

McCabe United Methodist Church

June 9 & 10, 2018

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

Made in God's Image...Star-Belly or Not

Sermon on Genesis 1:1-5, 26-27 & Galatians 3:26-28

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The beginning of *The Sneetches* by Dr. Seuss: “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 out walking, / They'd hike right on past 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 frankfurter 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 story continues with a con-man named “Sylvester McMonkey McBean” arriving at the beach where all the Plain-Belly Sneetches are hanging out, moping about their sad lot in life. Sylvester has with him a bizarre contraption that will allow a Plain-Belly Sneetch to enter into it and then come out the other side with a star on his or her belly.

Of course, the procedure manufactured by this contraption came at a price...but the Plain-Belly Sneetches were so desperate to be acknowledged by the Star-Belly Sneetches that they paid their money and every single one of them got a star added to their belly.

When the Sneetches who had been born with Star-Bellies saw all these formerly Plain-Belly Sneetches *with* stars on their bellies, do you think they were happy to add more Star-Bellies to their ranks? Of course not! They were so set in their sense of quote-unquote “natural superiority” that they just *had* to find a way to differentiate themselves from these newly Star-Bellied Sneetches.

So, they found Sylvester McMonkey McBean – or he found them – and they paid money to have their stars *removed* in another of his contraptions. Proudly bearing

their plain bellies, the formerly Star-Belly Sneetches paraded snobbily by the formerly Plain-Belly Sneetches, fully resuming their air of superiority.

Sadly, the cycle continued to a ridiculous conclusion: the Sneetches spent all their money going round after round, in and out of Sylvester's "star on" and "star off" machines, changing their appearance in hopes of gaining their place or *maintaining* their place in Sneetch society.

And when all their money had been spent, Sylvester McBean happily drove away with his machines, with a whole bunch of money, *and* with some rather stunned Sneetches in his wake. The con-man thought he had created unfixable chaos among the Sneetches. However, the last page of the story tells of a different result:

"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."

In the beginning, when God spoke the universe into being, God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. Then there was sky to separate the waters above the sky from the waters below the sky. Then there was the creation of land and vegetation, followed by the creation of the sun, the moon, and the stars. Next came the fish and other sea-faring creatures, along with the birds of the air...plus the land-living beasts. And, according to God, it was *all good*.

Then, as we heard read in Genesis 1, verses 26 and 27, "God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness ... so God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.'"

"Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image...'" That's how we humans were made: in God's image. That's how *each of us* was made: in the image of our good and gracious God.

Earlier this week, a friend of mine shared a quote on Facebook by Christian writer and speaker, Bob Goff...I thought it connected so well to these words from Genesis chapter 1.

Goff said, "God's never looked in your mirror and wished he saw someone else. You are enough. You are loved. You are his. Own that." Isn't that absolute grace and mercy? *"God's never looked in your mirror and wished he saw someone else. You are enough. You are loved. You are his. Own that."*

And we are enough because, at our conception, we were created in God's image – no matter who we are, where we are from, what we look like, what color our skin, what our socioeconomic status...it doesn't matter.

When God looks in our mirror, within our own reflection is a reflection of God's very self. *That* is meant to define who we are...not some “star” on our belly.

Years ago, I worked as a server in a restaurant where one of our hosts was a young, Muslim woman who wore a head scarf. One night when she was working, a couple came in to dine and, upon seeing this young woman at the host stand, they sought out a manager and specifically asked *not* to be seated by her...simply because she was Muslim.

I heard about this after the fact and was so saddened.¹ That we are each of us created in God's image is an across-the-board reality – regardless of religious identity. We may disagree with the tenets of someone else's religion – as they may disagree with ours – but we are still called to acknowledge each other as having been created by the God in whose image we were *each* made.

That's the message of our verses from Genesis chapter 1. It *sounds like a simple message*...but, it's not. Not only do we often struggle to understand and to value ourselves as ones made in God's own image, but we also often struggle to understand and to value *others* as ones made in God's own image. It's messy, isn't it?

