

Sunday, July 30, 2017

Dr. Seuss Book: The Sneetches

Sermon Title: Blurring the Divide

Scripture: Ephesians 2:11-22

The reconciliation of God's people

¹¹ So remember that once you were Gentiles by physical descent, who were called "uncircumcised" by Jews who are physically circumcised.¹² At that time you were without Christ. You were aliens rather than citizens of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of God's promise. In this world, you had no hope and no God. ¹³ But now, thanks to Christ Jesus, you who once were so far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

¹⁴ Christ is our peace. He made both Jews and Gentiles into one group. With his body, he broke down the barrier of hatred that divided us. ¹⁵ He canceled the detailed rules of the Law so that he could create one new person out of the two groups, making peace. ¹⁶ He reconciled them both as one body to God by the cross, which ended the hostility to God.

¹⁷ When he came, he announced the good news of peace to you who were far away from God and to those who were near. ¹⁸ We both have access to the Father through Christ by the one Spirit. ¹⁹ So now you are no longer strangers and aliens. Rather, you are fellow citizens with God's people, and you belong to God's household. ²⁰ As God's household, you are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹ The whole building is joined together in him, and it grows up into a temple that is dedicated to the Lord. ²² Christ is building you into a place where God lives through the Spirit.

I have a gift that my family doesn't appreciate. I can cast a dark cloud over any occasion or conversation. For example, if you want to talk about chocolate, it won't be long before I start talking about child slave labor on the Ivory Coast and fair-trade chocolate. If you want to talk about getting a great deal on something, I'll probably have to say something about sweatshops in Indonesia that make those low prices possible. If you want to take a walk on the beach, I will likely lament the entire time about the amount of garbage on the sand and between rocks. If you want to celebrate a beautiful day, I might bring up the doomsday concerns that we are stressing our planet to a possible point of no return. It's my gift...I kill joy. It is the curse of being painfully aware that all our lives are interconnected and that people are suffering around the globe – an obsessive thought I can't seem to release.

Last week we sat down as a family to watch Pinocchio. It was supposed to be family time with my grandson and Pinocchio is another movie I have never seen. Just imagine my reaction to the scene where a man lures all the bad boys to an island, turns them into donkeys, puts them in crates to sell to the salt mines. How could I NOT think of the hour-long conversation I had with a special ops veteran who now rescues children from sex trafficking and sexual exploitation in Asia? I had a visceral reaction to the scene and could hardly bear to watch. And, of course I had to offer my commentary. Now, if I can do that with Pinocchio, just imagine what I can do with the Dr. Seuss and the Sneetches. Can you spell GENOCIDE?

While the story of the Sneetches speaks to all kinds of social discrimination, it is well-documented that Theodore Seuss Geisel, aka Dr. Seuss, was influenced by Hitler's Germany and the rise of antisemitism. In 1936, he traveled with his wife to Germany and was appalled by what he saw. He came back to the states and did political cartoons, often depicting Hitler as an "arrogant, incorrigible infant in diapers."¹ The yellow star used to denigrate Jews in Germany is obvious in the Sneetches. So here is a children's story that alludes to one of the worst genocides in modern history.

¹ <https://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/ojs/index.php/tlg/article/view/765/710>

“Stars upon thars,” is so silly. Jews forced to be identified with stars is not. Those stars were part of an intentional and deliberate plan to exterminate Jews. Gregory Stanton has identified the stages of genocide.² The first stage is to classify people into “us” and “them” categories without respect for difference. The stars Jews were forced to wear were part of the stage Stanton calls “symbolization,” showing they were different, at to be hated. Then comes discrimination and dehumanization. You dehumanize someone by calling them things like vermin and cockroaches, something that needs to be exterminated. Then comes the hate groups and hate speech fanning the flames of division and polarization. Persecution and extermination follow. Denial is the last stage, where perpetrators or later generations deny the existence of any crime. When we hear hate speech legitimized by national leaders we need to be concerned. It may not lead immediately to genocide but it most certainly leads to violence. Othering people and diminishing groups of people is not innocent behavior.

If you are a fan of South Park, there is a great episode where Cartman tries to start a campaign against Ginger kids, so Eric and Kenny sneak in the middle of the night and turn Cartman into a Ginger by dyeing his hair red, bleaching his skin, and giving him freckles. It is amazing how, in 22 minutes, South Park, in its own R-rated, bombastic way, shows us how we get to genocide. Dr. Seuss gives us the G-rated version.

