

**Summer Sermon Series: The Biblical Messages of Dr. Seuss**  
**“The Sneetches”**  
**Joshua 10:1-7; Matthew 15:21-28; Galatians 3:26-29; James 2:1-4**  
**Salem United Methodist Church; August 23, 2015**  
**Rev. Dr. Sue Shorb-Sterling**

This summer we've been taking children's stories written by Dr. Seuss and finding the biblical principles that guide our Christian lives. Today's story is called *The Sneetches*. Jesus used stories or parables to teach us about how to live. Dr. Seuss wrote and illustrated parables to teach both children and adults how we should live as well.

One of the aspects of our human condition is that we tend to make divisions among ourselves. In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, my home town had no racial diversity, but there were two groups which separated the town: the German Protestants and the Irish Catholics. The Catholics lived on one side of town and the Protestants on the other. The Protestants would have nothing to do with the Catholics and vice versa. There was one other division in our area. There were those who lived in the town and those that lived in the country. The town folk looked down on the “farmers.” And the farmers held their heads high because they knew that even though they were not respected; their hard work put food on the table of the “townies.” These divisions were very evident in our high schools. There was a private Catholic high school, a public town high school, and a public country high school. The rivalry among these divisions was played out every fall on the football field. The group with the bragging rights for a year was the one that could beat the other two.

Humans are very good at creating divisions and stereotyping, aren't we? This happens in our schools, our communities, our cities, and around the world. We stereotype people by the way they look, talk, act, think, and believe. We create divisions based on economics, race, ethnicity, religion, or stars on bellies. This is the division in the story of *The Sneetches*. There were two types of Sneetches. One group had stars on their bellies. The other group did not. The Sneetches with the stars on their bellies thought that they were better than the Sneetches without stars. They did not include them in any of their activities. The Sneetches without stars wanted to have stars so they could be like the Sneetches with stars. They were not happy being themselves.

This human condition of creating divisions began with Cain and Abel. Abel was a shepherd. Cain was a farmer. After both gave offerings to the Lord, Cain resented the differences in Abel so much that he killed him. In today's Hebrew lesson we see Joshua leading the Israelites into the Promised Land. Sometimes the people who already resided there accepted the Israelites and invited them to live among them, such as the area of Gibeon. In other areas, the residents fought the Israelites to keep their land. Joshua won many battles in these different areas and he would eliminate the residents or “wipe them out” so the Israelites could settle the land. Five kings in the surrounding lands were so upset that the Gibeonites accepted the Israelites into their community that they ganged up and fought the Gibeonites and the Israelites. The five kings and their armies were defeated by Joshua who had all five kings killed. This is a great example of how one group, who does not like another, will do whatever it takes to wipe them from the face of the earth. We still see this kind of behavior in the Middle East, don't we? Those that are being targeted today are Christians. Two church leaders, an archbishop of Syrian Orthodox Church and a bishop of the Greek Orthodox Church were kidnapped in Syria more than two years ago. We do not know if they are being held captive or have been killed. Over the last few years tens of thousands of Iraqi Christians fled their homeland and are living in exile in Jordan. Last summer hundreds from a minority group called the Yazidis some who were Christians, were killed by ISIS. Last August tens of thousands Yazidis fled to the top of Mt. Sinjar to escape ISIS. Many died of dehydration. These are just a few examples of Christian persecution and killings in the Middle East. And we could name many times in history where one group of people for whatever reason tries to wipe another group from the face of the earth. I think of the Trail of Tears in 1830 where our government forced marched the southeastern Native American tribes: Cherokee, Muscogee, Seminole, Chickasaw, and Choctaw to be relocated to Indian territories in the west. Their property was seized and they were forced to march. One in every four Native Americans died in route, thus the name “Trail of Tears.” There was another time in human history in which one group made another group wear stars, remember? At least in the story of the Sneetches they don't kill each other, they just try to become like the other.

