**Oh, the Faith That You’ll Grow – The Sneetches**

**Matthew 15:21-28; Matthew 7:1-5**

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Early in 1941, much of the world was at war, the US watched and waited, and a talented artist and author named Theodor Geisel began work for an outspoken, liberal publication called *PM*.  According to its founder, Ralph Ingersoll, part of *PM’s* mission was to speak out against “people who push other people around just for the fun of pushing, whether in this country or abroad.” Geisel, also known as Dr. Seuss, took that mission to heart and, with his sharp caricatures and quick wit, drew more than 400 cartoons that took aim at the powerful forces at work during World War II- Hitler, Mussolini, fascism, and isolationism.

He also drew a number of cartoons criticizing racism and anti-Semitism both in the US and abroad.  In 1942, he published a series of cartoons critiquing racist hiring practices in the US defense industry which, according to Richard Minear’s book *Dr. Seuss Goes To War,* prompted FDR’s executive order which prohibited the industry from racial or ethnic discrimination.  Dr. Seuss was equally critical of anti-Semites in the US who supported the actions of Hitler.

Considering this, it’s not surprising that two decades later, after his career as a children’s author had taken off, he wrote a children’s book that was a parable about prejudice and discrimination entitled, *The Sneetches.*  Today, as we continue our summer sermon series on lessons of faith found in the books of Dr. Seuss we’ll look at *The Sneetches,* prejudice, and discovering the logs in our eyes.

Now, the Star-Belly Sneetches-

Had bellies with stars.

The Plain-Belly Sneetches-Had none upon thars.

Those stars weren’t so big. They were really so small.

You might think such a thing wouldn’t matter at all.

But, because they had stars, all the Star-Belly Sneetches

Would brag, “We’re the best kind of Sneetch on the beaches.

With their snoots in the air, they would sniff and they’d snort

“We’ll have nothing to do with the Plain-Belly sort!”

And whenever they met some, when they were out walking,

They’d hike right on past them without even talking.

When the Star-Belly children went out to play ball,

Could a Plain- Belly get in the game…? Not at all.

You only could play if your bellies had stars

And the Plain-Belly children had none upon thars.

As you can tell from these opening lines, the Sneetches are a divided society.  Those who had stars on their bellies considered themselves superior to those who did not.  And, though the Plain-belly sneetches didn’t like being excluded or treated differently, at some level they bought into their inferiority.  And that led them to wish they could have stars on their bellies. Until one day, along comes Sylvester McMonkey McBean. McBean appears on the scene with a peculiar machine which, for just $3 each, will put stars on the bellies of sneetches without. The plain-bellied sneetches paid their fee, lined up with great excitement and, sure enough, the machine worked and the plain-bellied sneetches came out with stars upon thars.

Now every sneetch was the same, but that was not okay with the original Star-bellies.  They liked the way things were before. So, they decided, with the advice of McBean that stars had gone out of style.  The best sneetches on the beaches had no stars. For just $10 each, McBean removed their stars and they could once again be distinguished from those other sneetches.  The sneetches with new stars promptly got theirs removed, and then those without stars got them put back on again. And so the others gave up their new stars. And so it went, stars on and stars off until, before long, they could no longer tell who first had a star and who didn’t.  McBean takes off with their money saying, “They never will learn. No, you can’t teach a sneetch.” Yet, the narrator says, “But McBean was quite wrong. I’m quite happy to say, That the Sneetches got really quite smart on that day. The day they decided that Sneetches are Sneetches And no kind of Sneetch is the best on the beaches.  That day, all the Sneetches forgot about stars and whether they had one, or not, upon thars.”

