**Oh, the Faith That You’ll Grow – Horton Hears A Who**

**Luke 4:14-24, 28-30**

Rev. Nancy S. Lynn

July 14, 2019

One of the greatest fallacies about children’s books is that they are written for children!  Okay, maybe that’s not entirely true. There are definitely some children’s books that don’t exactly hold a grown up’s attention.  With that being said think about the number of books written for children that captivate adults. Take, for example, the Narnia books by C.S. Lewis, which were written with characters and plot that appeal to children but also have an extended allegory that only a more mature reader would follow.  Or, what about the Harry Potter books which, with their epic battles between good and evil, are just as engrossing to adults as to kids.

Over the last few weeks, we have been looking at the lessons of faith that we can learn from the books of Dr. Seuss and, of course, we have discovered that his books, too, have moral and ethical teachings that are relevant for adults even though the language and drawings are aimed at children. “The Lorax” explores environmental concerns.  “The Sneetches” looks at prejudice and discrimination. And, “Green Eggs and Ham” challenges us to be willing to follow God’s call out of our comfort zones. This week we look at another Seuss classic, “Horton Hears A Who”.

But, before we get into that, I had an interesting realization the other day.  I have no idea if Theodor Geisel, aka Dr. Seuss, ever read the sermons of John Wesley, but he certainly could have.  Wesley, who was the founder of Methodism, once said there is no holiness without social holiness. In other words, we cannot claim to follow the teachings of Jesus without attending to the social concerns of the world - poverty, inequality, oppression, and so on.  Wesley also believed that to grow in faith we must grow in both social holiness and personal holiness or, he would say, acts of mercy and acts of piety. What is interesting is how many of the Dr. Seuss books present the same two challenges to us - to grow in social concern and spiritual maturity. “The Lorax” clearly conveys the need for us to be aware and concerned about a social issue while “Green Eggs And Ham” speaks to our personal fears and personal growth.

“Horton Hears A Who” incorporates both.  Now, just in case you need a reminder...the story starts like this.  (start film clip) So, Horton is determined to help whoever is calling out from the small speck of dust.  He soon discovers that the voice is that of the Mayor of Whoville, a thriving, miniature community built on a bit of dust atop a clover.

 However, Horton’s attempts to help only lead to more trouble for the Whos when a kangaroo and her child, three monkeys, and a black-bottomed eagle work together to get the clover away from Horton.  They think Horton is crazy to believe anyone could be so small as to live on a clover. So, they contrive a plot for the eagle to take the clover and drop it in a field of millions of clovers just like it.  Horton walks for two days to get to that field and then sorts through the millions until he finds the Whos - a bit worse for wear but still safe on their speck of dust. Again, Mrs. Kangaroo comes along condemning Horton for his foolishness and threatening to put Horton in a cage and boil the clover in Beezle-Nut oil. Horton calls out to the Whos, telling them to make as much noise as they can so Mrs. Kangaroo and the others will know they really are there.  The mayor of Whoville runs through the town telling every Who in Whoville to make noise, but it isn’t enough until…(show clip).

For a simple kid’s story, there is so much in there for us to learn from!  Let’s start with what Horton does. He is minding his own business in the pool of Nool when he hears someone in need.  He can’t see them, he doesn’t know them, but he immediately determines to help them. And, in fact, he risks his life because he knows they don’t have the resources to escape the pool by themselves.  His selfless concern is juxtaposed with the cruelty of the kangaroo, monkeys, and eagle. They not only refuse to believe the Whos are there, they mock Horton for going to such lengths to protect them.

It’s a juxtaposition similar to what we find in the passage we heard from Luke a few minutes ago. Jesus is in the temple of his own hometown when he reads from Isaiah.  “The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”  He then explains that these lines from Isaiah are about him - he is the fulfillment of this prophecy. With these words, he begins his ministry and proclaims his mission.

At first the people are impressed by him - what a fine, young scholar Joseph’s son is - but it’s not long before they turn on him.  He thinks too much of himself, he must be crazy to think he is the one Isaiah spoke of. Soon, they transform from an appreciative congregation to an angry mob, and they run him out of town with a plan to throw him over a cliff.

As people who follow Christ, we are called to reach out and care for the Whos of this world.  We are called to hear the voices of those who struggle or are oppressed - to offer our care, our resources, and our love.  But, uplifting one group almost always puts us at odds with another. And that is why walking the path of Christ is risky business.  There are times when following Christ means we have to speak out, to speak truth to power.

Jesus did this over and over again - defending the poor, the lepers, the prostitutes, the widows, anyone with less power - against the Romans and the Jewish officials who benefitted from their powerlessness.  Yes, Jesus did this over and over again and, as we know, it didn’t end well for him - at least not until God intervened.

We all encounter times in our lives when we feel the Spirit nudge us toward helping, protecting, or advocating for someone who is in need or is seen as lesser.  Have you had that feeling recently? Perhaps you feel called to confront a bully at work or to assist our Immigrant Hospitality Team in reaching out to immigrants.  Maybe you’re thinking that you’d like to work on the Habitat house or advocate for affordable housing in Ann Arbor. Maybe you hope to go to Kenya or are considering how our church might be able to serve right here in our neighborhood.

Whatever the Spirit is calling you to, there may well be times when you face the criticism of others or when you must take a risk or make a sacrifice.  The source of strength for social holiness comes from personal holiness - growing in trust that God is at work in what you are doing.

There is another lesson for us, too, I think, in the story of Horton and the Whos.  Horton does so much for the Whos - he rescues them time and again as the story goes on.  But, ultimately, it is the Whos who have to find their voices and speak out for themselves.  In the end, Horton cannot protect them (in fact, he is the reason their speck of dust is hovering over a boiling pot of Beezle-Nut oil), but he does help them learn how to protect themselves.

The Christian Church, including the United Methodist Church, has done great things to help and serve others in the world.  However, in the early years of Christian mission, that help often came with a fair bit of cultural imperialism characterized by a sort of hands-down attitude about mission work.  More recently, we have learned that it is much more effective and respectful to offer a hand up or, even better, a hand across - to give others the resources they need to help themselves.

Jesus approached people this way throughout his ministry but most notably on the night before he was arrested when he got down on the floor, washed his disciples’ feet, and said to them, “For I have set you an example that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them.”

Of course, this call to service and humility is our call, too.  As we look toward the fall and a new program year, as we synthesize and refine our plans for the coming year, I hope that we will continue to look for opportunities to serve the community around us.

With his words in the temple, Jesus tells us what he is called to do - to help and advocate for the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed.  And throughout his ministry, he teaches that we are called to do the same. Like the extended metaphor in the Narnia books, it can get complicated and hard to discern what to do.  We hear so many arguments about what is right and what is wrong. And like battling Voldemort in the Harry Potter books, it can get risky. There is a lot to lose. But, from welcoming children to healing lepers to dining with prostitutes and tax collectors, ultimately Jesus’ message is as simple as a line from “Horton Hears A Who” - “a person’s a person no matter how small.”  May we be disciples who hear the quietest of voices and join our voices to theirs. May it be so. Amen.