

McCabe United Methodist Church

May 27, 2018

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

How the Grinch Could Not Steal Christmas

Sermon on John 1 (selected verses) & Matthew 6:19-21 (5/26 & 5/27/18)

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Holy God, may the words of my mouth, the thoughts of all our minds, and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you...you call us by name, we are yours...so may all we do and say bring honor to you; we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

It's possible some of you worshiping with us today may find it a bit strange that, on this, the last weekend in *May*, we have somehow found ourselves at the end of *December*...with a bit of a Christmas celebration. And, of course, this particular weekend in *May*, is not just *any* weekend: it's *Memorial Day* weekend.

Though I think of him more often than on Memorial Day weekend, every year on this weekend, Army Staff Sergeant Robb Roling is very present on my mind and heart.

I often jokingly refer to Robb as the first boy who ever tried to kiss me. Our parents are very good friends and he and I were in the same class in school, so we kind of grew-up together. I wouldn't say *we* were friends, per se, and I remember being a bit scared as he chased me around my house trying to kiss me – we were probably 6-years-old at the time – but my memories of Robb are fond ones.

He was brilliant and he went to an elite college out east to study astrophysics (or some other very fancy-sounding scientific field). Then, in response to 9/11, he felt called to enlist in the army and he eventually became part of the Army Special Forces. On June 30, 2007, Robb was killed during an operation in Baghdad.

Robb is the only soldier I know, personally, who was killed in action while serving in our military...so he's the one I think of every Memorial Day weekend. The photos on the screen are from just over a year ago when The Global War on Terror Wall of Remembrance was at the Bismarck Events Center. My husband and I visited the exhibit and I was grateful for the opportunity to find Robb's name on the wall.

This being a somewhat somber weekend of memorial and reflection, yes, it may seem a bit strange to be using a *Christmas* story to help shape the message of the day. But, first of all, in a sermon series utilizing Dr. Seuss stories, we could *not* leave out *The Grinch*. And, in many ways, Memorial Day weekend is exactly the right weekend for us to utilize this particular Seuss story.

Despite the way many of us celebrate over this three-day weekend, we know in our heart of hearts, Memorial Day weekend is about something much

deeper, much more grand, something much more *holy* than going camping or grilling-out with family and friends while perhaps enjoying an extra day off of work.

Memorial Day weekend is, first and foremost, about remembering those who fully gave themselves – generously and sacrificially – in service to our country.

*And...*those of us who claim faith in Jesus Christ know in our heart of hearts that Christmas is about something much deeper, something much more grand, something much more *holy* than presents and decorations and feasts.

How the Grinch Stole Christmas is clearly a secular – a non-religious – Christmas story...but, despite the fact that there is no mention of Jesus in it, its message is also a core part of the *Christian* Christmas story – a story that has very little to do with presents, decorations, and feasts.

Despite it not being a religious Christmas story, the story of the Grinch relates to the Christian Christmas message because, at its core, the story of the Grinch is all about generosity...and *generosity* is the very heart of the Christmas message.

Generosity of heart and life is at the core of Memorial Day weekend as we give thanks for members of our military who gave their lives while serving. And, of course, generosity of heart and life is at the core of Christmas.

Again, though it is not a religious Christmas story, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* provides a wonderful illustration for us about the power of Christmas to expand our hearts in order that we might live more generously toward and for others.

As Christians are sometimes asked, every once in a while I get asked what my favorite verses of the Bible are – or which verses *I think* sort of “sum up” the Bible's overall message. And the verses I think sum-up the entire Bible are verses 14 and 16 of John chapter 1:

“The Word became flesh and lived among us and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth ... From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.”

The message of Christianity – as shared in the words of the Bible – is all right there: that God's Son was born and lived among us. As he lived among us, we were witnesses to God's glorious, abundant grace and truth. And the writer, John, wanted us to know that from this Word-made-flesh, we do not simply receive *grace*. No, we receive *grace upon grace*. Abundant, generous grace.

As we continue to explore our way through different Dr. Seuss stories in this current sermon series, we also continue to explore the ways life is *messy*...and the ways in

which the God we know in Jesus Christ enters into the mess with us, working to bring healing and redemption – working to bring grace upon grace, into and out of the mess.

The first part of John chapter 1, is sometimes referred to as the prologue for the Gospel of John...and it's a *poem* about who Jesus is:

“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. All things came into being through him ... The Word became flesh and lived among us and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth ... From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.”

In Genesis chapter 1 – the very beginning of the Bible – God creates the world by *speaking* things into being. “God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light.” God used *words* to create.

Well, in John chapter 1, John tells us that Jesus has been with God *since* the very beginning – since the creation of the universe...that Jesus has been a part of who God is since the beginning...that the God who used words to create made those words come to life in a new way when Jesus was born into this world that first Christmas. “The Word became flesh and lived among us and ... From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.”

Jesus Christ is the Word of God made flesh and he came to live among us, that he might bring *grace upon grace* into our messy lives – that, through Jesus, we might experience a life of generosity within the mess.

