

“Lessons from Dr. Seuss: *The Sneetches*”

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John 17.20-26

Acts 11.1-18

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The Dr. Seuss characters we hear about today are seeing stars – not the kind Nasa released a photo of this past week, but stars on bellies. And these are not just any stars – but stars with a deep significance. These silly stars are given a purpose yet have less power than was actually assigned to them. The stars themselves represent power, superiority, and privilege. To not have stars means to be in the margins, to be less than others, or to be an outsider. At the same time, the stars, at first, are by chance. Who made them? Most likely they were born with them. Like a mole or a birthmark, they are easily removed and simply come with the territory. They were not really meant to be these weighted symbols. You’ll notice that some of you have stars on the back of your bulletin covers. What does that mean? We’ll come back to that...

*The Sneetches*<sup>1</sup> is a story about the Plain-Belly Sneetches and the Star-Belly Sneetches. Those who had stars were seen as superior, and those without were not. Something that could be so easily painted over like finger nail polish makes such a separation among these creatures. It may seem so simple, but for them it is a big deal. Often those who have the privilege do not see the significance because they hold the power. Who are the Plain-Belly Sneetches in our time? Who has been degraded and pushed to the margins based on a difference?

Well, one day this guy rolls into town. His name is Sylvester McMonkey McBean and he promotes a solution to their problem. He not only has a solution, but he will sell it to the Sneetches! Greed drives him and he profits from their anxiety and prejudice. We might question who in our own world profits from making these separations?<sup>2</sup> People have justified making separation from differences for a long time. When someone points out a difference and uses that difference to separate “us” and “them” we might ask ourselves how they profit from keeping people separate.

It may seem that this separation happens because of something as silly as stars, but we still do this – we still find reasons to separate people, and it has been happening for a long time. Humans divide because of race, gender, sexuality, disability, and other diversity. We hear about an example in biblical times. In the Acts passage we read today Peter had a great meal with the Gentiles. As soon as his friends heard about it, they gave him an earful. “(T)he circumcised believers criticized him, saying, ‘Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?’” First, the term in Greek for “criticized” can also mean to discriminate or judge or doubt, or take superiority. They are discriminating against the uncircumcised in this statement, finding themselves superior to them and are telling Peter that they think so.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Seuss, *The Sneetches and Other Stories*. (New York: Random House, 1961).

<sup>2</sup> James W. Kemp, *The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss*, (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2004), 68.

The difference mentioned in their labeling is that they are circumcised and the Gentiles are not, but it goes beyond that. The circumcised believers are upset with Peter because he ate food that was considered unclean.<sup>3</sup> It may seem like a minor detail that he ate a few animals he wasn't supposed to, but in their tradition it truly was important. To do so showed a lack of respect for their culture. It was very important because God had instructed them specifically not to eat this food. So, it was not so much even about the food itself as the lack of respect for what God had told them to do and their identity. Their defenses are up and they are very upset.

Peter is ready with a response, though. He tells them about the vision he had. He “saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.'” Peter had some of the same reservations the others have had, and Peter argues with God a bit saying, “But you said...” and God responds by saying, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” Then Peter had an experience where he went and ate with the Gentiles and spoke with them about Christ and they all believed. At the end, he comes to the conclusion, “who was I that I could hinder God?”

This explanation seems to click with the group of believers and they forgive Peter, asking for their own forgiveness, and seem to welcome the Gentiles. Who were they to hinder God? Who are we to hinder God? Perhaps we could ask ourselves that. If people continued to try to hinder God, who would be excluded from the church? When we hinder God we limit God's family. Think over the years of all the people that have been pushed out of the church universal - how would our church be different if those people were still excluded? What about those we exclude now?

In the Gospel of John Jesus is praying. He includes prayers for the disciples, who are around him and for people in the future. He's praying for us.<sup>4</sup> Christ says, “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one.” What does unity mean in a world that is so divided? How can we talk about unity when Russia continues to attack Ukraine? How can we talk about unity when there are people benefiting from the oppression of others? I used to think that through Christ we could find unity. Each time we do communion we ask God to unite those at the table. I used to think that my understanding of unity would increase over time, but I admit it has only become more muddled. I don't know how Christ can unite us when some who come to the table believe that God called them to storm the Capitol building. I admit that I don't know how Christ can unite us when there are Christian nationalists who spout white supremacy. I admit that I don't know how Christ can unite us when it seems we have more that divides us than ever.

So I lean heavily on the part in which Christ prays for us. I lean heavily on confession and God's forgiveness and redemption because for all the faults I see within the faith I know I have my own faults, as well. I rely on God knowing how to move us forward, and listening, because I believe God gives us the tools. I believe one of those is through educating ourselves, and seeking equity in a world that is very inequitable. I believe that we must look at the world through resurrection eyes- through new eyes and possibilities, because the ways we've been

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<sup>3</sup> Lewis S. Mudge, “Acts 11.1-18” in *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Vol. 2*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 450.

<sup>4</sup> Peter J. B. Carman, “John 17.20-26” in *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Vol. 2*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 540.

doing it hasn't worked yet. I believe we must offer reparations to those who have been affected by the privileged. I believe there is hope, but I also believe there is much work to be done.

God brings us together, in all kinds of weather, to stand up from our pews and share the good news.

We will find differences along the way, in how we act, sing, and pray, but God gives us ways to unite, rather than bicker and fight.

What do you think it signifies to have a star on the back? How many of you have a star? Raise your hand. All of you have stars! What does that mean? Maybe some of you wished for stars. Perhaps some of you hoped you wouldn't have one, unsure of what the star represented. Our minds, our culture, our world can divide our thinking. Rather than celebrating differences we are often afraid of differences. Yet, we affirm that God created us to be diverse. God loves that we are each unique, and that we each bring different gifts to the table. Let us celebrate those differences and be willing to make the changes God calls us to. Amen.