**Oh, the Faith That You’ll Grow – How the Grinch Stole Christmas**

**1 Corinthians 13:1-7**

Rev. Nancy S. Lynn

July 21, 2019

No one seems to know for sure how or when it happened.  There is a girl’s camp in North Carolina which claims responsibility.  Others say it was the Christians in the southern hemisphere. Maybe it was those in the northern hemisphere trying to remember what snow is like when the temperatures reach the nineties.  Wherever it came from, somehow, at some point, we began hearing about celebrations of Christmas in July. I’ll be honest and say that, cynically, I suspect it’s just another marketing ploy to increase our summertime spending.  Even so, as I was putting together our summer sermon series about the lessons on faith found in the books of Dr. Seuss, it just seemed appropriate to save the Grinch for this weekend before July 25. Add in a few Christmas carols and we have an opportunity to remind ourselves what our faith is really all about.

I’m going to assume that most of you don’t need a detailed reminder of how the story goes, so here is just a quickie.  “How The Grinch Stole Christmas” tells the story of a grumpy, bitter, envious character named The Grinch and his decision to steal Christmas from the Whos of a little town called Whoville.  On Christmas Eve, after all the Whos are asleep, he takes a sleigh from his home on top of Mt. Crumpit down to Whoville and systematically steals all the decorations and gifts and special food from every Who household.  When Christmas morning comes, he expects to hear the Whos all crying because Christmas has been stolen from them. Rather, he hears them singing and the joy in their voices helps him to recognize that Christmas isn’t about all the stuff - the food and the gifts and the roast beast - it is about love - love incarnated in family, friends, and community.  And so, he returns to Whoville and gives back all their Christmas gifts, decorations, and food, and then joins the Whos for their Christmas feast. The heart of the Grinch, which was once two sizes too small, grows three times that day.

“How the Grinch Stole Christmas” was released in time for Christmas 1957.  About that same time, Theodor Geisel, also known as Dr. Seuss, was interviewed by Redbook magazine, and he told the story of what inspired him to write what is now a Christmas classic.   "I was brushing my teeth on the morning of the 26th of last December when I noted a very Grinchish countenance in the mirror. It was Seuss!" said Geisel.  "Something had gone wrong with Christmas, I realized, or more likely with me. So I wrote the story about my sour friend, the Grinch, to see if I could rediscover something about Christmas that obviously I'd lost."

I’m intrigued by his statement “something had gone wrong with Christmas, I realized, or more likely with me”.  One message in “How the Grinch Stole Christmas” is clearly a critique of the increasing commercialization of the holiday.  This had been a theme in Geisel’s writing as far back as his Dartmouth days, and it seems to be what he thought had gone wrong with Christmas.  As Christ-followers, this is something many of us struggle with, as well. On the one hand, we enjoy all the hubbub around Christmas - the decorations and gifts, carols and candy canes.  On the other, we understand that the significance of the holiday has nothing to do with all its trappings but, rather, with the miraculous incarnation of God’s love in a tiny baby born in a stable 2,000 years ago.  And so, every year, we get caught in this tension between what the secular world has made Christmas to be and what we know it’s really all about.

But, I think it’s interesting that Dr. Seuss said “Something had gone wrong with Christmas...or more likely with me”.  So, perhaps the story is as much an exploration of him as it is a critique of American materialism.

 Because, let’s face it.  Something has definitely gone wrong with the Grinch.  He is not just grumpy or irritable. He’s mean. He hates Christmas, he despises the Whos.  He is small-minded and judgmental and downright vengeful. He’s a monster, that Mr. Grinch. His heart's an empty hole and his brain is full of spiders, He’s got garlic in his soul, that Mr Grinch.”

So, what is it?  What makes him so mean? The narrator tells us, “It could be his head wasn’t screwed on just right, It could be, perhaps, that his shoes were too tight, But I think that the most likely reason of all, May have been that his heart was two sizes too small.” I had a little fun this week when I decided to Google “mental health and the Grinch” and found any number of articles and blogs analyzing the Grinch.  I saw diagnoses of Major Depressive Disorder, antisocial personality disorder with depressed mood, obsessive compulsive disorder, even bipolar disorder. But the most convincing argument I saw stated simply that he suffered from a lack of love.

