

Detail:

2-16-20 Sermon "How The Grinch Stole Christmas"

How the Grinch came to be such an angry, miserable, being we may never know.

Ted Geisel, Dr. Seuss to the world, in his **original** work never let us in on Grinch's back story - what his background or home life were like. In the battle over nature vs. nurture - whether was he born this "grinchy" or did life's circumstances turn him into this bitter bag of bile - we have no answer.

The film version, for better or worse, took some liberties with Seuss' original story in order to fill in the blanks, suggesting that Grinch was bullied as a child.

And that may well have been the case - we don't know. The Grinch we encounter in the story is full on nasty - as the famous song from the cartoon version tells us, he was "as cuddly as a cactus and as charming as an eel." And whatever else we might surmise, we are told this - his heart was two sizes too small.

Have you ever known someone like that?

Someone who was just the epitome of bitterness, nastiness, grouchiness, and were miserable to be around? We often don't know why a person becomes so irritable that nobody wants to be near them - was it a loss they suffered, a slight they've endured, downright hatred channeled their way?

And perhaps we don't know because they're so hard to be around long enough to find out.

It's particularly hard to love people like that - they seem completely unlovable - yet that's exactly what's needed isn't it?

And while we **know** that's what's needed, knowing it doesn't really make it any easier to do anything about it, does it?

In our Gospel reading today we know very little about Zacchaeus either, other than maybe what's in the song. He's introduced in Luke's gospel as a tax collector (we hate him already don't we?).

In fact, Luke says he was a ruler among tax collectors - management level - and because of that he was rich.

I recently watched the 2015 film, "The Big Short."
Did any of you see that film?

It had Brad Pitt, Steve Carell, Christian Bale, Ryan Gosling and others, and it's a true story about the lead up to the housing crisis that began in 2008.

It takes the very complicated subject of high level finance and tries to simplify it for the viewer, while showing us exactly how all of that mess came about as a result of banks bundling bad mortgages and selling them off as good investments to unsuspecting buyers - other banks. Those bad mortgages soon began to default, which they were almost guaranteed to do.

The original banks stood to profit greatly while the other banks were doomed to lose tons of money.

Meanwhile, millions of people lost their homes, their life savings, and their college and retirement accounts.

It's one of those films that educates you in a very intriguing way, but at the same time makes you so angry that you want to scream. And in one scene, one of the bankers, played by Ryan Gosling, in an aside to the camera, shares that in spite of all this chaos and mayhem he had just received his annual bonus - of \$47 million dollars.

I don't know about you, but when I hear something like that, I feel a sense bitterness, some anger, and maybe some resentment starting to bubble up inside of me.

You too? Well, those are the kinds of emotions that the crowd feels when Jesus invites himself to dine with Zacchaeus in his home.

And Luke reports some of the mumbling and grumbling that goes on - "he's going to be the guest of a sinner." They're none too happy.

As I said earlier, we don't know very much at all about Zacchaeus. We know he's a ruler among tax collectors, we know he's rich, and we know he's short in stature. Now the gospel writers don't as a habit comment on the physical characteristics of a person unless it's about some kind of infirmity that Jesus is about to heal.

We can be pretty sure Jesus is not going to suddenly make Zacchaeus taller, so the fact that that detail is included must be intended to help us understand something about Zacchaeus.

And Luke tells us that Zacchaeus cannot see Jesus well because of his being vertically-challenged, so he runs ahead and climbs up a Sycamore tree to get a better view. Now, I have some experience as a tree climber - as a kid I often climbed trees all over my neighborhood to get a better view of one thing or another.

In addition, I went to Indiana State University, where the school logo is a Sycamore leaf, in part because of the native American heritage of the Sycamore tribe in the areas, as well as the fact that there were Sycamore trees all over our campus.

And Sycamore trees are not the easiest trees for people of average height to climb, so a person of a shorter stature would not be able to just run ahead and scurry up your average Sycamore tree.

A little internet research, however, revealed that the Sycamore trees that grow in that part of the world are nothing like the American Sycamore trees that we're used to here.

The *figus sycomorus* found in parts of the middle-east and Africa, is a smaller tree upon which an edible, but not particularly tasty variety of fig grows.

