8/24-25/19 Horton Hears a Who Rev. Amy Haines

Rm 8:18-25, Lk 9:46-48 The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss

…On the fifteenth day of May, in the Jungle of Nool,

In the heat of the day, in the cool of the pool,

He was splashing…enjoying the jungle’s great joys…

When Horton the elephant heard a small noise.

So Horton stopped splashing. He looked toward the sound.

“That’s funny,” thought Horton. “There’s no one around.”

Then he heard it again! Just a very faint yelp

As if some tiny person were calling for help.

“I’ll help you,” said Horton. “But *who* are you? *Where*?”

He looked and looked. He could see nothing there

But a small speck of dust blowing past through the air.

“I say!” murmured Horton. “I’ve never heard tell

Of a small speck of dust that is able to yell.

So you know what I think?...Why, I think that there must

Be someone on top of that small speck of dust!

Some sort of a creature of *very* small size,

Too small to be seen by an elephant’s eyes…

…some poor little person who’s shaking with fear

That he’ll blow in the pool! He has no way to steer!

I’ll just have to save him. Because, after all,

A person’s a person, no matter how small.”

-Dr. Seuss “Horton Hears a Who” 1954, Random House

Today we continue our series The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss with the book, “Horton Hears a Who.” Two weeks ago we pondered the Dr. Seuss book “Oh The Places You’ll Go” and remembered that wherever we go, God goes with us. Through the highs and lows and in-betweens of life, God is with us on the journey of life and faith. Last week we reflected on Dr. Seuss’ short story, “The Sneetches” that reminded us to cherish what we have in common instead of letting our differences divide us. We were reminded to value that we are all created in the image of God.

That same line of thought continues today in the book “Horton Hears a Who.” Today we are reminded that we all matter, for “A person’s a person, no matter how small.”

Last week I mentioned that most of Dr. Seuss’ books did not specifically address the socio/political concerns of the time, yet somehow timelessly speak to the struggles of every generation.

This book, however, was written with a specific context in mind. While this book is a call to care for all God’s children, it is also Dr. Seuss’ apology for encouraging negative stereotypes of the Japanese people during WW2, stereotypes that fed into the fear that led to the Japanese-American internment camps.

From 1941-1943, Theodor Geisel, aka Dr. Seuss, drew over 400 political cartoons for the newspaper *PM*. Many of them were racist portrayals of Japanese people.

In 1953, Geisel visited Japan to research an article for *Life* magazine. He wanted to write about the effects of the war and post-war efforts on Japanese children. With the help of Mitsugi Nakamura, dean of Doshisha University in Kyoto, Seuss went to schools all over Japan and asked kids to draw what they wanted to be when they grew up.

What Seuss saw made a deep impression, and when he returned to America, he started work on *Horton Hears A Who!* Published in 1954, this book is dedicated to Nakamura.

 -Joy Lanzendorfer “10 Facts About Horton Hears a Who!” 7-30-15 mentalfloss.com

So this book was influenced by the divisions and hatred and dismissal of a specific group of people during WW2. Yet it is still a timeless parable to recognize that all persons are persons, and we are not to treat one group better than another, or dismiss one group because they are not like us.

When Horton recognized that someone was living on that speck of dust, he sought to help them. He cannot see if they are worthy of his care or worth rescuing. To Horton that does not matter. All that matters is that they are persons, too.

So Horton carefully puts the speck of dust on a very soft clover, better to care for them, better to protect them.

Imagine…living on that speck of dust was an entire town called *Who-ville­* filled with many *Whos* who had houses and churches and grocery stores. These are not the same Whos that later faced off with the Grinch who stole Christmas. They may be cousins. Who knows!

Horton has compassion for these *Whos* in *Who-ville*. Yet no one else can hear them. No one can see them. Therefore, the rest of the animals in the Jungle of Nool all think Horton is crazy.

This was true when this story was first published in 1954, and remained true when Horton’s story became an 88-minute movie in 2008. In one scene in the movie, Horton’s best friend Morton, a mouse, tries to convince Horton to get rid of the speck, knowing what the other animals now think of Horton.