In the story of the Sneetches, a guy by the name, Sylvester McMonkey McBean, shows up with his Fix-it-Up machine. He provides a much needed service. He charges a small fee to the Sneetches without stars so they can receive a star on their bellies. Now those who originally had the stars don't want to be the same as those with the purchased stars, so Sylvester McMonkey McBean seizes the opportunity and has his machine remove the stars from the original Sneetches with stars for even more money. Thus began a cycle of putting on stars and removing of stars

for all the Sneetches until everyone has run out of money. The only one who benefited from this was Sylvester McMonkey McBean. He has become very rich off the Sneetches. Here is another aspect of our human condition: greed. There will always be people who seize the opportunity to become rich by selling or dealing whatever it takes to keep people divided. This brings me to our Gospel lesson today where the disciples and even, perhaps, Jesus is trying to keep people divided in their own little groups. A woman comes to Jesus. By the social custom of the day she is not to speak to a man in public. That is the first division, male and female. Second, she is not Jewish. But neither of these will stop her from doing everything she can to get Jesus' attention. She believes her daughter is possessed by demons. Today we would say her daughter is mentally ill. At first Jesus doesn't respond to her at all. This leads his disciples wanting to send her away. But she continues to plead with Jesus who seems to respond with indignation. He basically says, "I came to help my people only." Scholars have interpreted Jesus' response in different ways. Some see the persistence of the Canaanite woman to be a turning point in his ministry. Because of her persistence in asking for the healing of her daughter, Jesus comes to realize that he is to be the Savior of the world, and not just a Jewish Messiah. Other scholars see Jesus as testing this woman's faith in him. Did she really want him, a Jew, to heal her non-Jewish daughter? Remember it was Jesus who took his ministry to Tyre and Sidon, two non-Jewish regions. Either way this scripture is interpreted, the fact is that a non-Jew contacted a Jew and believed that he could heal her daughter and he chose to do so. Jesus as the Son of God saw a human in need. He sat the divisions aside and responded out of love for one of God's children.

Who are we as humans? Geneticists have uncovered that no matter what our ethnic background we are more similar than different. We are of all one race: the human race. The Apostle Paul battled with divisions within the early church. His churches in the area of Galatia, which is now the southern part of Turkey, were creating divisions within the churches. There were those who were Jews who came to believe that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah. Then there were those who had no Jewish background, but believed Jesus to be the Savior. They were dividing themselves into these two camps. In addition, both slaves and their owners became Christians and were in the same church. And the social roles for men and women were quite different. All of these groups are bringing their differences, their social roles into the churches. This was causing huge problems. Paul is telling them that in Jesus there are no divisions. We are all one. Jesus unites us.

Thus the church is to be a model for the world. We are to be diverse, yet be united. We can believe differently. We can hold different political views. We can look differently. We can have different educational levels and have different level of incomes. We can speak different languages and still be one. The United Methodist Church is one of the most diverse churches in the world. The Baltimore-Washington Conference because of our location around the nation's capital is one of the most diverse conferences in the denomination. When I think of how the church can be a model for the world, I think of Salem, this church. We have some ethnic and racial diversity. We have some age diversity. We have economic and educational diversity. We also have political diversity, yet we come here to form a community not of divisions, but of unity. A community formed by the love of Jesus Christ which calls us to accept each other and love each other. I have witnessed in this place two people coming to worship: one wearing fancy clothes and fine jewelry, another poorly dressed. But we have not shown favoritism. We welcome everyone. The welcome in our bulletin reads, "Whoever you are, wherever you are on life's journey, you are welcome here." Our faith in Christ is what unites us and is the driving force to us living in harmony. Our divisions are not to drive our faith, but faith is to unite us.

Back to the Sneetches story, after the Sneetches gave all their money to Sylvester McMonkey McBean to give them stars or take the stars away, he drives away saying, "They'll never learn. No. You can't teach a Sneetch!" But he was wrong. Once they had no money, Dr. Seuss ends the book with the "Sneetches got really quite smart... They decided that Sneetches are Sneetches... That day, all the Sneetches forgot about stars and whether they had one, or not, upon thars."

**Reflection Questions:** In our nation, in our world, what are the "stars" that divide us? What do we need to forget to create unity? How can I offer acceptance and love to someone who may view me as not part of their group?

**Resources:** *Sneetches* by Dr. Seuss; *The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss* by James Kemp; "Christians under threat in Syria, Iraq" by Linda Bloom (United Methodist News Service)