

And when it comes to your individual journey of discipleship,
99% of the time, God will use other people to help you.

Other people who can pray for you,

who can correct you when you're wrong, encourage you when you are struggling
and help you find the answers to questions you have.

As I look back over my life, I can see how God sent other people
my way at critical moments.

God has sent friends, family members, and spiritual directors
when I most needed them.

They've guided me, prayed for me, mentored me and
gave me course corrections.

I have been so blessed.

Without them I would not be who or where I am today.

And I am absolutely convinced that the same is true for you.

God will send people into your life, sometimes unexpected people,
to guide and help you.

In most cases, God has already sent them, they are already in your life.

But to discover them you might need to open your eyes and heart wider,
and like Nicodemus, even seek them out.

Like for me, it could be a family member or friend, a co-worker or classmate.

It might be a member of your small group or a ministry that you belong to.

How do you *'seek them out'*?

It can start with a text or email or phone call.

It can begin with words as simple as,

'I've got a question you might be able to answer.'

Or, *'what's your opinion on this?'*

This happens regularly in my men's small group.

Our group is a safe space where we can share our struggles, our doubts, or anything going on in our lives.

And God uses us to help and pray for each other.

As I said, God sends other people to help each of us.

But you may need to seek them out.

And if it's someone God is sending to you,

they will love and care for you - they'll have your best interests at heart.

This is how God intends for his children to live.

God made us for each other.

Christ formed a community called the Church because he knows it's the best way for his disciples to grow.

Not by living as 'lone rangers' or seeing ourselves as islands, but together.

And yes, like Nicodemus, this requires humility, and maybe a risk.

But isn't that better than the alternative?

Situations like Chelsea Timmons' are rare.

I doubt you and I will ever find our help at the bottom of a driveway in a snowstorm.

We will need to seek out others and then be open to how God uses them.

This is how we will grow our faith. Amen. +

Link to article about Chelsea Timmons:

<https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/20/us/austin-storm-delivery-driver-trnd/index.html>