

# McCabe United Methodist Church

May 13, 2018

*The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss: Life Is Messy!* series

*Are You My Mother? We Wander, God Finds*

Sermon on John 3:1-17

Pastor Jenny Hallenbeck Orr

---

Mother Bird knows her baby bird is about to hatch, so she does what so many parents do by instinct: she does what she can to provide for her baby. Perhaps thinking she has a bit more time before the egg cracks open, she leaves the nest on a hunt for food.

While mother bird is off *providing*, Baby Bird hatches...and immediately begins searching for Mother Bird. Baby Bird leaves the nest and tries oh-so-hard to find his Mother. "Are you my mother," Baby Bird asks a kitten, a hen, a dog, and a cow. The kitten doesn't even respond (perhaps the kitten was searching for its own mother!), but the hen, the dog, and the cow all say, "No," I am not your mother.

Baby Bird is frustrated and probably a little scared, so he turns to the next thing he sees – which happens to be a large steam shovel – and proclaims *it* to be his mother. Obviously, the steam shovel is *not* the baby bird's mother...and Baby Bird gets even more scared.

But, the steam shovel picks up the baby bird and puts him right back in the nest where he started. Not so very long after that, Mother Bird flies back to the nest, worm in beak, and snuggles up to her baby. Baby bird had wandered off...but, in the end was found – and returned home, safe and sound.

Last week, Pastor Mark kicked-off our newest sermon series, entitled "The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss: Life Is Messy!" Each of the eight weeks of this series, we'll be using a Dr. Seuss (or Seuss-themed) story to help illustrate a biblical truth.

The biblical truths we'll be exploring during this series will remind us that life is, indeed, *messy*...but, more than that, in the midst of this series, we'll be reminded that the God we know in Jesus Christ *enters into the mess* with us, bringing redemption and hope.

The first Dr. Seuss story of the series was the story that's providing the framework *for* the series: *The Cat in the Hat*. The cat came to the house, uninvited, made a real mess of things, and the children were left wondering how to fix the mess.

Life is, indeed, *messy*. Sometimes the mess is of our own making while, other times, the mess comes from outside forces: from other people in our life, from community or global circumstances, from political unrest, from natural disaster, et cetera, et cetera.

Last week, Pastor Mark preached about *sin* and the way sin causes us to make a mess of our lives. Yet God's answer to sin is forgiveness...and, when we sincerely pray for God to make our hearts clean, and to put a new and loyal spirit within us, the sin-made messes in our lives begin to be redeemed.

This weekend we're considering mess of a slightly different kind...the kind of mess than can be made when we go it alone, apart of God. For the baby bird in *Are You My Mother?*, the problem started here, on this particular page of the story.

Baby Bird hatches, takes stock of his situation, realizes Mother Bird is nowhere to be seen, and, then, Baby Bird promptly decides to do his own hunt for Mother Bird... despite the fact that he is in no way equipped to go on a self-led hunt for his mother. He cannot yet fly, he doesn't know the territory around his nest, and, perhaps most importantly, he doesn't even know what his mother looks like!

Going it alone, thinking he can find his mother all by himself, seems not to be the best plan for Baby Bird. But he does it anyway.

I don't know about you, but "going it alone" and "doing something *my way, by myself*" has been a theme in my life...and it's a theme that hasn't always played-out very well for me. I decide for myself that I should wander down a particular path and, even when things seem a little off, I get stubborn and keep right on wandering.

Doing things *my way, by myself*, has often been true for me...and I suspect the same was true for Nicodemus, who we meet in chapter three of John's gospel.

As we heard a bit ago, John chapter three begins with these words: "Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.

In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless [they are] born again." "How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely one cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"

Now, I like to imagine Nicodemus was making a little joke here: "Surely one cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born again!" I mean...how could that *not* be a rhetorical, *joking* comment on Nicodemus' part?

Not only is the image of an adult re-entering their mother's womb rather awkward... frankly, it's also rather hilarious. Surely Nicodemus was kidding around and thought

Jesus would appreciate the joke. They were both religious leaders...colleagues, in some way, shape, or form. And colleagues make weird jokes with each other about their chosen fields.

I think Nicodemus was making a joke...but *Jesus* was 100% serious.

Jesus had said that in order to see God's kingdom – in order to experience salvation – you must be born again. This was a wholly unfamiliar concept to Nicodemus the Pharisee...because, for him, salvation was experienced by doing God's law.

For the Jewish people – Jesus' people – the religious law *was* how they experienced salvation. They had the big 10 commandments, as well as a whole host of other laws...each of which was meant to help them do God's will. And salvation was about doing God's will, following the law.

Honestly, there is nothing particularly *wrong* with that. Laws and rules are important, aren't they?

Imagine a world without speed limits, signs, and stop lights to help regulate traffic. Granted, there are plenty of us who hold the rules of the road rather loosely...but, can you imagine how much scarier it would be to drive if there were *no* rules – and if there were no law enforcement officers charged with helping us *keep* the rules?

Kind of like the baby bird in *Are You My Mother?*, we humans have a tendency to want to do our own thing, whatever seems best for *us* at the time...and sometimes we do our own thing with little consideration for how our actions will affect others. Rules and laws help give us boundaries.

