

Summer Sermon Series: The Biblical Messages of Dr. Seuss
“The Cat and the Hat Returns or Cleaning up Our Mess”
Mark 10:13-17; Isaiah 1:16-18; Ephesians 2:11-22
Salem United Methodist Church; July 19, 2015
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Back in April a friend was congratulating me on receiving my doctorate and stated, “Do we now call you “Dr. SueSS?” She was combining my first name and the two initials of my last name. The children’s author, Dr. Seuss, is spelled differently. However, the name stuck so much so that Blake Roberts gave me a graduation gift of two books, *The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss*, by James Kemp and *The Parables of Dr. Seuss*, by Robert Short. As I read them, they took my back to when I was a children’s librarian and storyteller. I was drawn to stories they taught children how to overcome difficulties and fears, stories that taught respect and care for others, and stories that offered messages of hope and well being.

Everyone loves a good story. We seek out movies, books to read, plays, and TV shows that share a good story. And we love to discuss these stories with others such as in book clubs, or get together with friends after seeing a movie or play together. But what makes a good story? There needs to be good solid characters with depth. The plot has to have an element of tension, such as good vs. evil, or light vs. darkness. Cinematographers often will use the elements of light and dark to visually flush out this tension in a movie. Often we consider a story to be a good one because there is something in it that connects with our life’s story. The Bible is filled with these kinds of good stories. We can find ourselves in the dysfunctional lives of those in the Abraham saga. We can identify with King David’s abuse of power and the fumbling naivety of Jesus’ disciples. And yet the Bible is just one story made up of many stories. The Bible is the story of God’s love for us, God wanting to be in relationship with us. God will do anything to win over our love including becoming human. The Bible is a story in which God ultimately wins in the end and we win, too because of God’s actions.

So what is it about Dr. Seuss’ stories that connect with us? Could it be the silly illustrations? Or are there deeper truths buried within the simple rhyme? Theodore Seuss Geisel, the real name behind the pen name, Dr. Seuss, is to have stated, “There is no particular message in these books, unless it’s one of eternal hope.” He never boasted about being a super Christian, yet there are some deep Christian truths in his stories. For instance, the most popular Dr. Seuss book, *The Cat In The Hat* with only 220 words, we discover that we are never alone. Jesus, a.k.a The Cat In the Hat, can enter in our lives at our lowest moments, bring us great joy, and turn our world upside down at the same time. We learn, too, that Jesus can restore our frazzled lives and give us hope. This is the message Paul offers us in the Ephesians passage today. He states that once the people had no hope, but now we have more than hope. We have peace through Jesus Christ and we are members of the household of God. We belong to God. That’s a comforting hope, isn’t it?

Back to the Cat in the Hat, the story ends with a question when the mother comes home, “What should we do? Should we tell her about it?” In other words, should we tell her about the visit by the Cat in the Hat? Isn’t this the question we face every day in our lives as Christians? Should we tell people we know and love about the hope and peace we have in Jesus? Should we tell them the comfort we have knowing that we are members of God’s household? What do you think? Since I used *The Cat In The Hat* in the children’s sermon, I would like to focus on its sequel, *The Cat in The Hat Comes Back* in this sermon.

For the sake of time, I will not read the entire book, but retell it for us. The story opens with the same two children who are in *The Cat And The Hat*. Sally and her brother, the narrator, are left alone again. They are to shovel the “deep, deep snow.” “There was no time for fun... There was work to be done.” I think many of us can identify with this. There is always work to be done and it can be such drudgery. But then, who shows up again? The Cat in the Hat! The brother who represents the status quo becomes quite anxious. The message of joy and hope that the Cat left him the last time did not last. So the Cat comes back. When we lose our way, when we lose our faith or hope, Jesus never gives up on us, but returns to offer it to us again and again. The Cat in the Hat makes himself at home by taking a bath. There is this picture in the book of the Cat in the bathtub filled with water eating cake with pink icing. The boy narrator

tells the Cat that eating cake in the tub is a bad thing to do. The cat laughs and states that he likes to eat cake in the tub and that the boy should try it sometime. Instead, the boy tells him to get out. He has no time for the Cat. Hold this image. We have a tub of water, the cat, and cake. If the Cat in the Hat is the image of Christ, could the water and cake be the images of the sacraments, baptism and communion? The Cat offers the invitation. "You should try it some time." When Jesus offers us an invitation, how often do we respond? In the book the boy narrator responds with "Get out! I have no time for that. We don't want you about?" Do we ever tell Jesus to get out of our lives? We don't want you about.