It's messy...so entirely appropriate to consider as we continue in our *The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss: Life Is Messy!* sermon series. And today, the two Scripture readings we've heard are both critically important.

Again, the message of our verses from Genesis chapter 1 is that we are each of us – everywhere in this wide world – created in God's own image. It's a broad, all-encompassing message. The message of our verses from Galatians chapter 3, however, gets a bit more specific for those of us who call ourselves “Christian”.

The book of Galatians in our Bible is a letter written by the apostle Paul to the Christian church he started in Galatia. We know this area today as being part of modern-day Turkey. Paul had traveled to Galatia as part of a missionary journey to help expand the message of Jesus.

Because Jesus himself was Jewish, the first people to know Jesus and to know of his message were other Jewish people.

¹ The identifying details of this story have been modified, but the circumstance described is as it was.

However, not long after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven, the good news of Jesus began to spread *beyond* the Jewish community to the Gentiles. ("Gentile" is a word that simply means "non-Jew". Unless any of us here were born Jewish, we're all Gentiles.)

And, one of the biggest challenges – if not *the* biggest challenge – of the new and growing Christian church came about as a result of the message of Jesus being spread to Gentiles.

See, the Jewish believers in Jesus had, for all their lives, been abiding by the laws and practices of Judaism...laws and practices that, among other things, included certain dietary restrictions *and* that included male circumcision.

When Gentiles began hearing and believing the message of Jesus, questions immediately arose about whether or not they needed to begin following Jewish religious laws as part of their new Christian religious faith and practice. Many Jewish Christians felt strongly that Gentile Christians needed to abide by Jewish law and practice, while others – including the apostles Peter and Paul – firmly believed that requiring Gentile converts to adopt Jewish law and practice proved too much of a stumbling block and would, therefore, keep them outside Christian faith and outside the church.

For the Jewish people, their strict dietary practices, and the practice of male circumcision, were marks of identity...badges of honor defining them over and against other religious groups. And there is nothing inherently wrong with that! But, the Holy Spirit led the leaders of the early church to grow beyond those particular distinctions.

It was okay for Jewish Christians to continue to follow Jewish religious laws...but Peter and Paul made it *very* clear that Gentile converts to Christianity did *not* need to be burdened by following Jewish dietary laws or by practicing male circumcision.

Paul would have been abundantly clear on this point when he traveled to Galatia and first shared with them the good news of Jesus.

Unfortunately, some time after Paul and *his* missionary crew started the church in Galatia, a different group of missionaries arrived and began teaching things contrary to what Paul had taught them...things like how Gentile Christians *did* need to follow Jewish religious law and practice.

Much of Paul's letter to the Galatian Christians reflects the fact that he is trying to "fix" the mess created by these other missionaries. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul reminds them of things he'd taught them when he was first with them...and the main point of his teachings is found in chapter 3, verses 26-28:

"for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or

Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

Whereas back in Genesis 1, we learn that we are all of us – regardless of religious identity – made in God's image...here in Galatians chapter 3, Paul teaches us that, *within the church* – within the community of Christians – we are not to make distinctions about who is in or out.

Gentile (here, referred to as “Greek”) believers in Jesus and Jewish believers in Jesus were to be on the same level in the church... regardless of dietary practice or circumcision. Christians who were slaves and Christians who were free were to be on the same level in the church...regardless of their social standing in the wider community. And, within the church, men and women were to be equal...regardless of what those outside the church might say or believe.

In this world, we are each of us made in God's image. Within the *church*, we're all like those Sneetches on the beaches, made in God's image... whether or not we have some literal or metaphorical star on our belly.

Gentile or Jew...slave or free...male or female...white, brown, or black... republican or democrat...young or not-so-young...married or single... rich or poor...traditional worship lover or contemporary worship lover...in the church, these kinds of distinctions are not meant to matter. They are not supposed to matter. They *should not matter* to us. And, if we find that they *do* matter to us, we might want to check our level of Star-Belly snobbery and pray that God opens our heart.

