

***Summer Sermon Series: The Biblical Messages of Dr. Seuss***  
***“Horton Hears a Who or Caring for the Least”***  
***Deuteronomy 26:11-13; Psalm 24:1-2; Matthew 25:31-46; I John 4:7-16***  
***Salem United Methodist Church; August 16, 2015***  
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One of the methodologies of Jesus’ teaching was to tell parables or stories that held hidden truths. To teach his message Jesus would make an analogy from his culture. Often after Jesus told one of these parables, the disciples would ask him to tell them what it meant and he would. Dr. Seuss or Theodore Geisel is a modern day creator of parables. He made analogies and tells the story in such a way that both children and adults get the message. In our summer sermon series we are identifying the hidden truths in Dr. Seuss’ parables and connecting them to biblical truths. Today’s story is *Horton Hears a Who*.

When I was in elementary school there were several children who came to school dirty. Their clothing was soiled and torn. Their hair was oily and uncombed. And they had an unpleasant odor. Bathing appeared not to be a priority. No one wanted to sit near them or play with them. We even nicknamed them as the “Cooties.” If anyone touched them, sat near them, or had to drink after them at the water fountain, this person then “had cooties.” As I reflect back on our behavior towards these children, I am appalled. We were so very mean to them. I have no idea what their home situation was like. These children couldn’t help that they didn’t have clean clothes to wear to school or no opportunities to bathe. As children what was it in our nature that made us not have compassion on them, but saw them as non-persons and mistreat them so badly? As adults what is it in our nature to shun anyone, to distance ourselves from others, to ignore others, to mistreat others, to harm others? When you were a child who was it that was shunned in your school and why? As an adult who is being pushed out of your workplace? Who is the family in your neighborhood nobody likes? Who in our world is being mistreated or harmed because they are ethnically different or have different beliefs?

Dr. Seuss addresses this in his story of *Horton Hears a Who*. The story begins with Horton, an elephant, hearing a small noise. He hears a faint cry for help, but doesn’t see anyone around. He is willing to help, but he doesn’t know who to help or where they are. Then he sees a speck of dust and comes to the conclusion that there is someone who lives on the speck of dust, but too small to be seen by elephant eyes. Horton states, “I’ll have to save him, because, after all, a person’s a person, no matter how small.” Horton then takes the speck of dust and puts it in on a clover flower to keep it safe. But Horton has his opposition. There is a sour kangaroo with her young kangaroo in her pouch who tells Horton that he is out of his mind. They tell the rest of the jungle about Horton’s crazy antics of protecting a speck of dust on a clover. In the meantime, Horton hears from the speck of dust that he saved all the folks and their houses, churches, and grocery stores. The mayor tells Horton that the town is called “Who-ville” and those that live there are called Whos. They are thankful and grateful to Horton. In the meantime, the Wickersham brothers, three big jungle monkeys come to Horton to stop all this nonsense. They take the clover flower and give it to an eagle, Vlad Vlad-i-koff, and tell him to get rid of it. Horton is appalled by the actions of the jungle animals and afraid for his new friends. He follows Vlad Vlad-i-koff through the night until he drops it in a field of clovers. Horton is determined to find it and searches each clover flower until he does. The mayor tells Horton that when their clover was dropped their whole world crashed. Horton promises to stick by them as they make repairs. The kangaroo and the Wickersham brothers with many others want Horton to put a stop to his nonsense and threaten to boil the dust speck in Beezle-Nut oil. Horton holds his ground and states that the speck of dust is full of persons. He asks the Whos to prove their existence by all yelling at once. They do and make every noise they can think of, but are not heard. Meanwhile the jungle animals are preparing both the Whos demise and Horton’s. The Whos find one little Who who is not making a sound. When his voice is added to all the noise making finally their voices are heard. “Their whole world was saved by the Smallest of All.” Finally those who were going to destroy the Whos vow to protect them, too. What a conversion!

God must have been proud when Dr. Seuss took one of the basic truths from God's Word and transformed it into this parable. God knew that within the human heart resides the ability to prejudge others, and hate others even to the point of destruction and annihilation. God commanded the Israelites back in the wilderness that they are to care for the least of their community. God defined the least as the immigrant, the widow, and the orphan. These were the least in their community at that time. They are to care for the immigrant because God reminds the Israelites that they were once immigrants, too." An immigrant is someone who has left their home usually because of persecution of one type or another and is seeking refuge. The Israelites were immigrants when they left slavery in Egypt. They are to remember what it was like not to have the safety of a home or the necessities of life and offer this to these immigrants. Also, in the Israelite culture, widows and orphans were non-persons. Anyone who did not have a male figure in the family to care for them had little-to-no means of support. So widows and orphans were living at the edges of their society. Like Horton stands up for the Whos, God stands up for the immigrants, widows, and orphans and created a way for their community to care for them.

Jesus redefines who is living at the edge of our communities in his Judgement parable. They are the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, stranger, the sick, and the imprisoned. Those who care for them will be rewarded. Those who don't listen to their cries, those who don't even know they exist, will be punished. In the parable those in need become the Lord himself. If we knew the Lord was in need in any way we would move heaven and earth to care for him, wouldn't we? But we will ignore the cries of the needy.

Dr. Seuss' parable leads me to ask these questions. Who in our community or in our world is trying to be heard? And who hears them? Who is standing up for them? Who is protecting them? Who is being a Horton? And who are the jungle animals out to destroy them? This past week marked the first anniversary of the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson. Can we set aside any political banter or analyzing the particulars so that we can ask, "Who is the Horton in Ferguson?" Who is sticking by those who feel they are not being heard? I am proud to say that an interracial group of about 75 United Methodists are being a Horton. This past week they gathered to offer peace and hope in the midst of the violent unrest. The peaceful group was led by Rev. Willis Johnson who serves Wellspring UMC just a block from the police station. Those who have been supporting Johnson's efforts have stated that as followers of Jesus we are to be concerned about our neighbor as we honor our baptismal vows "to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves." And that the role of the church is to name the ugly that is happening so healing can begin. And from healing comes hope. These folk hear the cry of the needy and are trying in their way to help and protect.

Being a Horton is risky. Horton gave up the comforts of his life to find and care for the Whos. He wasn't deterred what the other jungle animals said about him or what they were going to do to him. Saving the least in his community was his priority. He could have gone back to bathing in the cool of his pool, but instead he gave it all up to save those who were not being heard, and in the process convinced others to do the same.

We in the 21<sup>st</sup> century need to hear the ancient words of the Apostle John yet again, "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." Jesus is the Horton who came to save us, even the smallest of the small. He not only risked his life, but gave it so we could have life. A person's a person after all.

**Reflection Questions:** Who do we hear crying for help? Can we risk the comforts of your life to stand up for them and see that they are cared for? Can we be a Horton?

**Resources:** *Horton Hears A Who* by Dr. Seuss; *The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss* by James Kemp; *The Parables of Dr. Seuss* by Robert Short; "United Methodists join in Ferguson protest" by Kelley Hartnett, UMC News Service