

“Lessons from Dr. Seuss: *The Butter Battle Book*”

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Isaiah 2.2-4

Matthew 5.38-49

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The world has changed in some ways since *The Butter Battle Book*¹ was written in 1984. Technology has changed. We have cell phones and laptops and the internet. We have more interest and knowledge and science invested in preserving the environment, so transportation looks different. Leadership has changed. Perhaps what hasn't changed is that war, weapons, and hatred still exist. As we continue our sermon series including Dr. Seuss books we read one today that is perhaps one of the most politically charged children's books written for its time.

The Butter Battle Book was written during the time of the Cold War. At a time when people were concerned about an arms race Dr. Seuss wrote a prophetic children's book. The story is told by a grandfather and we hear about the Yooks and the Zooks. The Zooks ate their bread with the butter on the bottom and the Yooks ate their bread with butter on top. The grandfather tells the grandchild of the escalation. At one point, the Yooks at the Zooks could look each other in the eyes and maybe even have a civil conversation. Yet, as they narrowed in only on their differences, a wall was built, literally and figuratively. They fought over the buttering of bread. This seems silly to us, but to them it was quite serious.

The grandfather goes back to headquarters over and over for bigger weapons, only to be met with even larger weapons by the Zooks. The chief keeps pushing the grandfather and is one instigator that escalates the battle. At one point, the cheering crowd says, “Do or die.” The option is to fight and kill, or be killed. There is no other option on the table. Eventually the battle is down to the grandfather and one Zook. Each has a terrible weapon that can destroy the other. The ending is sad for multiple reasons. First, the grandchild is brought by the grandfather to “witness history.” The grandfather sees this as an opportunity, but it does not occur to him that he could also destroy his grandchild, or that he is teaching him the same hatred and violence, or traumatizing him. The grandfather also ends by saying, “We'll see...” We don't know how it ends. We do not know if the Zooks are destroyed, or the Yooks, or both. Perhaps they are both still standing on that wall, staring each other down. Maybe it doesn't matter how it ends. If we are too anxious about how it all ends we fail to see how we treat one another in the present.

We don't know how our wars and battles will end, either. In February of this year Russia invaded Ukraine, creating another cold war fear that this could end in utter destruction. Another iron curtain appeared, though it has been more difficult to sustain with newer technology and media in the world. We still don't know how it will end. The wall imagery makes me think about our southern border in the United States. The grandfather felt he was safe because he could keep the “other” out but perhaps this was escalated *because* he isolated the others. Our world is so divisive today we can probably find parallels to this story anywhere. Pick a headline – this speaks to it. But, as Christians, how do we respond?

¹ Dr. Seuss, *The Butter Battle Book* (New York: Random House, 1984).

Our first scripture passage may be familiar. In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus talks about how to respond to a perceived enemy. “You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also;⁴⁰ and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well;⁴¹ and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.” We are reading from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. He tells his listeners that they have previously heard about retaliation, but he is saying that they should stop the cycle of violence and hatred.

What does it mean to turn the other cheek? To go the extra mile? He is certainly not telling them to put up with abuse or ignore them. In that time, to be hit with the back of the right hand was an insult, and so Jesus is telling people not to hit back, but to protest and say “I won’t take that, but I also won’t hit back.”² Essentially, by changing things up and doing the unexpected, Jesus is telling them to refuse to play the game.³ He is telling them not to bow to their level, but do the unexpected. We have to flip the way we approach the world.

Many years ago I was trained in the ALICE method of responding to an active shooter situation, which stands for “Alert, Lockdown, Inform, Counter, Evacuate.” Many organizations use this method for safety, especially as our country experiences more gun violence. The group suggests evacuation is always preferred, but once in a great while counter is the only way to safety. Counter doesn’t necessarily mean attacking the attacker with guns or weapons, but presumably the first method of counter is to distract and catch the shooter off guard. It does not mean you sit idly; it does not mean you meet violence with violence. It means you surprise them. Maybe a group of people throw foam balls at the shooter’s head while others escape, and others drag the shooter to the ground. All people respond the same when caught off guard – it takes a minute to figure out what is happening and to gather one’s wits again.

When it comes to violence in our world, how do we respond? Do we join protests? Do we sit back? What is the best way to respond? Part of why I began thinking about the interfaith vigil for gun violence reduction is because so many people mention feeling helpless in the midst of gun violence in our country. We know thoughts and prayers for the victims are not enough. We need space to grieve, and take action. What would have happened in *The Butter Battle Book* if one side finally said, “No, we’re not going to use weapons anymore – we’re going to catch them off guard”?

The Isaiah passage also deals with the unexpected. We read the idea of turning weapons into something productive and helpful rather than harmful. Written during the time of exile and a time of the Syro-Ephraimitic war, we see a desire for the end to war.⁴ The people seek God on God’s mountain in order to find instruction. If we are wise, we, too, will seek God’s instruction before we act. God’s mercy and peace will show us the way.

There are organizations that buy back guns and turn them into garden tools. If we turned guns into bread machines, what would that look like? Maybe we could help cure hunger while

² Jason Byassee, “Matthew 5.38-48” in *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Vol. 1* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 380.

³ Matthew Myer Boulton, “Matthew 5.38-48” in *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Vol. 1* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 383.

⁴ Bruce C. Birch, “Isaiah 2.1-5” in *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Vol. 1* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 3.

also ending some violence. It is ironic that the fights in *The Butter Battle Book* are over food. All too often food becomes a weapon in our world. Healthy food is expensive. Junk food is cheap. People cannot afford food or clean water.

We have to counter the violence in our world. We have to disrupt it and break our world from this vicious cycle.

Rather than being consumed by war,

Let us make food to be consumed.

We can help each other and practice peace

Before violence makes us all doomed.

Greet your neighbor, love a friend,

For in God's love there is no end.

Rest assured in God's grace,

Which is offered for the whole human race.

Amen.