

It No Longer Matters if you have a Star or Not

*A sermon by the Rev. Shana M. P. McCauley
Preached at St. James, Tigard*

Every night, part of our ritual before we put our son to bed is to read him a story. At five months old, he can't really tell us what he wants us to read, so we get to pick the books that we like. I know this won't always be the case, but for now, I enjoy it. I like to read Dr. Seuss, even if some of his books are tongue twisters. He is great at teaching important life lessons in a fun way. The other night, I learned an important life lesson from *The Sneetches*.

You see, there are two kinds of Sneetches; Star-belly and Plain-belly. On the first page there is a picture of two yellow Sneetches, one with a green star on its belly, and the story begins thus:

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!"

In a way that only Dr. Seuss can, and a bit more whimsically than Paul did, Dr. Seuss addresses the way people treat those who are different. Paul is a bit more serious about it; Paul was a bit more serious about just about everything, but I guess that's a sermon for another time!

In Jesus' time, Jews were *born* Jews. There was no conversion. They hung out with, worked with, and married other Jews. And their children were Jews. Partially, they stayed separate for purity reasons, but partly it was to obey the laws. Jews were required to keep Kosher, which is no small undertaking. Keeping kosher means that certain animals may not be eaten at all, and of those that are allowed, they must be killed and prepared a certain way. Only certain parts of the allowable animals are permitted for eating – hence the Hebrew National Hot Dogs slogan "No butts about it." Fruits and vegetables are ok, but must be checked for bugs, which are not ok. There's no mixing of meat and dairy. Food from the ocean must have gills and scales – no shellfish or other seafood. Also, utensils and plates must never touch anything that isn't Kosher and there must be separate dishes for meat. Grape products must be prepared by Jews. And so on.

Furthermore, in Jesus' time, Jews were pretty much restricted to interacting with other Jews, we see this even in language. There were Jews and there were Gentiles, and what made someone a Gentile? Not being a Jew; to the Jews, you were either Jew or not Jew, aka Gentile. And interactions with Gentiles could cause someone to become unclean and require ritual cleaning in the temple.

Much like the Jews of Jesus' time, the Star-Belly Sneetches also stay with their own kind. Dr. Seuss says that the Plain-Bellies weren't invited to play ball, roast

frankfurters, or toast marshmallows; in fact, the Star-Bellies wouldn't even talk to the Plain-Bellies when they passed each other on the beach.

One day, the Fix-it-Up Chappie Sylvester McMonkey McBean comes along,

And he said, "You want stars like a Star-Belly Sneetch...?"

My friends, you can have them for three dollars each!"

So the Plain-Bellies pay up and go through the machine, popping out on the other side with stars on their bellies.

Jesus came to offer a solution too. He cleared the decks and opened the kingdom of Heaven for anybody who was interested. In Seuss-speak, he said that we didn't need stars on our bellies, though if we have them, that's fine. But like the Star-Belly Sneetches, the Jews didn't welcome equality with open arms. They worked hard to be Jews, and many of them expected to be rewarded for their commitment. It took a lot of work to be a law-abiding Jew after all. Even for Paul, this free undeserved equality is a challenge. In several of his letters, he makes it clear that he was an obedient Jew, who kept Kosher, and stayed away from the unclean, almost as if he was bragging. I think he says so especially to gain credibility with the new Christians who still considered themselves Jews. From Paul's letters, we can guess that there was a fair bit of griping from members of the new Christian communities about these heathen Gentiles being welcomed into their communities.

The Star-Belly Sneetches have a similar gripe about the newly starred Plain-Bellies. They are not happy at all about these Johnny Come Lately's who bought the star on their bellies – after all, the Star-Bellies were born with that right. About that time, the Fix-it-Up Chappie Sylvester McMonkey McBean comes along to save the day once again. For the low price of \$10, he will take that star right off their bellies. So they pay and get their stars removed.

This creates quite the mess. Every minute or two, the Sneetches are going through the machines to have their star removed or put on. Finally, when they are out of money, Sylvester McMonkey McBean packs up and takes off with a smile on his face.

"They never will learn. No. You can't teach a Sneetch!"

But, Dr. Seuss says, 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.

The Sneetches learned that day what Jesus came to teach us. Jesus simplified the multitudes of laws down to two commandments, to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. No longer were people required to keep Kosher, to offer sacrifices, to be circumcised or to only interact with other Jews. He made no distinction – suddenly, the Chosen People included everyone, not a select few. "For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us," Paul writes.

Even now, we Christians spend more time than we should worrying about stars on bellies. For many years, we didn't invite African Americans to our churches at all. When we did start allowing them, we restricted them to African American churches. Does that not sound just outrageously absurd? It's hard for me to imagine the vanity in

thinking that any human would be so powerful as to restrict people from God. And yet, many never gave this a second thought.

And the reality is, we still do this today. Many Episcopal parishes are ethnically and economically homogenous, as well as having parishioners who are all close in age. Unlike the days of segregation, which have left its legacy in the church, this is usually quite innocent. Most of us are naturally drawn to others who are like us. As a new mom, for instance, when I see parents with young children, I feel a certain kinship with them. At coffee hour, I'm inclined to seek them out over others who I don't have any superficial similarity with. And this is true for most people. It's natural to be drawn toward people like you; people you perceive to have similar life experiences. This means that communities over time become fairly homogenous, because people will seek those who are like them, and if they don't find them in one community, they will often go to another. The result is that the people who are left are usually in the same ethnic group, age group, economic group, and so on.

This is what the early Christians were struggling with – did they really have to welcome those who were so very different from them? These Gentiles hadn't worked nearly so hard to be worthy of God's love, and yet Paul was telling them that they were just as beloved as the Jews who had worked so hard. Jesus' simplification of the law made it a lot harder as it turned out. Before they could obey the letter of the law, now they were being pushed to obey the spirit of the law.

But in so many ways, many of us are not so different from those early Christians. It is really tempting to stay within the safety of relationships with people who are just like us. But if we are followers of Christ, we have an obligation to go beyond that. This loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself business is hard, but that's no reason not to try. Someone once said that it was through meeting others that they learned more and more about the nature of God. Today, I remind you that we are all called to keep learning more about God. It's risky, and what's worse, the consequences are uncertain. We don't know what could happen. But Jesus died so that we would all be welcome at the table, regardless of our earned or unearned worthiness. And the one thing he asked was that we love each other this way, to love one another regardless of worthiness.

So this week, talk to someone you've never talked to before. Heck, today go to coffee hour and talk to a stranger. Ask them what their dreams are and what they're passionate about. Building relationships with others will enrich your life almost every time. Let us learn from Jesus and the Sneetches. Truly loving one another means embracing the unfamiliar, loving others regardless of superficial differences. With a whole world of love to gain, what do we have to lose?