It’s a wonderful parable with a not-so-subtle message that is still relevant today.  We humans are forever looking for ways to feel superior by making someone else feel lesser.   But, I’m not going to leave us there with the obvious. Because, as Paul Harvey used to say, here is the rest of the story.  After the Japanese invaded Pearl Harbor in 1941, Seuss not only produced cartoons for PM that critiqued racism and anti-Semitism, he also drew many cartoons about the Japanese and Japanese-Americans that were blatantly racist.  While his work addressing the situation in Europe critiqued only individual leaders, Hitler or Mussolini, in caricature, his cartoons about the Japanese depicted a whole country full of evil people. The Japanese as a race were bad.  He also depicted Japanese-Americans as colluding with Japan and was an outspoken supporter of moving them into Japanese-Americans into internment camps.

Dr. Seuss’ inability to see the hypocrisy of boldly criticizing racism in one circumstance and then participating in racist propaganda on the other is a classic example of not seeing the log in one’s own eye. As we heard in the reading from Matthew 7, Jesus says toward the end of his sermon on the mount, “Do not judge that you may not be judged. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?” This is one of those lessons we have to learn over and over in life.  We are quick to criticize others for their prejudiced behaviors or ideologies without recognizing our own.

Ironically, there is a story about Jesus in which he, too, is confronted with this lesson.  In our other scripture reading for today, from Matthew 15, Jesus encounters a Canaanite mother who asks for him to heal her daughter.  The fact that she is from Canaan is important because that means she is a gentile. In response to her plea for help, Jesus says “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”  Basically, he is saying, “my teaching and healing are only for the Jews.” She asks again, saying, “Lord, help me”, and he answers with something that sounds quite offensive. He says, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” The word “dog” was a derisive word for someone outside the Jewish community. So, Jesus is saying, “God has sent me to the children of Israel, and it’s not right to give what is meant for them to outsiders.”  This mother is not to be deterred, though, and responds “even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table”. Suddenly, Jesus recognizes the log in his own eye. He has bought into the Jewish thinking that outsiders are unclean, dangerous, and unworthy, and he realizes that is wrong. At that moment, his ministry changes from one only for the Jews to one for all people. And as inheritors of his teaching and his church, we can be grateful that it did!

So, where do we find ourselves in all of this?  Living as we do in this time of great division, both in our denomination and in our country, we seem to be much like the sneetches.  We are polarized in so many facets of human society - Democrats and Republicans, traditionalists and progressives, pro-choice and pro-life, Caucasians and people of color, poor and wealthy, cisgender and transgender, gay and straight.  The list could go on and on.

And as we get further and further entrenched in being right about our opinions, we can easily slip into feeling superior - believing way down deep that those who have the opposite view are somehow lesser than we are.  We all do it. We all have logs in our eyes that we don’t recognize. We strive to be loving and accepting people - to be like Jesus. And yet, even Jesus, who was fully human as well as fully divine, had a log in his eye.  Even Dr. Seuss demonized the Japanese.

So, what is the log in your eye?  Can you name it? Do you know? And what will it take for us as Christ-followers, as people who live in this nation, as inhabitants of this earth, to remove those logs? How can we be an example of a different way?

In 1953, Dr. Seuss and his wife visited post-war Japan and had an experience much like Jesus with the Canaanite mother.  In Japan, Seuss spent time talking with people and getting to know their culture. He also witnessed first-hand the devastation in Hiroshima.  As a result, he began to reconsider his racist views, and he expressed this change of heart in the only way Dr. Seuss could - in his books. *Horton Hears A Who*, published in 1954, was the first of a series of books in which Seuss taught children about discrimination, prejudice, and acceptance - the most blatant of these is *The Sneetches.*

Of course, this kind of personal encounter with someone who is different - the opportunity to learn people’s stories as Seuss did in Japan and Jesus with the Canaanite woman - is how we begin to remove those logs. God calls us to meet people where they are, as they are, and listen with open hearts and a willingness to learn. If we are ever to move closer to the kingdom of God, it will only be through honest, compassionate encounters where we can discover that no kind of Sneetch is the best on the beaches and that stars on our bellies don’t matter at all.

May it be so. Amen.