As the Cat prepares to leave, he leaves something behind, a pink ring around the tub. We soon discover that the boy narrator is somewhat obsessive. He is very concerned about the ring in the tub. The Cat agrees to clean it up, but as he does, the pink spreads to everything in the house including the snow. For those of us who need to have everything clean and in its place, we can understand the boy's anxiety. Hold the image of the pink being spread everywhere. But where did it first appear? After the "baptismal" water empties out of the tub. What happens in baptism? Our sin is washed away. Remember the passage from Isaiah? He tells the Israelites that they could change from their evil ways by washing themselves. God promises to take their scarlet colored sins and make them white as snow. As the Cat prepares to get out, the boy sees for the first time the pink ring of "sin." This is tough lesson for us. As we grow closer to Jesus, we become much more aware of our sin. We begin to see ourselves the way God sees us. Master Eckhardt, a 13th century German priest, wrote, "The eye through which I see God is the same eye through which God sees me; my eye and God's eye are one eye, one seeing, one knowing, one love." As we begin to see with God's eye we see our pink mess of sin is everywhere and how it is affecting every aspect of our lives. It spreads on the rug down the hall to the bed, to the TV, to the fan that blows it everywhere including down the steps and onto the white mounds of snow. The boy narrator found it very distressing, as we do when we realize the harm our sin has on our world. However, the Cat comes to the rescue and knows just how to clean up the mess. He has 26 smaller Cats in the Hat in his hat. Their names range from Little Cat A to Little Cat Z, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. However, twenty five cats cannot clean up the sin. They are only good at spreading it everywhere or at the least showing the boy that the sin is everywhere. There is one who can clean it up, Little Cat Z who is too small to see. How many stories in the Bible have the youngest, the least likely one being the hero? There's Joseph, David, Ruth, and even Jesus. The last and littlest cat is the most powerful one. The Holy Spirit cannot be seen either, yet it comes into our lives cleaning up our messes one by one. And so Little Cat Z takes off his hat and VOOM! All the pink sin is cleaned up and it is white as snow again. The Cat states, "Now your snow is all white! Your house is all right...If you ever have spots, now and then, I will be very happy to come here again."

Our pink mess can spread everywhere. Our mess is everywhere. We often resist Jesus coming into our lives offering us the refreshing water and life giving "cake." We don't want to be confronted with our sin. Thank you very much. Get out! But our spiritual journey requires confronting our sin and getting our messes cleaned up. On a personal level, if the Cat was showing you the pinkness of sin in your life, where would it be? What would it be? Does your eye see what God sees? And what a mess our world is in! Racism and politics seem to be turning every white mound of snow pink. Violence and vile words are blowing towards those who look different, believe differently, and act differently. Loving our neighbor is going down the drain. Only a pink ring of hate and violence remains. What is our role as Christians in all of this? Are we to be the boy narrator who wants to keep everything status quo? Or are we to act like the Cat in the Hat who calls the pink mess what it is and works at cleaning it up? On the other hand, how much do we contribute to the pinkness of sin? Do our eyes see what God sees? How is the Cat in the Hat cleaning up a mess in your life or how has the Cat in the Hat cleaned up a mess in your life? Just remember the Cat promises to come again and again to clean up our messes.

Each of us will see different truths in these stories. Something will connect with us differently, but I raise this as one interpretation. What is yours?

Resources: *The Cat in the Hat* and *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back* by Dr. Seuss; *The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss* by James Kemp; *The Parables of Dr. Seuss* by Robert Short