

Oh, what a difference a year makes. I ended 2009 being beaten in Ping-Pong by Mark and Joe Whipple, concluding the year with failure and disappointment. Then I woke up the next morning, the first day of 2010, and the sun was shining and there was a cozy fire in the kitchen woodstove and Joan kissed me and said, "Good morning, honey. Would you like some pancakes?" What a difference a year makes!

I want to talk this morning about how quickly life can change, but about one thing that never changes.

I've been reading a book called *The Lincolns in the White House: Four Years That Shattered a Family*. It describes Abraham Lincoln's effort to unite the Union while suffering the death of his beloved son, Willie, and his wife's plunge into a grief and depression so deep he worried he would have to institutionalize her. Unlike modern Presidents, Lincoln had only two assistants—John Hay and John Nicolay. His Cabinet was comprised of men who believed Lincoln was unqualified to be President, had aspirations to the office themselves, and felt free to openly criticize him in the newspapers. The one doorkeeper at the White House let anyone enter who wanted to see the President, so the White House swarmed with people seeking jobs and favors from Lincoln.

Then to this overwhelmed man, came the war. Like most Americans, Lincoln believed it would be short, that one taste of violence would calm the country's emotions and a peaceful resolution would be reached. So when 18,000 Confederate soldiers and 18,000 Union soldiers squared off in Manassas, Virginia, on July 21, 1861, near a stream called Bull Run, a scant 30 miles from the White House, the city's inhabitants rode their horses and carriages to Manassas to picnic on the bluff above the battle ground and watch the clash.

The Union Army marched through Washington, led by military bands. People lined the streets cheering. There were so many parties and picnics, caterers were overwhelmed and food tripled in prices. Senators and servants, the full spectrum of Washington society, crossed the Long Bridge over the Potomac, drawn by the sound of cannon fire in the distance. But instead of a brief battle that would lessen the hostility, nearly 5,000 soldiers were killed, wounded, or simply never seen again. For the next week, their bloated bodies would float down the Bull Run tributary into the Potomac, washing up on the banks of the river in the city.

And America was at war. For 30 million Americans, life had changed just that quickly.

I think about things like that this time of year. We enter the new year with much optimism and great expectations, and the next thing we know we are faced with a battle, the severity of which we didn't anticipate. We'll be breezing along and everything is fine, then *wham!*, all of a sudden we are reeling from a blow we never saw coming.

This week, we could meet someone who could dramatically bless our lives, or someone we love could pass away.

We could find a job, or lose one.

We could have a tremendous spiritual experience, or lose hope.

We could be healed from an illness, or be diagnosed with cancer.

When I first saw Joan, I was standing at my kitchen window, looking out, deciding whether to have Dinty Moore Beef Stew or Chef-Boy-R-Dee Ravioli for supper. Then there she came, walking down the sidewalk. One minute, factory food; the next minute, the feast of my life. Just that quickly my world changed.

We can make all the resolutions we want. We can prepare, resolve, commit, plan, hope, arrange, anticipate, and decide, and we should. But just that quickly, our lives can change. Some of those changes will be beautiful, they'll enrich our lives in ways we can't imagine. But some of those changes will be so painful they will bring us to our knees.

It can happen in the blink of an eye.

Everything can change. Well, almost everything.

Today I want to tell you about one thing that never changes. This is a great truth that transcends cultures, eras, circumstances, and situations. Though it is a great truth, I sometimes forget it, and have to be reminded. It is something the Apostle Paul wrote about in his letter to the church in Rome. He was writing about the difficulties and travails we encounter in life. He told them not to ever lose hope, saying, “all things work together for good for those who love God.” This is such a great truth, it even exceeds Paul’s one qualification, so that we could even rightly say, “all things work together for good for those who love.”

I know a man who discovered this past year that his wife was having an affair. When he first came to talk with me, he was devastated. They began the hard work of rebuilding their marriage, but the trust has been so deeply eroded he worries the marriage might not be saved. “But I know that whatever happens, I will be alright in the end,” he told me, after long months of pain and suffering. “I know I will be alright, because I know how to love.”

All things work together for good for those who love.

It is tempting to dismiss that as trivial or trite. But we shouldn't, for it is a great truth. Our willingness and ability to love can transform any situation, so that even the bad things that happen to us can one day be overcome and even redemptive. Maybe not tomorrow, maybe not next week, maybe not as soon as we would like. But ultimately our willingness and ability to love can transform any situation. In fact, our capacity for love is the only thing that can overcome our deepest sorrows. All things work together for good for those who love.

The Civil War was America's first modern, total war. To maintain discipline, the Union military leaders thought it necessary to execute soldiers found guilty of insubordination, sleeping at one's post, cowardice, or desertion. Initially, some of the executed soldiers were still children, younger than 18. In Washington, D.C. people could "hear the sharp report of synchronized rifles on the army's execution days."¹

It grew so distressing to Lincoln that he ordered the Union generals to stop, telling them they could no longer execute anyone unless he had given his assent. But it was a wrenching situation for Lincoln. He said to his secretary, John Hay, "Doesn't it seem strange that I should be here—I, a man who couldn't cut a chicken's head off—with blood running all around me."

¹ The Lincolns In The White House, Jerrold Packard, St. Martin's Press, p. 145.

In one instance, the case of a young soldier came before him. He'd been sentenced to death for a minor military offense. His mother had traveled to the White House to plead mercy for her son. The generals had insisted the young man be executed as a warning to others. General William Tecumseh Sherman wrote Lincoln, saying "Forty or fifty executions now would in the next twelve months save ten thousand lives."

Lincoln wrote back to Sherman, "What possible injury can this lad work upon the cause of this great Union? I say let him go."

Our willingness and ability to love can transform any situation. It begins by transforming our hearts and minds, so that mercy and pardon and kindness come naturally to us, helping us let go of animosities and miseries which kill the soul, and then the body.

All things work for good for those who love...

Maybe not today, or even tomorrow or next year. Seldom as quickly as we would like. But eventually, all things work for good for those who love.