

Detail:

2-2-20 Sermon "Yertle the Turtle"

Theodore Geisel, aka Dr. Seuss, didn't like to write books with morals. He said, "a kid can see a moral coming from a mile away." That didn't stop him, however, from creating stories that came with a contemporary moralistic message. *Yertle the Turtle* is just one such story. Written in the early 1950s, but not published until 1958, Seuss wrote the character of Yertle specifically to represent the megalomaniacal dictator, Adolf Hitler, who in the decade prior had tried to expand his own empire at the expense of millions of others throughout Europe.

While Geisel is best known for his children's books, during WWII he drew political cartoons that denounced racism, isolationism, and other political issues of the day.

After the war, some of those same messages made it into his children's books. The irony is that today, some of his children's stories are criticized, rightly so, for **promoting** some of those very same things.

Yertle the Turtle is the story of a turtle who somehow comes to believe that he should be the king of all he could see. But Yertle had a problem - he couldn't see very far. His throne was a small stone in a pond, it was so low he could only see the pond itself.

So he got the idea to expand his kingdom:

He sat on a rock and could see all the pond,

But Yertle could not see the places beyond...

So, he ordered nine turtles to swim to his stone,

And using these turtles he build a new throne.

So Yertle ordered other turtles in the pond to climb on top of one another as a new throne for him, and of course, insisted that he be on top.

And one might think that the higher he got to be that he might grow content, but that's just not how it works with megalomaniac turtles or dictators, is it?

He got high enough that he could see for a mile, which meant that he was now the ruler not just of his pond, but also of a cow, a mule, a house, a blueberry bush, and a cat.

But the more he could see, the more he wanted to see.

The bigger his "kingdom" became, the bigger he wanted it to be, and the more turtles he ordered to stack one on top of another underneath him - until...

That plain little turtle below in the stack,

That plain little turtle whose name was just Mack,

Decided he'd taken enough. And he had.

And that plain little lad got a little bit mad.

And that plain little Mack did a plain little thing;

He burped! And his burp shook the throne of the king.

That burp knocked Yertle off of his throne and sent him face first into the pond, where he became "King of the Mud." And we don't have to look too hard to see the parallels between this story and Jesus' stories about either the overly self-righteous Pharisee OR about the foolish man who built his house on the sand instead of the rock. Yertle had a fall because he became so full of himself that he failed to build his throne on a very strong foundation.

Turtle backs are not very stable for the throne of a king. They were so weak, in fact, that it required only a burp to bring it all tumblin' down.

Yertle's self-serving motivation also wasn't built on a strong foundation. His motivation was driven by greed, and selfishness, and a lust for more, especially more power but also more stuff over which to rule.

He desired to get higher and higher so that he could grasp more territory, more stuff, more power, and more control. And despite a few passing moments of exaltation, he ultimately - and in fairly short order came down in a crash!

And even though none of us probably know any actual dictators, I'm thinking we all know, or have worked with, people like this turtle.

They're found in the business world, in the public and private sectors, they're even found - I know you'll find this hard to believe - but they're even found in the church! People so intent on climbing the corporate ladder, or moving up in an organization, that they don't care who they step on to get there.

Every day we face choices about what the foundation of our life will be. Every day we decide, consciously or not, to either build on sand or on rock; we decide in the attitudes we adopt, in the words we choose, and in how we treat other people. But also in the attitudes, words, and actions that we accept from others.

Sometimes we choose to build on shifty values such as greed, selfishness, or accumulation or by being apathetic to the plight others by ignoring the human need all around us.

Or, we choose to build on the values and principles found in the teachings of Jesus, of whom we at least ~~claim~~ to be followers.

The passage on building on solid rock is part of a larger section in Matthew's gospel called "The Sermon on the Mount." Here Jesus' words and teachings are the solid foundation upon which it's safe to build our lives.

By seeking to not only obey but to live Christ's words we're like the wise builder who built his house on rock,

so that it would be strong enough to withstand whatever storms and floods came along.

People who ignore Jesus' teaching in favor of their own values are building their houses - their lives - on shifting sand. When we do that, we risk being toppled, Yertle-like, by even the mildest of storms that come along.

The best known part of the Sermon of the Mount is what are called the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes are the strata, the layers of the rock, if you will, of the foundation upon which Jesus invites us to build our lives.

"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."

The word "meek" in our modern understanding often suggests weakness, passiveness, shyness, or even being a doormat - someone who always gives in.

But the historical and biblical meaning of meekness is more about humility, with seeing ourselves as we truly are and not as we may desire to be seen, as being no better or worse than we truly are.

It's what Fr. Richard Rohr and others mean when they talk about our "true self" versus our "false self."

That is, who are we in God's eyes, versus who we pretend to be or want others to think we are.