And, as you can see in this picture, the branches are often low to the ground so that even a child - or an adult of small stature - could easily climb up far enough to get a better look at something. This concludes today's botany lesson!

So what might we consider when we're thinking about Zacchaeus' height? Well, perhaps Zacchaeus was kidded or made fun of, even bullied because of his height.

What if that played into who he was, what his personality was like, even the line of work he went into?

If he had anything like what is sometimes called a Napoleonic complex, then as a person of small stature he might have tried any number of things to gain power, or influence, or even to make himself the center of attention, both to boost his ego, but also to get under the

skin of the people who had always made fun of him because of his stature.

What better way to get back at the school bullies than to be the one who gets to collect taxes from them?

What better way to make your point than to accumulate great wealth when the boys from the neighborhood are still struggling to rub two denarii together?

And even among his fellow tax collectors Zacchaeus had elevated himself, as it were, to the level of a “ruler.”

All this made him a very unpopular and, perhaps, unlovable man - just the kind of person Jesus was drawn to. Jesus *always* went to those who were considered by others to be untouchable, unlovable - lepers, prostitutes, sinners, and now this tax collector.

But when we deem someone as “hard to love,” I think that might say more about us than it says about them. Other people aren’t hard to love for loving people.

Jesus never struggled to love the people that we often describe as unlovable.

Sure, it’s hard sometimes to be around someone who’s dirty, who smells bad, or who’s suffering from untreated mental illness, or who just acts like a jerk, but that doesn’t justify dehumanizing these folks as “other,” or as “them.”

It’s easy - perhaps too easy - to cast the homeless person, the person from another country or religious tradition, the person of a

different race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or gender identity, socio-economic class, educational level, political or religious ideology, or whatever might differentiate one person or persons from another, as being “other” or “them.”

Maybe that’s what we see at play with Zacchaeus. Certainly it’s what we see happening in the Grinch.

But it’s the Grinch who can’t tolerate the “other,” the Who’s.

His life is so miserable that he can’t stand to see someone, let alone an entire community of someones, who doesn’t share in his misery.

Their joy, their happiness, eats at him.

He’s jealous, resentful, and the only way, he thinks, that he can make himself happy is by making them unhappy. His “wonderful, awful, idea,” as Seuss phrases it, is to tear others down until they’re at his level.

Where he makes his mistake - what he doesn’t understand, is that their happiness didn’t come from their things - in this case Christmas presents, food, or Christmas trees - it came from their hearts.

Their happiness is based, not in their possessions, but in who they are.

And who are these Whos? Well, it’s said that a person’s true nature reveals itself when they have lost everything.

When the Whos lost everything, they didn't start casting blame, looking for the "other" that stole their Christmas. They didn't scapegoat an entire group of people as the cause of their loss.

They didn't start posting Facebook memes about their situation or tweet out threats against others.

No, they came together as a community, they joined hands lifting one another up, and they sang together. They sang the Christmas songs that gave them hope and defined for them who they were as a community.

And it was in seeing their response that the Grinch, who expected misery and anger from them, was transformed. It was then that Dr. Seuss tells us, his heart grew three sizes.

We don't know what Zacchaeus was feeling, but perhaps the mere presence of Jesus grew his heart in some way. "Lord, I give half my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone, I repay them four times as much." But note the tense of these sentences.

He doesn't say "he will" give his possessions or repay four times as much, using the future tense.

In the Common English Bible his words are in the present tense, suggesting that he already does these things. That's a much different understanding of what's going in this story than the way we typically think about or hear it preached.

But that can be forgiven - both the New Revised Standard Version and New International Version both use the future tense, while the CEB and the King James Version use the present tense.

Different scholars have interpreted the language they've translated in different ways, and in doing so have introduced two completely different theological understandings into the conversation.

If the future tense is the correct translation, then the first half of Zachaeus' offer is very generous and totally unconditional - half of his possessions will go to the poor. The second half of this offer, though, is more conditional in nature, and can be looked at in at least a couple of ways.

“If I have cheated anyone, I repay them four times as much.” It's the “if” that makes us question, isn't it?

One can look at it from the point of view that Zacchaeus might in fact, know that he has NOT cheated anyone, so he can make as grandiose an offer as he wants.