Seuss introduces the character Sylvester McMonkey McBean as an opportunist who profits from playing upon the desires of one group to no longer be the “out” group and the other groups wanting to remain the “in” group. He offers a service for sure, a service that exploits their differences but ultimately leads the sneetches to finding their common identity. He arrogantly thinks they are naïve and can’t learn – but they’re not and they can. It just takes a while to figure out they have been played.

Do you ever wonder about who is profiting from fanning the flames of division and hatred? Is there a real-life Sylvester McMonkey McBean out there somewhere that is playing us for fools? If you want to read something disturbing listen to Tristan Harris’ Ted Talk.³ He starts out his talk saying, “I want you to imagine walking into a room, a control room with a bunch of people, a hundred people, hunched over a desk with little dials, and that control room will shape the thoughts and feelings of a billion people. This might sound like science fiction,” he continues, “but it exists today.” Harris used to be a design ethicist at Google where he studied and worked at how to steer people’s thoughts. With Google, Youtube, Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter, and news feeds vying for our attention, they utilize persuasive strategies to do just that. One particularly effective strategy is generating outrage, which we are then compelled to share.

He goes on to say that the newsfeed control room is only accountable to maximizing attention. And if you think Sylvester McMonkey McBean is a fictional character, listen to this. He says that these newsfeeds are driven by advertising profits and big data now makes it possible for an advertiser to say, “That group over there, I want to schedule these thoughts in their minds.” So, Harris continues, “you can precisely target a lie directly to the people who are most susceptible. And because this is profitable, it is only going to get worse.” When I was a kid, the dissemination of biased information was called propaganda. This is propaganda on steroids.

Harris wants us to realize that we are persuadable, because once we realize we are persuadable “there might be something we want to protect.” He goes on to argue that with accountability,

² <http://www.genocidewatch.org/images/8StagesBriefingpaper.pdf>

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https://www.ted.com/talks/tristan_harris_the_manipulative_tricks_tech_companies_use_to_capture_your_attention/transcript

transparency, and new tools for using the technology we rely on, we can work together for positive change. As it is now. Good grief! Now I am casting a cloud of gloom and doom over Facebook.

What smacked me in the face is the very simple admission that we are persuadable. We can be played and we are played, every day, by people who profit from stirring pots of conflict, distrust, misinformation, half-truths, fear, and anxiety. It sells.

The stars were a social construct as are many of our differences. Our differences are a good thing and should be celebrated like the colors of a magnificent tapestry – rather than categorized, demonized, and used to discriminate. The profiteers of division are counting on us to remain naïve – when we really are capable of learning after all.

In our reading from Ephesians the writer names a difference that is stirring up strife between the Gentile followers of Jesus and the Jewish followers of Jesus. The Greek text actually uses a derogatory word for “the uncircumcised.” The writer tells both sides that Jesus tore down the barrier that divides the two. “You are no longer strangers or aliens,” he tells them, “you are fellow citizens with God’s people, and you belong to God’s household.” (2:19)

The writer of Ephesians has a word for those who like to stir things up that cause or maintain division. He writes, “²⁹ Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up,^[u] as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. ³¹ Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice,³² and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. (Ephesians 4:29-32)

The book of Ephesians has quite a bit to say about peace and making peace. It contrasts the peace of Rome with the peace of Christ; the *Pax Romana* with the *Pax Christi*, without ever saying the word Rome. Ceasar Augustus was hailed as a God for bringing peace to the Roman world – but it was a brutal peace, maintained by violence and legions of soldiers. So, when the author speaks of making peace and being made new he is speaking of the unique and lasting peace that comes through love and justice. In the last chapter of Ephesians, the author took all the pieces of armour that a Roman soldier wore and turned them into equipment for peace. Listen to this:

¹³ Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. ¹⁴ Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. ¹⁵ As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ With all of these,^[u] take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. (Ephesians 6:13-17)

The tools and equipment for stirring up strife and division, and sowing seeds of dehumanization and discrimination are exponentially amplified by those who advertise on and troll the web. All the time we are baited with outrageous headlines and half-truths. We can use that same amplification to be peace makers not an agent of Sylvester McMonkey McBean.

The Sneetches that don’t have “stars upon thars” WANT “stars upon thars.” I take that to mean that they want what we all want, to be seen an equal, rather than looked down upon – to have equal access and opportunity. As the body of Christ, equipped with truth and love, we have an opportunity and responsibility to make sure no one is less than. No one.

Amen.