8/17-18/19 The Sneetches Rev. Amy Haines

Ps 139:1-6, 13-18; James 2:1-4 The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss

They came in late to church one Sunday, a young couple in their early twenties, different in style and manner than any in the congregation. Many people just thought they had come to hear the special music that day and would never be back. But the next week, they were back.

And everyone noticed them that day as they came in late and went straight to the front row.

That in itself is unusual, a couple who wants to sit in the front row of a United Methodist congregation.

But this couple also had their own sense of style. Her clothes were from Goodwill or thrift store fabric. One week she would wear a long, flowing skirt; the next week she would wear her camouflage pants. He almost always walked in with a hat on and sometimes wore his polyester suit with a multi-colored shirt and bow tie.

The older ladies who sat behind them did not know what to think or how to respond. They greeted them kindly, but wondered about their lives. The ladies squirmed at their very affectionate ways in worship, but enjoyed his strong singing voice on the hymns. Some in the congregation never tried to get to know this young couple, but others admitted that once they got past first impressions they appreciated and learned from the couple’s deep faith.

When can you admit that you have judged another because of what they were wearing or the way they were acting or the history you know about them and their family? When have you ever felt judged or discriminated against because of the way you are dressed, what you look like, or the amount of money you make?

Our human nature is wired to recognize how we are different one from another. How else will a small child find their mother in a large crowd?

Our human nature is wired to bring us together with like-minded people, those who share our same backgrounds or interests or beliefs or family situations. These often become some of our closest friends.

Our human nature gets in the way of God’s nature, however, when these differences become divisions, and pull us apart from one another.

At work, at school, in line at the grocery store, even at church, our human nature makes snap judgments about people based on what they look like, how they act or what they wear, not based on who they are.

We begin to judge one another based on outward appearances. Then we lump people into broad categories, and label these categories. And once we label entire groups of people, we often become prejudiced toward specific groups, never bothering to get to know the diverse individuals that comprise those groups.

This prejudice then leads to an attitude of superiority, a de-valuing of the other, even hatred toward an entire category of people, even though we may not personally know anyone in that category.

This hatred is what then produces our daily news headlines.

..Innocent shoppers killed because they live too close to the Mexican border

..Congresswomen told to go back to where they came from

..Systemic judicial racism against African-American men

..Hispanic US citizens and their children carrying passport cards

as they fear getting targeted by ICE

..Deep divisions among our congressional leaders

..white supremacy ideals going mainstream

The list goes on and on.

Sadly, these divisions are nothing new.

Consider the divisions we see even in the Scriptures:

Cain and Abel

Judea and Israel

Jew and Gentile

Jew and Samaritan

Male and female

Rich and poor

In every generation, there has been much that seeks to divide us. And often, racism and classism and tribalism carry over from generation to generation to generation. Our minds get trained to think “us vs. them” rather than “we.”

And yet…

today, we are reminded once again, that God calls us to a different way. Strangers or friends, rich or poor, young or old, male or female—no matter who we are, where we come from, how much money we have, or what we look like, God’s Word for us today reminds us to focus more on what is common among us rather than what divides us. In our homes, at our work, in the public and even in the back of the sanctuary, God calls us to another way.

God calls us to see all people as God’s beloved children. To recognize that everyone is created in the image of God. Those we like and those we don’t. Those who look and act like us and those who speak a different language and have a different heritage than us. We are all created in the image of God. And this image has nothing to do with eye color or skin color. This image looks deeper, at God’s character, God’s grace, God’s compassion, God’s love.

As Psalm 139 proclaims, we are all fearfully and wonderfully made. We are all known by God.

We are all loved by God. We are all created in the image of God.

Yet sometimes we forget to value our commonality as children of God. Instead, we let our differences divide us. Then we need to remember Paul’s words to the church in Galatia:

“There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is neither slave nor free;

nor is there male and female - for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal 3:28)

“You are all God’s children through faith in Christ Jesus.” (Gal 3:26)

We here today are all God’s children through faith in Christ Jesus. We are all valued and loved and cherished by God, who knows our going outs and our coming ins, our struggles and our joys.