Have you ever noticed, of all the things he dislikes about the Whos, what is the one thing that upsets him the most?  “And then they’d do something he liked least of all! Every Who down in Whoville, the tall and the small, Would stand close together, with Christmas bells ringing.  They’d stand hand-in-hand. And the Whos would start singing. They’d sing! And they’d sing! And they’d sing, sing, sing, sing! And the more the Grinch thought of this Who-Christmas-Sing, the more the Grinch thought, “I must stop this whole thing!”

What he really can’t stand - what drives him to his darkest nastiness - is the joy and love that bind the Whos to each other.  The Grinch lives alone (well, with his dog) on the top of Mt. Crumpit. He is completely isolated. With no family, friends, or community, he is free to ruminate on all the things that irritate or upset him.  He wallows in his envy, judgment, and condemnation. He plots and connives - seeking to steal from the Whos what he can’t have for himself.

Now, I am going to venture that we all have an inner Grinch.  I’m not just talking about being in a bad mood or getting tired of Christmas carols.  I’m talking about those times when we get mean and judgmental and we wish downright nasty things on people we don’t like.  What brings your Grinch out? Or better, yet, who? Who leads you to feel threatened, filled with anger, envy, or shame? Who has something that you covet though you would never admit it?

It’s not easy to think about or to talk about.  These aren’t feelings that most of us have every day - hopefully.  But, they come at us intensely and sometimes unexpectedly. And they often tell us much more about ourselves than the people or circumstances we are grinching about.

Maybe you are recently divorced and seeing couples in love or whole and happy families brings this out in you.  Maybe you are struggling financially and seeing how others spend freely sparks your envy and outrage. Maybe you recently lost your job and watching people on their way to work each morning leaves you burning inside.  What brings us to this place, this inner place where the Grinch thrives inside us, often has to do with what someone else has and we do not. Wealth, beauty, skinniness, power, popularity, or, in the case of the Grinch, love.  Or, what we have that we most fear losing. Power, privilege, wealth, opportunities. We hold tight to the things that we believe give us status in the world and lash out at anyone who might take them away.

What is interesting about the Grinch, of course, is what ultimately heals him.  The very thing that led him to want to steal Christmas is what causes his heart to grow three sizes that day.  The singing of the Whos, their song - which is a testimony to the joy of Christmas and the love they have for each other - seeps into all his inner darkness to show him what Christmas is about.  And then when he goes back to Whoville, when he returns everything he has stolen, he is forgiven and embraced by the very community he set out to hurt. He is brought into the circle of love and invited to feast at the table.

When Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians, he had learned that the church in Corinth was troubled by conflict, rivalries, and inappropriate behavior.  So, Paul describes to them what Christian community - a community characterized by love - looks like. Not surprisingly, it is everything opposite of grinchiness. “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth”.  Whatever brings out the Grinch in you, the antidote can be found in a loving Christian community.

This also gives us a clue as to what to do when we encounter the Grinch.  The Grinch, whoever he may be in your life, can be awfully scary. He leads us to feel helpless or hopeless as if he will steal away everything we value most.  Yet, in the face of the Grinch, the Whos turn to each other. Together, they remember what really matters. Together, they have courage to face the future despite what they fear and what they’ve lost.  And together, they create a community which, like that baby born in Bethlehem, is the incarnation of God’s love for each other, for the world, and even for the Grinch.

That is what we celebrate every December (or July) 25th.  God’s love, which enfolds us all no matter what our wounds, took the form of a baby who grew to be a man who taught us what love looks like.  And now our calling - wherever and whenever we may encounter the Grinch - is to continue to seek and create, to embody and offer a community of love where we sing with joy and find hope in each other.  May it be so. Oh, and Merry Christmas. Amen.