

Summer Sermon Series: The Biblical Messages of Dr. Seuss

“Yertle the Turtle and the Beatitudes”

2 Samuel 11:1-15; Matthew 5:1-12; Matthew 7:24-27; Philippians 2:1-11

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The idea for this sermon series began when I received my doctorate and a friend called me Dr. SueSS. Then I received two books on the theology found in Dr. Seuss' books. We have fallen in love with the messages in the Dr. Seuss stories. We read them again and again as children and/or we read them again and again to our children. In this sermon series we will dig deeper into these messages and connect them to their biblical counterparts.

Have you heard? A new Dr. Seuss manuscript was found and is being published. The book is called, *What Pet Should I Get?* It was debuted to a class of children in La Jolla, California. In the mid 1950's Ted Geisel, the man behind the pen name of Dr. Seuss, lived in La Jolla, California. At that time he was known as a local children's book author and illustrator. Several times he was invited to the local elementary schools to read his latest book to the children. When my husband was a first grader in San Diego, Dr. Seuss came and read to his class-a time he has not forgotten. The children this past week who had the last Dr. Seuss book read to them will remember this, too.

Dr. Seuss had a brilliant mind. Anyone, who can take complex, adult themes and simplify them so children understand them, is brilliant. Yertle the Turtle was first copyrighted in 1950, yet its theme of greed and selfishness is eternal. I love the way Dr. Seuss opens the story. All is right with the world. “Yertle the Turtle was king of the pond. A nice little pond. It was clean. It was neat. The water was warm. There was plenty to eat. The turtles had everything turtles might need. And they were all happy. Quite happy indeed.” This statement reminds me of Genesis 1. After God has created everything, God states that humankind has everything that we need. It reads, “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Genesis 1:21). God created the perfect world. The turtles lived in a perfect world...until... Yertle, the king, decided that his kingdom is too small. Have you ever known of anyone who thought their “kingdom” was too small? Have you ever thought your “kingdom” was too small? Kingdom could be defined as acquiring larger and more material things, like cars or property. We are not satisfied with what we have. We want a bigger this or that, or more of this or that. Kingdom could be defined as climbing the career ladder, too. We set out to do whatever we can to obtain that more prestigious position with absolutely no concern whose backs we might have to break in order to reach the top. And that's what Yertle does. He is king of the pond, but he wants more. He wants to rule all he can see. To reach his dream, he orders the turtles in his kingdom to stand on each other's backs to create a higher and higher throne. The higher he gets the more he sees. The higher he gets the higher he wants to be to see even more and be ruler of it. The tower of turtles standing on each other's backs grows and grows. One turtle, Mack, complains about how his back, shoulders, and knees are hurting. All the turtles are suffering at the expense of the king. Mack pleads with Yertle to stop. Yertle silences Mack and calls for more turtles to build the tower even higher. Mack is a bit of a revolutionist. He burps and the tower collapses. Yertle now falls from being king of the pond to being king of the mud.

David was a Yertle-type of king, too. God had given him the kingship of Israel. He had everything he needed, but it wasn't enough. He wanted more, especially Bathsheba, the wife of one of his faithful officers, Uriah. While Uriah is off fighting for his king, David abuses his power and takes Uriah's wife. She becomes pregnant. David continues to abuse his power by calling Uriah back from the field with the hope that Uriah would sleep with Bathsheba. This would cover up who the real father of the baby was. Uriah refused to sleep with his wife while his soldiers were fighting

in battle. So David abuses his power one more time and sends Uriah to the front of the war with the hope that Uriah would be killed in battle. And he was. David got what he wanted, Bathsheba, but on the suffering backs of both she and her husband. The prophet, Nathan, confronts David and his kingdom begins to topple until he is not much more than the king of the mud.

Jesus addresses our need for power when he lists what we call the Beatitudes from his Sermon on the Mount. In the third one, he calls those who are meek blessed. Being meek is the opposite of being power hungry. When we think of someone who is meek, we think of someone is passive, shy, who gives into another's will, a doormat, a "yes" man. However, the real meaning of meek means humble. The Common English Bible uses the word, humble, instead of meek in this passage. The word, humble, comes from the Latin word, *humilis*. Humus, the rich, dark soil that is created from decaying vegetation, comes from the same Latin word. Humble people are people of the earth. They are people who know that they are not better or worse than anyone else. They know that they are children of God and that is enough. Listen to how Eugene Peterson translates the Beatitude about the meek inheriting the earth. "You're blessed when you're content with just who you are—no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought" (Matthew 5:5).

We live in a world where we are not satisfied with who we are or what we have. We want more and more and more so we can be something that we are not. The term, Christians, means that we are people who are like Christ. But to be like Christ we have to know who Christ is. Paul, another brilliant writer explains who Christ. He writes in his letter to the church at Philippi that Jesus as God humbled himself to become human. He used his divine powers not to abuse humans, but to offer healing, grace, and love. He came to serve us, to be our servants. A servant is one who puts their needs aside and meets the need of another. They will even try to guess what one needs and meet it before one even knows one has a need. Servants have historically been considered as a lower class, even slaves. They lived very humble lives-opposite ones from those they served. Paul tells us that as followers of Christ we are to serve each other out of compassion, sympathy, and love. We are to be about the interests of others before our own, and then we are united in Christ's love.

A medieval woman mystic, Julian of Norwich, understood this concept. She wrote in a book called *The Showings*, "God makes no distinction in love between the blessed soul of Christ and the least soul on this earth." In sports terms, we with Christ are all part of God's team. Not one of us sits out the game or keeps the bench warm. We all have a playing position on God's team. Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest, states that "God can only see Christ in us, it seems, because we are the extended Body of Christ in space and time; Christ is what God sees and cannot not love." God sees Christ in us and loves each of us. Not one of us is more important than the other. We are all one in God's love. So in the words of Paul, we are to be the same mind as Christ's. We are one with Christ and one with each other- a profound statement that is said in our communion liturgy.

Reflection Questions: What does this mean for us in our 21st century life? Do we live as Christian royalty on the backs of those who have little? Is our lifestyle one like Yertle the Turtle? Or do we serve God's people no matter what status they hold in our world? How do you live a Christ-like life? How can you live a more Christ-like life? Who do you know who lives a Christ-like life and you could use to model this life-style for you? Are you a Mack who speaks out against the oppression of a Yertle? What kind of "burp" might help the "dynasty" to collapse?

Resources: *Yertle the Turtle* by Dr. Seuss; *The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss* by James Kemp; Richard Rohr's Meditation: Julian of Norwich, Part III.