Loved and claimed and called by God, we are then to live another way. And to assist us in seeing this different way today, we continue our sermon series, The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss, with his short story, “The Sneetches.”

Last week 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.

Today, “The Sneetches” reminds us to cherish what we have in common instead of letting our differences divide us.

Published in 1961, this book was a word of hope to a culture that was still grappling with the horrendous atrocities of World War 2, especially the Holocaust, while also struggling with the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement, pushing back against Jim Crow laws.

Do you realize that if Martin Luther King Jr and Anne Frank would still be alive today, they would both turn 90 this year? The struggles of the past are still the struggles of our day.

While Theodor Geisel did not write his stories to reflect on any specific social or political issue of his day, he did write to affirm positive human values. And sometimes those values gave vital commentary to the socio/political struggles of the day.

“The Sneetches” is really a timeless story, that speaks to 2019 as much as 1961.

We still grapple with racism and sexism and anti-Semitism and political division.

So the story of the Sneetches begins…

“Now, the Star-Belly Sneetches

had bellies with stars.

The Plain-Belly Sneetches

had none upon thars.

Those stars weren’t so big. They were really so small

you might think such a thing wouldn‘t matter at all.

But, because they had stars, all the Star-Belly Sneetches

would brag, “We’re the best kind of Sneetch on the beaches.”

With their snoots in the air, they would sniff and they’d snort

“We’ll have nothing to do with the Plain-Belly sort!”

And whenever they met some, when they were our walking,

They’d hike right on part them without even talking.

When the Star-Belly children went out to play ball,

Could a Plain-Belly get in the game…? Not at all.

You only could play if your bellies had stars

And the Plain-Belly children had none upon thars.

When the Star-Belly Sneetches had Frankfurt roasts

Or picnics or parties or marshmallow toasts,

They never invited the Plain-Belly Sneetches.

They left them out cold, in the dark of the beaches.

They kept them away. Never let them come near.

And that’s how they treated them year after year.”

--“The Sneetches and Other Stories” Dr. Seuss 1961 Random House

Year after year, how often does the story of the Sneetches still get played out in modern society? No, not the stars on thars, but one group acting superior to another, rejecting others because of their looks, or background, or political affiliation.

John Henry Bell once observed,

"We create barriers because we are afraid of others; we create walls because we think we are superior to others and simply do not want to associate with those who are less than what we think we have become."

-John Henry Bell, “The Sneetches” from his blog 7-18-12

as told on starsuponthars.weebly.com

When you were a child were you ever told you couldn’t play with Jimmy or Susie and later you found out it was because your parents didn’t like their parents, or they thought they weren’t good enough for you to play with, or they were of a different race or culture or religion? If so, then you can imagine what it felt like to be a child of the Plain-Belly Sneetches.

Most of us can remember a time when we were rejected not because of who we were, but because of who someone else thought we were, due to family or belief or opinion or appearance.

Theodor Geisel's sensitivity to social injustice stemmed from his own experiences as a teenager.

Geisel's grandfather had emigrated from Germany during the 1800s making Geisel German-American. During World War I his ethnicity was teasing fodder for his classmates. The Lutheran church he attended switched to English from German during service to avoid persecution.

--starsuponthars.weebly.com

So Geisel knew firsthand discrimination and prejudice.

“The Plain-Belly Sneetches were not content to be treated differently, to be shunned, but at some level they accepted their inferiority instead of rejecting the second-rate label placed upon them. Although they were despised by Star-Belly Sneetches, they wanted to become them.”

--James Kemp “The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss” Judson Press p.66-71

And what they thought was a ray of hope arrived one day from a strange source.

The story continues…

“Then ONE day, it seems… while the Plain-Belly Sneetches

were moping and doping alone on the beaches,

just sitting there wishing their bellies had stars…

a stranger zipped up in the strangest of cars!