…Pleading Morton asks,

“Please, for me, just this once, be faithful 99 percent of the time.

I’ve never gone 99 percent on anything, and I think I’m awesome.

So come on.”

Horton puts Morton back on a rock and repeats,

“I meant what I said and I said what I meant…”

He pauses to allow Morton to finish the sentence.

Instead, Morton turns his back on the elephant and says,

“I’m not going to say it.”

Horton tries to coax the mouse, but Morton still refuses.

Horton finally presses a little harder, and Morton gives in.

“An elephant’s faithful one hundred percent.”

Horton smiles and adds,

“That’s right. That’s my code. My motto.”

Then he adds,

“Thanks for the warning.”

-Jim Wilson Faithfulness sermons.faithlife.com

“I meant what I said and I said what I meant,

an elephant’s faithful, one hundred per cent.”

Right away we now know a lot about Horton’s character. He is compassionate. He is faithful. He lives out what he believes.

But his faithfulness to the citizens of *Who-ville* on a speck of dust on a soft clover runs into trouble. The other animals all begin to harass and intimidate and later physically punish Horton.

Kangaroo calls him a fool. The Wickersham brothers, big jungle monkeys, steal the clover with the speck of dust and give it to Vlad Vlad-i-koff, “a mighty strong eagle, of very swift wing.”

The black-bottomed eagle flew away with the speck of dust clinging to the clover. All night he flew, over stones large and small,

until “…he let that small clover drop somewhere inside

Of a great patch of clovers a hundred miles wide!”

Horton was not to be deterred from protecting his new friends. Like Jesus’ parable of the lost sheep, when the shepherd leaves the 99 to go after the one, and like the parable of the lost coin, where a woman searches until the coin is found, clover by clover by clover Horton searched.

…on through the afternoon, hour after hour…

Till he found them at last! On the three millionth flower!

“My friend?” cried the elephant. ‘Tell me! Do tell!

Are you safe? Are you sound? Are you whole? Are you well?”

Having found them once again, Horton is even more determined now, to stick by his small friends through thin and through thick.

Yet the animals of Nool were not yet through. They threatened Horton:

“You’re going to be roped! And you’re going to be caged!

And, as for your dust speck…hah! That we shall boil

In a hot steaming kettle of Beezle-Nut oil!”

Horton was at his wit’s end trying to protect his friends. He told the mayor of *Who-ville* to prove that they really are there, calling all *Whos* to holler and shout and scream.

“They whooped up a racket.

They rattled tin kettles! They beat on brass pans,

On garbage pail tops and old cranberry cans!

They blew on bazookas and blasted great toots

On clarinets, oom-pahs and boom-pahs and flutes!”

Yet still they weren’t heard. Horton challenged the mayor, asking if anyone was shirking. House by house the Mayor searched, until he found one. A very small, very young lad was inside, playing with a yo-yo, not making a sound.

The mayor pulled him outside, and declared,

 “Open your mouth, lad! For every voice counts!”

“The lad cleared his throat and he shouted out, ‘Yopp!’”

…And that Yopp…

That one small, extra Yopp put it over!

Finally, at last! From that speck on that clover

Their voices were heard! They rang out clear and clean.

And the elephant smiled. “Do you see what I mean?...

They’ve proved they ARE persons, no matter how small.

And their whole world was saved by the Smallest of All!”

Horton reminds us today that

“A person’s a person, no matter how small.”

Horton reaffirms today that all lives matter. Young and old. Rich and poor. No matter our skin color, or ethnic background, no matter if we work, are a student or are retired, no matter our political affiliation or social status, a person’s a person. And all persons are beloved by God. And we are called to value all persons created in the image of God.

Jesus had a habit of seeing and hearing and caring for all people he encountered, from the religious leaders to the outcasts of his society, children and women, the unclean and lame, tax collectors and rural fisherman and even a Roman soldier’s daughter.