Lynn and I are going on vacation in the fall to England and Scotland, so we've been studying up a little on our English history. We've watched "The Crown," on Netflix, of course, but also a recent documentary on the current royal family, and I just bought a book that provides a pretty good history of all the kings and queens of England and Scotland. And then, of course, there's the whole Prince Harry and Meghan Markle thing.

All of this "royalty" stuff reminded me of an old children's story about a land where everybody in town - including, presumably, the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker - wears a crown.

One day a traveling photographer came into town.

He made his living taking photos of the royal family and then selling an album of them to the king, and he did this by keeping his eyes open for people who might be wearing crowns.

Well, he set up his camera and began looking for people with crowns, only to find that they were everywhere! Men, women, children - everyone was wearing a crown.

So he asked a man what relation he has to the king, and the man responded that he's one of the king's children, which would make him a prince.

He asked others, and got the same kind of response, "I'm a daughter, so I'm a princess," or "I'm a son, so I'm a prince." So, the photographer begins taking photos, and it isn't long before he's used up all of his film.

Well, he puts his photos into an album and heads for the castle. He knocks on the castle door and when the door is opened the man who answers is wearing a crown as well.

"You must be the king," the photographer says, to which the man replies, "No, I'm one of his helpers. I'm also a prince."

Well, the photographer was amazed, and he asked, "How can there be so many crowns, and how can everybody be a prince or a princess? Doesn't it make the king mad that EVERYONE is wearing a crown?"

The man replied, "Sir, there's a crown here for you, too, if you'd like it! The king issued a royal decree that everyone who enters this land becomes a member of his family. Everyone here is allowed to wear a crown - everyone is a prince or princess. But there is one rule in order to wear a crown:

we must remember that he is the king."

The lesson here is to remember that to be meek, to be humble, doesn't mean to be weak or wishy washy, it means to understand

accurately our identity as human beings, and that God sees us as God's beloved children. We're all princes and princesses in God's reign, but we must remember that God is the ruler.

Meekness - humility - requires that we always remember that, while we're members of the royal family, we're not the monarch - God is.

Another beatitude says, "Blessed are those who thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."

Sometimes God desires more of us than what we require of ourselves. But there are also those times when we require more, or maybe something different, for ourselves than what God requires.

Freddy wanted to be a baseball player.

As a kid he would throw and bat and catch, and he got pretty good at it. He wanted to play big league ball when he grew up.

He wore baseball caps and baseball shirts, he watched baseball games, and collected baseball cards.

He played little league ball and was pretty good his first year. The second year he made the All-Stars.

He grew older and played in Babe Ruth leagues, and then joined his high school team. He kept getting better, but had a long way to go to get to the big leagues.

However, there was a problem.

Freddy kept getting better, but so did everyone else.

High school players were a lot better than little league players, and in high school Freddy wasn't an all-star. When he graduated, no college offered him a scholarship. He went to some major league open tryouts, but never made the team.

Finally, someone said to him, "Fred, you're pretty good.

You're probably as good as you'll ever be, but you don't quite have what it takes to be a big league player.

You gave it a good try, but maybe you'd better try something else."

Not everyone can be a big league player.

Freddy couldn't have his heart's desire.

But what God desired of Freddy - two things Jesus commanded - has always been available to him - it's always been within his grasp.

Thankfully, God's kingdom isn't like baseball.

Anyone who wants to play has a place on God's team.

Pleasing God ought to be the most important thing in our lives.

>>>GO TO "LOVE GOD/LOVE NEIGHBOR" SLIDE<<

Jesus cited two fundamental commandments for those who desire to please God. The first is to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and the second is to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Those two things are always within our grasp, and true disciples of Jesus Christ practice these every day.

Matthew 5:14-16 says, *“You are the light of the world.*

A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to God in heaven.”

Yertle the Turtle’s light didn’t shine very much or very far. In fact, his light shone only on himself.

He cared about the other turtles only to the extent that they could serve him, and he landed in the mud as a result.

That’s why Jesus invites us to build on the rock.

With apologies to Dr. Seuss, we might say:

“Turtles are toppled by mere burps and sneezes,

But Christ’s rock stands firm in all storms and breezes.”,

We have a foundation of rock on which to build through our trust in Jesus Christ, in the words and principles he taught us to live by, that reveal to us most fully the God of all Creation. We can build on this foundation by, among other things, remembering the story of Yertle the Turtle, and then doing the opposite.

We can build on this rock foundation by recognizing, in humility, that we are, all of us, children of God, while at the same time remembering that we are not God.

We can build here by being caring and generous instead of selfish, by pursuing justice instead of power, by being humble instead of proud, by being forgiving rather than judgmental, by being good stewards of all that God has provided instead of being wasteful or selfish, or self-centered. We build on this strong foundation by letting the light of God's love for all of God's children shine in and through us to others far and wide. Amen.