“My friends”, he announced in a voice clear and clean,

“My name is Sylvester McMonkey McBean.

And I’ve heard of your troubles. I’ve heard you’re unhappy.

But I can fix that. I’m the Fix-It-Up Chappie.”

…

“Then, quickly, Sylvester McMonkey McBean

put together a very peculiar machine.

And he said, “You want stars like a Star-Belly Sneetch?

My friends, you can have them for three dollars each!”

“Just pay me your money and hop right aboard!”

So they clambered inside. Then the big machine roared

And it klonked. And it bonked. And it jerked. And it berked

And it bopped them about. But the thing really worked!

When the Plain-Belly Sneetches popped out, they had stars!

They actually did. They had stars upon thars!”

There will always be those who will exploit our divisions for their own greed. I honestly think if our news media would spend more time reporting on stories of hope and kindness rather than hate and division our world would be a better place. But I digress. There are always those who will take advantage of our divisions, and Mr. McBean did so to the Sneetches. His machine added stars to thars so there were no more Plain-Belly Sneetches.

Yet the first Star-Belly Sneetches were not happy. How to tell them apart? How to keep them divided?

Once again, this stranger came to the rescue!

“Then up came McBean with a very sly wink.

And he said, “Things are not quite as bad as you think.

So you don’t know who’s who. That is perfectly true.

But come with me, friends. Do you know what I’ll do?

I’ll make you, again, the best Sneetches on beaches

And all it will cost you is ten dollars eaches.”

So the Sneetches with plain bellies added stars to thars.

And the Sneetches with star bellies removed their stars.

“Then, of course from THEN on, as you probably guess,

Things really got into a horrible mess.”

…

“Off again! On again!

In again! Out again!

Through the machines they raced round and about again,

Changing their stars every minute or two.

They kept paying money. They kept running through

Until neither the Plain nor the Star-Bellies knew

Whether this one was that one … or that one was this one

Or which one was what one … or what one was who.”

Then you know what happens next. The money ran out. McBean laughed and left and on his way out said, “They never will learn. No. You can’t teach a Sneetch!”

Do we ever feel like that? That in spite of our best efforts, we will never learn to overcome the divisions in our lives? That racism and classism and political divides and hatred will continue to dominate our news and our lives? Somedays it does feel like we will never learn, that we will never stop allowing our divisions to pull us apart.

Yet, I still have hope. Hope that we are better than our petty differences and deep divisions.

I still have hope that we can overcome and treat one another with the value and dignity that is inherent in each one of us. I still have hope that as brothers and sisters in Christ, we can and will live another way.

I have seen that hope lived out in Dayton this summer and this week, even in the midst of grief.

I have heard that hope reiterated when the Leadership Conference of Religious Women, the leaders of Catholic and Jesuit religious orders, called out our government leaders this week to refrain from “language that disrespects, dehumanizes, or demonizes others.” They said,

“You hold a position that has the potential to inspire the best of every one of us and we ask you to use this unique status to bring about healing and never seek to create divisions.”

-Leadership Conference of Religious Women, Aug 2019

I have experienced that hope at Annual Conference through the stories of lives redeemed through congregations such as New City Church reaching out to recovering addicts and alcoholics with the good news of Jesus.

Today, our Scripture from the letter of James calls us to another way. To God’s way. To focus less on our divisions and more on our unity within the body of Christ.

This unity does not negate our differences. It is good that we are different from each other, with different passion and skills, different backgrounds and personalities. Yet within the body of Christ we are to use our differences to lift up one another, to find our place in the body of Christ and work together, just like the different parts of our human bodies.

Our differences do not have to divide us. We are one within the body of Christ, all fearfully and wonderfully made, all saved by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. James called out the early church for their acts of favoritism, for honoring the rich and judging the poor. These actions highlighted the divisions among the early Christians, and pulled people farther apart rather than reminding them that together they were the body of Christ in the world.

James challenged the early church with these questions:

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism deny the faithfulness of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has been resurrected in glory?