After once healing a child of an unclean spirit, Jesus took another child and brought him to his side. The disciples at the time were arguing among themselves who was the greatest. Jesus got their attention with a child beside him, for the disciples were like most of society of that day and age and saw children more as a nuisance and non-person than one to be welcomed. Unlike today, when many of us as parents and grandparents and aunts and uncles are focused on the lives of our children running to and fro, striving to be well-rounded and accomplished, children then were truly ignored. They were treated much like the rest of the jungle animals treated the *Whos*.

With a child at his side, Jesus said to his disciples,

“Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me.

Whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me.

Whoever is least among you all is the greatest.” (v.49)

Time and again throughout the Scriptures God’s people are called to care for all persons, but especially the least among them.

The people of Israel were called to care for the widow, the orphan and the immigrant among them. The widow and orphan often had no one else to care for them. Israel was to be kind to immigrants for once upon a time they were immigrants, strangers settling in the Promised Land.

Jesus cared for women and children, Jew and Samaritan, Pharisee and tax collector. In Matthew 25 we hear the call to care for the hungry and the stranger, the sick and the imprisoned, as caring for the least of these is loving God through loving God’s children.

How well are we doing here today, following in the footsteps of our faith ancestors? Are we caring for the stranger and for children, for the sick and the hungry, for the poor and the outcast? How are we caring today for children in cages and children bullied at school and children pressured to grow up too fast? How are we listening today for the cries of a lonely widower or the groans of an adult who cannot read or the struggles of a returning citizen seeking a new start?

How often do we not follow the ways of God’s kingdom? How often are we more like the animals of Nool rather than Horton, not valuing those different from us, not listening to the cries of the world around us, not living by compassion and the fruits of the Spirit?

This past week, one of my daughter Rachel’s homework assignments was a Kindness Project.

Every month here at Bright Beginnings Christian Preschool, the children learn how to live by a different fruit of the Spirit, starting in September with self-control. How easy these concepts are to learn, yet how hard they are to live by!

Horton encourages us today to keep on keeping on. Keep on living by kindness and compassion and faithfulness and persistence.

This is echoed in the words of the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans:

“We were saved in hope. If we see what we hope for, that isn’t hope. Who hopes for what they already see? But if we hope for what we don’t see, we wait for it with patience.” (v24-25)

This hope keeps us moving forward, step by faithful step, through suffering and joy. Like a woman in labor pains, the agony of the present moment will birth something new. Paul promises that newness is no less than the redemption of all creation. All who desire new life will be saved! The good news of Jesus’ resurrection is good news for all!

I have no doubt that at times Horton wanted to give up, in the face of such adversity and suffering. When Kangaroo made fun of him. When the eagle dropped the town into a vast field of clover. When he was beaten and mauled and hauled into a cage. Yet Horton knew there was a town relying on him, so he continued on, never giving up.

Paul calls us to keep on in hope, for we know this world can be a better place. We know the promises of God for future redemption and glory. We know the church can more fully live into who Christ calls us to be. And we know that as followers of Jesus we can more faithfully love God through loving our neighbor.

We are not perfect, and sometimes we hold back, and sometimes we fail. Yet we are called to continue on, in faithful living, in heartfelt serving, and in determined compassion for all persons.

We continue on, for God hears our cries, our prayers, our yearnings, our dreams. God sent his Son to this speck of dust we call earth to seek and save all of us, no matter our size or seniority or status. God is working to redeem all creation, and calls us to join that redemption through being good stewards of the resources God has entrusted to us.

As adopted children of God, we must live in ways that reflect God’s nature. When we exclude or divide or dismiss or devalue others, then we are not acting like beloved children of God.

Horton reminds us

“A person’s a person, no matter how small.”

This is true in the story, and true in humanity, and true in God’s eyes.

Horton’s story ends with these words:

 “From sun in the summer. From rain when it’s fall-ish.

 I’m going to protect them. No matter how small-ish.”

May we be more like Horton, faithfully following Jesus as a community of faith, as the body of Christ who becomes God’s eyes and ears to listen for the cries around us, who becomes God’s hands and feet to offer forgiveness and grace, compassion and kindness to the world around us, who become God’s voice to speak out for the voiceless, recognizing all persons are persons, no matter how small.

With the Spirit’s help, may we be like Horton. May we be like Jesus.

May it be so. Let us pray.