And, throughout John's Gospel, Jesus offers sign after sign of the kind of generosity we're invited to experience through Jesus, God's Word-made-flesh.

In John chapter 2, Jesus goes to a wedding feast and, when the wine runs out, he turns a massive amount of ordinary water into a massive amount of extraordinary wine.

In John 4, Jesus sets aside cultural rules about gender and ethnicity to talk with and bless a woman from Samaria – someone those cultural rules should have prevented him from talking with.

In chapter 5 of John's Gospel, Jesus heals a man who was paralyzed – and the healing happened on the Sabbath, when religious rules would have dictated that no one do any work, healing included. But Jesus, again, set aside the rules in order to offer grace.

In John chapter 6, Jesus feeds a crowd of over 5,000 people with only 5 loaves of bread and two fish...and, after everyone had their fill, there were 12 baskets of leftovers. In chapter 9, Jesus heals a man who had been born blind and, in chapter 11, Jesus raises a man from the dead. *Grace upon grace*. Abundant generosity of heart and life.

In John's Gospel, we meet a Jesus who enters into the mess of life and brings to the mess *grace upon grace*...Jesus enters into the mess of life and offers abundant generosity, inviting us to grow in our own generosity.

Now...generosity is kind of a tricky concept. So often, in and out of the church, when we talk about *generosity*, we mean to imply monetary generosity – generosity with our financial resources.

In the church, we talk about tithing – giving 10% of our household income back to God in thanksgiving for all God gives *us*...we talk about tithing or about working toward a tithe. And financial generosity is extremely important! But generosity is more all-encompassing than that.

In addition to the ways we are invited to be generous with our money, God also desires for us to be generous with our time, our talent...and in our attitude toward others.

Again, the signs of generosity Jesus demonstrated in John's Gospel included miracles like turning abundant, ordinary water into abundant, extraordinary wine...but he also demonstrated generosity by talking with people he should not have been talking with (according to cultural rules that were in place at the time).

In a world with ever-increasing political and religious polarization – a world where political agreement seems more important than anything else – people of Christian faith have an opportunity, like Jesus himself did, to demonstrate a different way of thinking and living.

Instead of judgment and political entrenchment, we have the opportunity to demonstrate attitudes of *generosity* toward others.

In so many ways, it seems our society is chock-full of Grinches whose hearts are (at least) two sizes too small. And how awful it must have been for the Grinch to have had such a teeny-tiny heart! Almost entirely alone up in his cave, looking down over Whoville with judgment, bitterness, and contempt.

I don't know about you, but, when I read *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, the Grinch is *not* the character I want to be like! I'd much rather be like the Whos in Whoville who manage to sing a joyful song even *after* their Christmas stuff has been

stolen...for it's only through that joyful singing – it's only through witnessing that generous-hearted attitude – that the Grinch's own heart begins to grow.

Of course, he had to stand in the cold snow, festering and stewing about it for several hours before his attitude began to shift. But *shift* it did.

“Every Who down in Who-ville, the tall and the small, / Was singing! Without any presents at all! / He HADN'T stopped Christmas from coming! / IT CAME! / Somehow or other, it came just the same!

“And the Grinch, with his grinch-feet ice-cold in the snow, / Stood puzzling and puzzling: 'How *could* it be so? / It came without ribbons! It came without tags! / It came without packages, boxes or bags!' / And he puzzled three hours, till his puzzler was sore. / *Then* the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before! /

“‘Maybe Christmas,’ he thought, ‘*doesn't* come from a store. / Maybe Christmas...perhaps...means a little bit more!’ / And what happened *then*...?

“Well...in Who-ville they say / That the Grinch's small heart / Grew three sizes that day! / And the minute his heart didn't feel quite so tight, / He whizzed with his load through the bright morning light / And he brought back the toys! And the food for the feast! / And he... / HE HIMSELF...! / *The Grinch carved the roast beast!*” //

The Grinch could *not*, in fact, steal Christmas. And, when he finally let himself receive the song of the Whos, he realized life was so much better when joining in the joy...life was so much *richer* with a big heart – a generous heart.

“The Word became flesh and lived among us and ... From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.”

So...where might God be inviting *us* to receive some much-needed “grace upon grace”? How might God be inviting *our* hearts to grow a size or two?

This Memorial Day weekend, how might God be inviting each of us to set aside our inner Grinch in order that we might experience a little bit of Christmas? How might God be inviting each of us to experience generosity in the midst of life's mess?

Jesus Christ, God's word-made-flesh, came to us that first Christmas 2,000 years ago in order that we might receive God's abundant generosity...that we might receive not just grace, but *grace upon grace*.

Friends, the invitation to *receive* that grace-upon-grace is always open...and so is the invitation to share it.

Let us pray...

Holy One, for your Word-made-flesh, Jesus Christ, we are so thankful. Through him you offer us grace upon grace and, through him, you invite us into your very heart – your heart of generosity. Where our hearts are two sizes too small, shower us with your grace that our hearts might expand. Help us to join with you, year-round, in the joyous Christmas song. And, as we receive your grace, may we offer it to others; in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.