Have you not made distinctions among yourselves by showing favoritism, and become judges with evil thoughts?

James calls the early church back to loving God through loving neighbor, and even names favoritism as a sin!

He then goes on to call us all to faith in action. Our faith in Jesus Christ, our commitment to the body of Christ we call the church, has to be lived out in the midst of daily life. We cannot be kind to someone of another race to their face and call them derogatory names behind their backs. We cannot say we care for the poor or the marginalized, for immigrants or women, then remain silent when our congressional leaders create policies that hurt our fellow brothers and sisters. We cannot be honest about racism until we recognize the privileges we experience if we are white and middle class.

God calls us to another way, beyond feeling superior, beyond degrading others, beyond silent complicity.

God calls us to honor and cherish and care for all our brothers and sisters in Christ, no matter their background, race or economic situation.

God calls us to learn to live by love in the lab we call the church then share that love with the community and the world.

We are called to another way, the way of God that honors our differences while valuing our common faith in Christ Jesus.

..In downtown London, a large prosperous church had three mission churches under its care.

On the first Sunday of the New Year all the members of the mission churches came to the city church for a combined communion service. In those mission churches, which were located in the slums of the city, there were some outstanding cases of conversions—thieves, burglars, drug addicts, alcoholics, you name it—and they all knelt side by side at the same Communion rail. They all came to the same Table.

On one occasion the pastor saw a former burglar kneeling beside a judge of the Supreme Court of England. This judge had sent the burglar to jail where he had served for seven years.

After his release this burglar had been converted and became a strong Christian and Christian worker. As the judge and the former convict knelt beside each other at the communion rail, neither one seemed to be aware of the other.

But after the service, the judge was walking home with the pastor and said to the pastor, "Did you notice who was kneeling beside me at the communion rail this morning?"

The pastor replied,

"Yes, but I didn't know that you noticed."

The two walked along in silence for a few more moments, and then the judge said

"What a miracle of grace."

The pastor nodded in agreement,

"Yes, what a marvelous miracle of grace."

And then the judge turned and asked:

"But to whom do you refer?"

And the pastor said,

"Why, to the conversion of that convict."

The judge said,

"But I wasn't referring to him. I was thinking of myself."

The pastor was surprised and replied:

"You were thinking of yourself? I don't understand."

The judge explained.

"It did not cost that burglar much to get converted when he came out of jail.

He had nothing but a history of crime behind him and when he saw Jesus as his Savior he knew there was salvation and hope and joy for him. And he knew how much he needed that help.

But look at me. I was taught from earliest infancy to live as a gentleman; that my word was to be my bond; that I was to say my prayers, go to church, take communion and so on. I went through Oxford, took my degrees, was called to the bar and eventually became a judge.

“Pastor,” the judge explained,

“nothing but the grace of God could have caused me to admit that I was a sinner on a level with that burglar. It took much more grace to forgive me for all my pride and self-deception, to get me to admit that I was no better in the eyes of God than that convict that I had sent to prison."

--Billy Strayhorn epulpit.net 9-7-03 "Rich Man, Poor Man, Beggar Man, Thief"

Dr. Seuss ended the story of the Sneetches on a positive note:

“But McBean was quite wrong. I’m quite happy to say

That the Sneetches got really quite smart on that day,

The day they decided that Sneetches are Sneetches

And no kind of Sneetch is the best on the beaches.

That day, all the Sneetches forgot about stars

And whether they had one, or not, upon thars.”

How can we live this week, different than society around us, focused more on what unites us than what divides us? How can we care for the poor and pray for the rich and not play favoritism in our interactions with others? How can we see people as people, beyond outward appearances and arbitrary labels? How can we speak up against the -isms that divide us? How can we be aware of our own stumbling blocks, our own language and attitudes and actions that judge others without knowing them?

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we can do all of this and more through the grace of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit. I invite you to find one way this week to value others, and live a different way, the way of Christ.

Sneetches are Sneetches.

People are People.

May we be able to live by God’s way, with God’s help.

Let us pray.