Like law enforcement officers who are charged with helping us stay accountable to civil law, *pharisees* were Jewish religious leaders who were charged with helping the Jewish people stay accountable to their religious laws.

The work of the pharisees was noble, faithful, important work. But, as with any work, the pharisees sometimes went too far. And, sometimes, their focus on keeping people accountable to the religious law caused them to lose sight of the law's main purpose: to help people love God and to love neighbor.

Sometimes the *letter* of the law became far more important than the *spirit* of the law. The spirit of the religious law was to keep people loving God and loving neighbor... but, when the pharisees enforced the *letter* of the law, it often seemed to the people like a never-ending “to do” list that weighed them down. Rather than bringing joy and peace, the law sometimes brought heaviness and feelings of inadequacy.

So when Nicodemus came to Jesus that night wanting to talk about salvation, Jesus told him it wasn't about the letter of the law...it was about the *spirit* of the law. And the spirit of the law lay in "being born again".

I sometimes wonder if God should have made it more possible for us to remember ourselves as infants. Kind of a strange thought, I know, but I think remembering that time would be really helpful for us later in life.

See, at some point in growing-up, so many of us get the idea that whatever we need, we can simply take care of ourselves – never mind that time when we were babies and couldn't do *anything* for ourselves... and never mind the fact that we had absolutely nothing to do with coming into this world in the first place.

Who knows why, but we are really good at forgetting that there was a time when we were completely helpless and were fully dependent upon receiving whatever we needed from someone else.

And it's this very idea that challenged Nicodemus the pharisee to his core. Because Jesus told him that salvation was not about keeping the religious law...salvation was not about strictly following all the rules...and salvation was not about that "to do" list he could control and manage all by himself. No. Salvation wasn't about all of that.

Jesus told Nicodemus that the one thing he had to *do* to experience salvation was one thing he could *never* do himself: be born. Again.

In so many ways, in our culture, we believe that what we *do* is what saves us. And I don't necessarily mean "saves us" in a strictly religious sense, like "going to heaven." I mean that, in general, we place a high value in our culture on *doing* things...and on taking responsibility for ourselves and for our lives. This is mostly a good thing!

We get in trouble at school or in the public sphere and we get punished for what we *did*. A relationship falls apart and we wonder about what we could have *done* to have saved things. A diagnosis comes too late and we worry that we failed to *do* something soon enough.

We value hard work in this culture – hard work on the job and hard work to keep our relationships strong. So, even though we aren't law-keeping Jews, we should all be able to sympathize with Nicodemus. He placed a high value on working hard in order to experience salvation...and we can sympathize with what it means to place a high value on hard work.

But then Jesus went and told him that the only thing he could do to experience God's salvation had *nothing* to do with hard work – at least not any hard work *he* would be

doing. Because when you get born, *you* sure aren't the one doing the hard work...right?

That work was done by the woman who carried you in her womb. That work was done by the team of people who surrounded that woman with care and support. And, for a significant amount of time *after* we are born, the work of keeping us alive, and helping us to *thrive*, that work is done by the mothers, fathers, aunties, uncles, grandparents, and friends who labor, day in and day out, on our behalf...long before we can do much of anything on our own.

Salvation begins when we are *born again*. Salvation begins when we realize we cannot do life on our own.

In many addiction recovery programs, the first step in conquering the addiction is acknowledging a powerlessness in the face of that addiction...a sense that a person is powerless to manage or control their addiction *on their own*. In order to manage or control the addiction, in order to calm its destructive wake, *help* is needed. Help from God, help from other people.

This concept rings true in so many facets of our messy, messy lives: we simply cannot *do life and experience salvation* on our own. When we try to go it alone, or when we try to manage and control everything, the mess just gets bigger...and, eventually, we feel as though we've wandered far too far.

So, like the baby bird in *Are You My Mother?*, for us, salvation begins when someone other than ourselves leads us back to the nest from which we came – the heart and home of God.

For in that nest we can settle-into the assurance of God's love for us. And, in that nest, we are reminded that we were never on our own in the first place.

Frankly, Baby Bird was destined to fail on his mission to find Mother Bird. Within himself, he did not have the resources needed to find her. He should have stayed put in the nest, trusting that she would return to him. But, he thought he could find what he needed...on his own.

Only after wandering about, encountering all the wrong animals, and only after becoming rather lonely and frightened, did Baby Bird get the help he truly needed...and from a surprising source.

*Nicodemus* found help and salvation from Jesus...Jesus, who had a message that was surprising to a rule-following, rule-enforcing pharisee. "Salvation is about being born again," Jesus said. Salvation is about doing the one thing no one can do for themselves.

Salvation is about resting in the assurance that God is always laboring to give us life. Salvation is about the assurance that God is always working to provide for our true needs. Salvation is about the assurance that God finds us when we wander. And thanks be to God for it.

Let us pray...

*Holy One, you created us...you made us fearfully and wonderfully. For that, we are so thankful. Yet you know there are times we forget that you have been with us since before we were born – times we forget that you have cared for us, provided for us, strengthened us, challenged us... times that you have found us when we wandered away from you. Draw us ever closer to you, that we might be assured of your constant love and provision. May we never forget that our salvation is dependent upon you; in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*