

## **The Heart That Grew Three Sizes: Reconciliation**

### **Isaiah 11:1-10; John 3:16-17**

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Near the end of Dr. Suess's "How The Grinch Stole Christmas", the Grinch, who hates Christmas and has stolen everything related to it from the homes of the Whos down in Whoville, has a sudden change of heart. On Christmas morning, he expects the Whos to be broken-hearted to find what he has done, but instead, they begin to sing. Witnessing them standing in a circle singing the joy of Christmas, leads the Grinch to realize Christmas is about much more than the gifts and adornments he's taken away. Christmas is about joy and community and love. With that new awareness, his heart grows three sizes.

The story could easily end there. What ending could be better than seeing the Grinch smile and his heart once too small expand to nearly bursting from his chest? Except it leaves an awful lot unresolved. After all, the Whos are still without their Christmas presents and wreaths, dinners and trees. Just because the Grinch has discovered the true meaning of Christmas doesn't mean the Whos aren't filled with anger, even hate, for the miserable creature who stole their Christmas away. They have every reason to doubt his sincerity and regard him with suspicion. As Matt Rawle writes in his book "The Heart That Grew Three Sizes", "the Whos seem perfectly in the right should they want to bring the Grinch to justice."

Yet, that isn't what happens. When the Grinch makes good on his new appreciation of Christmas and rushes back to Whoville to return every item that he stole, the Whos could reject him, take back their things and turn him away. Instead, they invite the Grinch, this outsider, this criminal who should be feared and excluded, to sit at the head of the table at their feast. He even has the honor of carving the roast beast! But, why? Why would the Whos embrace him so readily when he has caused them such harm? Why open their hearts to reconciliation? In the same circumstances, what would you do?

It is the fourth Saturday/Sunday of Advent. Christmas is just days away, and we are wrapping up our walk through Dr. Suess's story, "How The Grinch Stole Christmas" as we put it in conversation with the scripture stories and prophecies we typically read during Advent. Here at the end of Suess' story is where the Christian themes are most obvious. After all, what happens between the Whos and the Grinch on Christmas morning points to the very reason that Jesus was born - to bring about reconciliation between God and humanity, between humans with each other, and between humans and Creation.

Two weeks ago, we talked about John the Baptist and his call for people to repent of their sins and ask for forgiveness. Next, we focused on our relationships with God. Today, we look more at our relationships with each other and Creation.

The passage we just heard from Isaiah paints a vivid picture of what God's vision of a reconciled world, a community of peace, hope, and joy, might look like. All those creatures who are natural enemies of each other - the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the goat, the cow and the bear, the child and the cobra - will one day all live together peacefully, without reason to hate or fear each other. And that will happen when the Messiah, full of wisdom and understanding,

counsel and might, comes to lead them - and us - with justice and righteousness. This will be the fulfillment of God's kingdom of love.

Yet, in our 21st century lives, it's so easy for us to forget that is what Christmas is really all about. Every year as we prepare for Christmas, we become so focused on *how* we celebrate Christmas, that we easily look past the reason *why*. Christmas celebrates that God came to live among us as this child, Jesus. Jesus came to pave a path for us to be reconciled with God. God loves the world so much, God loves us so much, that God became one of us to show us the way to live in right relationship with God's self, each other, and the earth, our home. God sent Jesus not to condemn us for all our worst behaviors but to save us from them so we can live in love and peace with each other.

This act of God's, this coming that we are waiting and preparing for, is an expression of God's deep love for us. Reconciliation that leads to life together in this peaceful Kingdom is God's hope for us. Yet, if you have ever been deeply wounded by another or, perhaps worse, you have done the wounding, you know that reconciliation between you and the other person is not something that can happen passively. It takes your willing participation, your time, and your effort... and it begins with forgiveness.

Sometime between waking up on Christmas morning and Christmas dinner with the Grinch at the head of the table, the Whos must have forgiven the Grinch - even without him asking for it. Otherwise, they could never have welcomed him so warmly at their Christmas celebrations.

Rawle defines forgiveness as "refusing your right to harm someone in the way that she or he has harmed you." That doesn't mean you have to become friends again or be part of each other's lives. Forgiveness is simply choosing not to retaliate, not to seek retribution. Forgiveness is releasing your resentment and bitterness, so you can be free. Reconciliation is actually seeking to be in relationship with that person again. God calls us to forgive while we hope for reconciliation. Yet, in real life (as opposed to life in Whoville), forgiving someone can take a very long time. Forgiving yourself can take even longer.

Here's a strange confession. When I was in my twenties, I kept a mental list of people that I hated. Fortunately, it was a very short list - I don't think there were ever more than two names on it - because I believed then, as I still do, that hate is a powerful word and shouldn't be thrown around lightly. Yet, hate was the word I had when I didn't know how to characterize a badly broken relationship. For someone to land on my list, they had to have genuinely and deeply hurt me and never acknowledged or apologized for that hurt. Without that closure, my feelings about that person remained unresolved and froze in time. I held onto the same fear and anger and pain I felt at the time they hurt me, and the word I had to describe that was hate.

It was years before I realized that it didn't have to be true. That I could forgive them without any action on their part. But to do that, I had to recognize God's love for me and God's love for them. I had to acknowledge my own brokenness and theirs and have faith that God loves us both anyway. That is where the real power of Jesus' birth is found.

Now, it would be a lot to claim those were the thoughts Dr. Suess had in mind when he wrote the ending of "How The Grinch Stole Christmas". And we don't know what conversations

the Whos had between themselves or with God when they woke up on Christmas morning to find what the Grinch had done. Yet, somehow, they were able to let go of their hurt and disappointment and forgive this Grinch.

When you reflect on your life, who are the people who have hurt you? Which relationships have ended badly? What feelings are left unresolved? Can you imagine letting go of those feelings? Can you imagine releasing your desire for retribution?

Alternatively, who have you hurt in your past? What would it take for you to forgive yourself and to ask for their forgiveness?

Of course, the story of the Whos and the Grinch also doesn't end with the Whos' forgiveness of the Grinch. They don't just let go of their anger and disappointment. They actually welcome him into their lives and their festivities. Yet, that might not have been possible had he not made the choice to make things right - to return everything he had stolen.

Because while you can forgive someone without their participation, you can't be reconciled with them that way. Reconciliation takes both people seeking to be in a healthy relationship with each other again. Both people acknowledge the hurt they have felt and the hurt they have caused. Both people offer grace to the other.

For a broken relationship to be healed, for true reconciliation to happen, both people have to trust in God's love and grace enough to believe they can once again offer love and grace to each other. Jesus' birth, ministry, death and resurrection show us the magnitude of God's love, the abundance of God's grace, revealing to us that if God can give so much to us, surely, we can do the same for each other. And when we do, that love, God's love that we offer to each other, is what will make it possible for us to one day live in the peaceful kingdom Isaiah foretold - where nations turn swords into plowshares, the lion lies down with the lamb, and little children lead us.

May it be so. Amen.