So, while he works in a profession that comes with the perception of dishonesty, he could in fact be claiming here that he has done his job honestly and above board. If that's the case, he can appear as magnanimous as he chooses because he knows that he won't have to pay off.

If the present tense is the correct translation though, then that suggests that Zachaeus has nothing of which to repent, no need to ask forgiveness.

And Jesus' words that salvation has come to Zachaeus' house this day means that Jesus is affirming the work of the tax collector.

So, if THAT's the case, then perhaps the transformation that takes place is not in Zachaeus, but in the people who assume him to be just another crooked tax collector.

Or... perhaps the transformation that is called for is in ~~our~~ understanding of God's grace.

If Jesus declares salvation on Zachaeus' house without Zachaeus having had to repent, could it be that Jesus is saying that God's grace covers our sins whether we acknowledge them or not?

Could it be that our sins are forgiven even before we commit them?

Could it be that what we do is less important to God than how we are?

We don't know what was on Zacchaeus' heart.

We don't know his back story, we don't know how he came to be who he was, or what cards life has dealt him. We don't know if he was an honest broker or not.

It's easy to guess or to assume, it's even easy to generalize about what some might call "his kind" - whether that be tax collectors, short people, people who climb trees, conservatives, liberals, Republicans, Democrats, gay, straight, black, white, or brown. Assuming, criticizing, belittling, taking the low road - that's always the ~~easy~~ thing to do, even if it's not the Christian thing to do.

But the fact is, we don't know what Zacchaeus has faced. What we do know is that after he encountered Jesus he changed; his attitude changed, his life changed.

Salvation had come to his house.

I think the Grinch encountered Jesus as well, it's just not stated explicitly in the story.

It was the spirit of Christmas that grew the heart of the Grinch. And the Spirit of Christmas is borne, not from gifts of stuff, not from roast beast that we consume, nor from trees bedecked with baubles and bells, but from the love of God, as shown to us in Jesus Christ; the same Jesus Christ who changed the life of a tax collector in a Sycamore tree 2000 years ago.

The same Jesus Christ who promises to change our lives if we'll embrace his teachings as disciples.

Dr. Seuss has much to say to us about the nature of God, and what it looks like to be a faithful disciple. Whether the example is an elephant who listens,

God-like, to the cries of those who are not heard in society and who is faithful 100%, or a creacha who realizes that there's no reason to be afraid of the unknown, that those incarnated lime green pants are just as scared of him as he is of them, the gospel is alive and well in the writings of Dr. Seuss.

In the evangelistic Sam-I-am of "Green Eggs and Ham," and in the faith of the Whos in "How the Grinch Stole Christmas," we see Jesus'

call to us and to his teachings made real in what we've always assumed are just children's stories.

You see, the sacred message of the love and grace of God can be found quite clearly in the so-called secular writings of Ted Geisel. But not just there.

The line between what is sacred and what is secular exists only in our imaginations.

If our heart isn't two sizes too small, we can find the love of God exhibited just as clearly in the music of The Beatles or U2 as we can in The Gaither Family Singers, and in the film "The Matrix" as easily as Cecil B. DeMille's classic "The Ten Commandments."

When our hearts are open to all the grace-filled ways in which God tries to reach us, then it is so much easier to find God's presence in the people, places, and things that our dogmas oftentimes steers us away from.

So let me end our message and our series with this:

Horton the elephant heard the cries of the Whos,

and God asks of us, "can you?"

Will you truly care for the least, last, and lost,

the ones others only throw prayers to?

Will you take a step forward in faith and in trust

and push yourself past mere involvement
in order to make a real difference in lives,
like with Sam-I-Am's kind of commitment?
And like Sam, can you give witness,
Hamvangelize, we might say,
to being present together weekly
to worship, give, and pray?
Of being present in community,
serving side by side with others;
our sisters from other misters, our brothers from other mothers?
And would you, could you, in your prayers
invite God's vision for Church of the Master,
for any temptations to abandon God's will,
for us, would surely spell disaster.
Pray that all that we do in the coming years
will be intended to bring folks to Jesus,

and that we'll do all the things that must be done,

even if it doesn't always please us.

And as we embrace the new with the old,

may the Good News always inspire us

to remember that loving our God and our neighbor

are the only things God requires of us.

Amen and amen, let's say it again -

amen and amen. The end.