This past week, there were two high-profile celebrity suicides: the first was fashion designer Kate Spade, whose whimsical clothing and accessories have helped millions of women – myself included – feel fun and fashionable...the second was chef and travel correspondent Anthony Bourdain, who taught people that travel and food can help expand our human experience in powerfully positive ways.

In a sermon about how we are all made in God's image, regardless of some of the “us and them” distinctions we humans make, I could take some time to discuss the tragedy of suicide. I could talk about how, because we are each made in God's image, no one ever needs to feel alone or unloved or that the world would be better without them in it.

I could talk about how desperately important it is for us to take care of each other...to be kind...to stand up to bullies...to encourage each other to seek help when life feels too messy or out-of-control. I could talk about all of these things because I believe them to be true and I believe such things connect well to today's Scripture readings.

However, instead of saying more about *those* things, I'm going to share a portion of a Time magazine article that was published online on Friday, in the wake of Anthony Bourdain's death. It features a semi-famous North Dakotan and, when I read the

article, it brought tears to my eyes.

The article is entitled “Viral Olive Garden Reviewer on Her Special Bond with Anthony Bourdain After He Came to Her Defense”, and many of you may remember the circumstances this article refers to. As I read from and talk about this article, listen for echoes of *The Sneetches*...and listen for echoes of our scriptures from Genesis and Galatians. The writer writes:

“Anthony Bourdain had countless journeys uncovering overlooked places around the world...But one of his most memorable efforts was his work with a restaurant reviewer in Grand Forks, North Dakota.

“After Grand Forks Herald dining critic Marilyn Hagerty went viral in 2012 for a review she wrote about Olive Garden (she called it 'impressive' and commended the 'generous' portion of chicken Alfredo she received), Bourdain quickly stepped out of the hordes of people who gave her a lot of snark for taking a chain restaurant so seriously. Instead, he met with Hagerty and published a book of her columns to which he wrote the foreword.”

The article then describes how Bourdain made Hagerty feel welcomed and included in the community of food critics – how, even though many food critics choose not to focus their energies on chain restaurants, Bourdain acknowledged that that's what many people in America love.

In the foreword Bourdain wrote for her book of restaurant reviews, he said, “Ms. Hagerty is not naïve about her work, her newfound fame, or the world. She has travelled widely in her life ... She misses nothing ...

“This is a straightforward account of what people [are eating] in much of America. As related by a kind, good-hearted reporter looking to pass along as much useful information as she can – while hurting no one ... Anyone who comes away from this work anything less than charmed by Ms. Hagerty—and the places and characters she describes—has a heart of stone.”²

Anthony Bourdain was one of the world's foremost chef's and food critics and, in the wake of snobby criticism from *many, many* others, he chose to see one of our own North Dakotans for who she truly is: someone who loves food, who loves her community, and who, through her work, wants to bring out the best in both.

Sounds to me like a couple of folks who have, in some ways, lived the spirit of our Scripture readings. For, among people of faith, there's no place for snobbery.

² <http://time.com/5306366/anthony-bourdain-marilyn-hagerty/>

There's no place for hearts of stone that are unwilling to look for the image of God in others. And, within the church, there's no place for distinctions like who has a star on their belly and who doesn't.

There *is* however, a lot of room for folks who are willing to come on in, to have a seat, and to listen for the good news of Jesus Christ. And there *is* a whole lot of room in the church for folks who see beyond differences in order to welcome others into our midst.

Let us pray...

Gracious God, there truly is so much in this life that is just plain messy. We see differences between ourselves and others and so often our first instinct is fear or judgment, rather than curiosity and welcome. Help us to recall the people in our lives who have made us feel welcomed and loved. May we be ever-grateful for them. May we be inspired by them. And may we be those figures of welcome and love for others. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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