

(6th Sunday after Pentecost)

The Psalmist, Dr. Seuss and God

Psalm 133

"See, how good and how pleasing it is for people to live together as one! It is like oil of great worth poured on the head, flowing down through the hair on the face, even the face of Aaron, and flowing down to his coat. It is like the morning water of Hermon coming down upon the hills of Zion. For there the Lord has given the gift of life that lasts forever."

"The Sneetches"

"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!"

Harper Lee, in her classic American novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, through the much-beloved character, Atticus Finch, says: "If you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his (or her) point of view until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it."

Atticus words to Scout deal with compassion and empathy as ways of understanding and living in relationship with other human beings who you might see as "different" than you.

Compassion is defined as "sympathetic pity and concern for the sufferings or misfortunes of others."

Empathy is defined as "the ability to understand and share the feelings of another person."

As followers of Christ, we are called to be compassionate and empathetic of others in the way Jesus embodied them in his life.

You would think then, that compassion and empathy would be, as those created by God, male and female, of all races and cultures, part of our divine DNA. You would think. And yet, throughout our human history, we have found ways to do just the opposite.

This story of separation and division, of trying to use God to show favoritism of one group over another, shows up in Genesis. Long before the musical *Oklahoma* asked if they "Farmer and the Rancher could be friends", there was Cain, the farmer, versus Abel, the rancher. pitted against each other. Out of anger and disappointment along with the fear of rejection for who he was and what he had to offer, Cain kills his brother, Abel.

When asked about his brother's whereabouts, Cain replies: "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?"

From that story on, we as human beings have tried to argue with God that, like Cain, we really are not responsible for the welfare of other people, because, well, they really aren't human beings created like us in God's own image.

Using stories like Cain and Abel, or Noah's cursing his son, Ham, and his descendants to a lifetime of slavery for discovering him drunk and naked, or Abraham choosing his son, Isaac, over his son, Ishmael, who he had with his mistress, Hagar, in the original "Handmaiden's Tale", or blaming the Jews for killing Jesus (who was Jewish) people have justified their discrimination and violence towards other people.

Distorting the true meaning of these Bible stories allowed "White" people in America to enslave and treat blacks harshly - for centuries. It was the reason early settlers to America and many thereafter saw our First Citizens (Native Americans) as "Savages" and stole their land, forced them onto reservations, and like they did with slaves, killed many along the way.

Dehumanizing another people is what allowed someone like Hitler to turn a nation on their Jewish, Catholic, and Gay neighbors, forcing them to wear a "star" or a "pink triangle" on their persons to identify them as such. The Holocaust was perfectly legal!

Elevating one race above another is what justified "Empires" from forcefully taking another people's land and resources for their own use by seeing those people as inferior to themselves.

Legality is a matter of power, not necessarily justice and especially not God's justice.

We would like to believe that we are above such behavior today. But are we?

If we are honest with ourselves, discrimination against others still infects our minds and hearts today.

You don't need to be forced to wear a "star" to separate one group from another. Sometimes discrimination is based on a person's appearance, from the clothes they wear to their hair style, to the school they attend to the place they live or as we know, the color of their skin, the language they speak, or the religion they practice.

As a college student, Theodor Geisel experienced some of these types of subtle lessons of discrimination when he was a freshman at Dartmouth College. Wanting to join a fraternity, he was rejected because of his "black hair and long nose," Geisel said, "I was supposed to be Jewish. It took a year and a half before word got around that I wasn't" So what if he was Jewish? What difference would it have made?

In the 1940's, he used his wit to address political hot button issues like the Jim Crow laws, anti-Semitism, and other forms of discrimination through his many political cartoons that were published in newspapers.

In 1953, he began working on another children's book. It would not be published until 1961. When it finally hit the shelves, *The Sneetches* had much to say about what was happening in America in regards to discrimination, segregation, and the Civil Rights movement.

With their "Stars on thars," "snoots in the air," better than you attitude, that closed the beaches and parties to those Sneetches who did not have "Stars on thars", Seuss brought the issue of religious persecution and racial discrimination into the home through a children's book.

As he noted in the introduction of the character, Sylvester McMonkey McBean, and his Fix-it-up machine, there is a "profit" to be made off of conflict between people. And there is profit to be made, which is a sad reality. Just ask the cosmetic and clothing companies, private schools, security firms, and weapon manufacturers.

Realizing they were being "played" by McBean, the Sneetches wised up. After much bickering between the two groups, the Sneetches came to the realization that in the end: "...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."

Of course, it is easy to come to that conclusion in a children's book, but what about the real world we live in? How can we, the children of God, created in God's own richly diverse and beautiful, rainbow of color image, begin to see one another as human beings and no kind of human being is better than any other one?

In a recent article, *Seeing Whiteness*, published in the *Christian Century* magazine, Reggie Williams says: "the story of race is about much more than our feelings toward one another, or about differences that we can fix with talk of tolerance or color blindness. The story of race is an ideology of difference that shapes our understanding of our selves, the world we inhabit, and the communities that we inhabit or want. As an ideology, racial thinking assigns a value to human beings who are grouped within artificial categories based on aesthetic features. In teaching (people) to embrace differences, we may end up accepting stereotyped understandings and artificial hierarchies. What is needed is not an embrace of contrived notions of racial differences, but a critical examination of them."

Alas, I do not have a simple answer for you this morning. Such examination of our notions of one another based on race and creed would take way more time than a sermon allows. But as Williams says, it is important for us to critically examine our notions of racial differences.

I don't know what you believe about people whose skin color, creed, dress, language or background is different than yours. I am not sure if or how your faith in Jesus has helped you examine how you see people who you view as different than yourself?

I have to admit, that as a white male, I see the world through a lens of privilege that a black pastor preaching to his black congregation or a Muslim cleric preaching to his people would see differently. I want so desperately to believe that in the end, we all will see each other as God sees us, as one beautiful and diverse mosaic of people reflecting the fullness of God's own sacred image.

Will we ever see ourselves as the Sneetches learned to see themselves? Will we ever be able to sing with the Psalmist: "See how good and pleasing it is for people to live together as one!" Or will we continue down our road of discrimination, judgment, separation, and destruction of the other because of our perceived differences?

What do you believe?