

“Lessons from Dr. Seuss: *Horton Hears a Who!*”

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Luke 18.1-8

Numbers 27.1-11

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Today we end our Seuss journey with *Horton Hears a Who!* This loveable elephant reminds us to look out for others and to listen for those who might go unheard. Horton, the elephant, is going about his usual day when he hears a noise from above. At first he does not see anything, but after closer examination he finds someone on a speck of dust. Horton has great respect for all life, including this very tiny person, and he says his most famous quote: “A person’s a person, no matter how small.”<sup>1</sup>

This gentle elephant goes to great lengths to protect the person on the speck of dust. He begins by putting the dust on a clover, which he can more easily carry around, and he finds out this person is a *Who*. Other animals begin to think that Horton is making this up. They cannot see or hear the *Who* and they make fun of Horton. Not only do they make fun, but they take the clover and put the *Who*’s life in danger. The kangaroos, monkeys, and eagle all mock in disbelief. They don’t understand that not only is there one *Who* on this speck of dust, but an entire community of *Whos!* A whole town is on this tiny speck of dust, but the other animals do not have the time or the ears to hear them.

The animals are ready to contain Horton, for they think he is unstable. Horton knows this is his only chance to save the *Whos* and he tells the mayor to make the whole town of *Who*-ville shout! So, they do! They make noise, they play instruments, they scream – but for some reason the other animals still cannot hear them. Then, the mayor realizes that one *Who* has not been participating, but as soon as he shouts, a change happens. The other animals can hear the *Whos* and they realize that Horton did save the community!

There are a couple of ways we might view this loveable character, Horton. Some may view him as representing God, because he hears the cries of those who usually go unnoticed.<sup>2</sup> He cares for those whom others ignore, just as God has a deep caring for those who are pushed in the margins in our society. God cares for those who are food insecure, for those who are houseless, for those who are struggling to keep a good job, and for those who are addicted. God cares for those who have been mistreated and misunderstood. It is easy to see how Horton could be viewed as a God-like figure.

At the same time, we might sometimes see ourselves as Horton.<sup>3</sup> As Christians, we are also called to hear the cries of those who are often not heard. We are to listen carefully to people who are silenced and who are struggling, so that we not only can help if possible, but to turn on the microphone so their voices are heard. We are called to make changes in the world so that

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Seuss, *Horton Hears a Who!* (New York: Random House, 1954).

<sup>2</sup> James W. Kemp, *The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss*. (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2004), 43.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

people are not ignored. Horton speaks up for the *Whos*. He stands up for them. When have we stood up for someone else?

We might also ask when have we been the kangaroo? What changed our perspective? Whose voices in our own community go unheard?

In the end, the *Whos* are the ones who must be empowered to speak up for themselves, but it was because of one elephant who cared so much and paid attention to the world around him that they were even noticed at all. We cannot stop someone from doing drugs. We cannot just give someone a home and expect them to have the means to pay a mortgage, take care of it, and be able to still pay for food. We cannot solve the problems of others, but we can work with others. We have to listen and we have to be open to new friendships and walk with them.

Maybe sometimes we feel like the *Whos*<sup>4</sup>. Perhaps we have felt like we have spoken up for justice and peace and have gone unheard. Where is God when we have prayed and prayed and nothing seems to happen? Where is our Horton to translate our prayers? We may not hear answers to our prayers right away, but we can trust that Christ hears our prayers and is with us. In fact, today we hear two scripture passages regarding how God not only has deep compassion for peace and justice, but also encourages us to be persistent.

The Numbers passage is not found in any of the lectionary years, which I find disappointing because it is such a powerful story about how a group of people who feel forgotten speaks up, and God hears, and takes care of them. The women in this story are speaking up for basic rights. These daughters, or sisters, are named, which is important because they are concerned with their name being lost without the land. Women were not often named in the Bible. Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah stand up before Moses and the priest and everyone at the meeting where the group is discerning who is to have what land. These women are concerned because they are not supposed to receive any land. Their father, Zelophehad, died. Since Zelophehad did not have any sons there legally was no one to pass on the inheritance to, and the women would not have any land and Zelophehad's name would be forgotten because his line would end.

These women are standing up for more than just a bunch of stuff. This is not only about land, though that is a big part of it. They are speaking up so that they can have land to live off of and be able to survive. They are also speaking up so that their family name can continue. They want their father's legacy to live on. They want to live on. Since they were female, they were not able to receive land, but they boldly go before Moses and ask him to go before God and present their case. Moses does so, and God tells Moses that the women can have the land – and the laws are changed regarding inheritance. Part of this change and the reason they present the case to God is because the land is not theirs to argue over – the land is God's.<sup>5</sup> They have no right to make this decision, but must leave it up to God. A good reminder when we think of creation care. It is also helpful to remember that laws that were made hundreds of years ago do not

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<sup>4</sup> John M. Buchanan, "Luke 18.1-8" in *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Vol. 4*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 189.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas B. Dozeman, "The Book of Numbers" in *The New Interpreter's Bible*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 218

always reflect the best interest of everyone, and as our knowledge expands, our laws should, as well.

The *Whos* and the daughters of Zelophehad have something in common – they spoke up so their voices were heard, because they knew in the end that it was up to them to be understood. At the same time, the daughters needed the help of Moses to approach God. It was about working together to make a change.

The Luke passage reminds us of the persistence we must have to make that change, as well as the persistence of God in caring for us.<sup>6</sup> We hear the story of a widow – another person who was most likely forgotten in her time and place. Without a husband, she did not have any money from inheritance and was not taken care of by the community around her.<sup>7</sup> Her life literally depended on going to this judge and asking for justice.

We hear that the judge is not a likely candidate to oblige to her requests. He does not care for God and he seems to care less for people. The widow does not give up, though, and keeps asking. She continues to pursue justice, and eventually he gives in and grants her request. In the New Revised Standard Version we read that he “will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.” The Greek, on the other hand, literally translates that he is concerned she will “strike” him or “wear him down.” While I do not imagine this woman to be violent, he may have been concerned of what means she would go to just for justice. She is peaceful, though, and finally is given justice.

Search for justice and do not cease until your voice is heard and there is peace. God hears our prayers and all we say, so do not give up but always pray. Listen for those who go unheard, and listen for where you hear God’s word.

Create space for others to be heard.

For they might have an important word.

Whether their word is bold or meek

God already hears them speak.

Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Margit Ernst-Habib, “Luke 18.1-8” in *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Vol. 4*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 190.

<sup>7</sup> Kimberly Bracken Long, “Luke 18.1-8” in *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Vol. 4*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 188.