

**Summer Sermon Series: The Biblical Messages of Dr. Seuss**

**“The Lorax”**

**Genesis 1:20-31; John 15:1-2, 4-6; Romans 1:18-25**

**Salem United Methodist Church; August 30, 2015**

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For the last few weeks we have been looking at different children’s books by the author, Dr. Seuss, whose real name was Theodor Geisel. Each of his stories teaches us, like the parables of Jesus teach us. Today we are finding the biblical message for us in Dr. Seuss’ story, *The Lorax*.

The story of *The Lorax* begins with a small child looking up at a lamp post with street sign. The sign states, “The Street of the Lifted Lorax.” It sits on a gray, barren land with no trees or grass. The small child is looking for where the Lorax once stood before he was lifted away. The question is asked, “What is a Lorax? Why was it there? Why was it lifted and taken somewhere?” So the little person goes to ask the Once-ler who tells him for a small fee. The Once-ler tells him that once there was green grass and ponds with Humming-fish. There were clean clouds and bright-colored Truffula trees with brown Bar-ba-loots, little brown bear-like creatures who lived happily in the shade and ate the Truffula Fruits. It was the Once-ler who discovered the soft, sweet smell of the Truffula tree tufts and saw an economic opportunity. So he chopped down one tree to use its tuft to knit a Thneed. As soon as the Once-ler has chopped down the tree, out of its stump pops the Lorax who spoke for the trees. He wants to know what Once-ler is going to do with the Truffula tree tufts. The Once-ler is going to make Thneeds, “Something-That-All-People-Need.” They can be used for just about anything from shirts to bicycle seat covers. The Lorax tells the Once-ler that he is crazy with greed and only fools would buy a Thneed. And they do. The demand is so great that and the Once-ler builds bigger and bigger factories and cuts down more and more Truffula trees.

As there become less and less trees, the Lorax complains to the Once-ler that the Brown Bar-ba-loots are starving. There is no more Truffula fruit to sustain them. The Swomme-Swans cannot sing because of the smog created by the factories and the Humming Fish’s pond is polluted from the run-off from the Thneed factories. The Once-ler doesn’t care about these animals. His response is that he will build bigger and more factories to meet the demands for the Thneeds. When the last Truffula tree is chopped down, the factories close and nothing is left except a polluted, barren land. The Lorax leaves through a hole in the smog, but leaves behind a small pile of rocks with the word, “UNLESS” written on a rock. The Once-ler tells the child that “the word of the Lorax seems perfectly clear, UNLESS someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It’s not.” Then he gives the child the last Truffula seed to plant so that it can produce clean water and air once again, because then the Lorax and his friends may come back.

The story of the Lorax was published in 1971. The interesting thing is that Dr. Seuss wrote *The Lorax* before the deforestation of the Amazon River basin began and before mountain top coal mining started. Was he a prophet? He at least knew the value forests had for the planet. Forests cover about one-third of the earth. Forests provide habitat for wildlife, oxygen, food, fresh water, clothing, traditional medicine, and shelter for us. However, deforestation is happening in many areas of the world. For instance, in the last fifty years 17% of the Amazon rainforest has been lost according to the World Wild Life. The forest was cut down for mahogany wood, oil, gold, and to provide grazing for cattle to meet the demand for beef in the northern hemisphere. Another example of deforestation is happening in the Appalachia Mountains with mountain top coal mining which is mining for coal by cutting off the top of the mountain. These forests are some of the oldest forests in our nation. This kind of mining apparently is more cost effective and can meet the demands for coal more efficiently. According to an organization called, Earth Justice, the total amount of acres used for mountain top coal mining in Appalachia now equals the size of Delaware. Communities that are located below these topless mountains routinely have mudslides and flooding.

Deforestation is having an effect on our planet. Scientists have evidence of this. One of our congregants, Don Moore, has spent his life studying polar bears. Over the last eight to ten years he has witnessed less ice on the Hudson Bay each winter. The result is that he has witnessed starving polar bears. There is a simple ecosystem there. The polar bear eat seals. The seals eat the fish, but the seals hide from the polar bears under the ice. When there is no ice for the seals to hide, they are eaten by the polar bears. When there are no seals left, the polar bears starve. Don shared a picture of a starving polar bear on his Facebook page and wrote, “We need to

reduce our carbon footprints and human population! Where is that conversation? Chris Morgan, filming Siberia tigers, had a Japanese colleague who noted that humans in an urban environment act like God. In the woods, things are more equal!” Humans acting like God. I think this means that when humans believe we own the world, we can do whatever we want. Dr. Seuss’ the Lorax makes this point and so does Scripture.

Remember the reading from Genesis? God gave us dominion over the wildlife. The word, dominion, in Hebrew is the word, *radah*, which means to rule. It is used often in the Hebrew Scriptures to refer to how God rules the heavens and the earth. But how does God rule? Does God dominate, which is one definition of the word, dominion? No, God does not use God’s power to hurt and destroy. God uses God’s power to heal and preserve life. Psalm 72 states that God has dominion “from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth,” but then it describes God as taking care of the weak and those in need. When God created us, God placed the image of God in us. We are made in the likeness of God and are to rule like God. We are to, *radah*, not to hurt and destroy, but rule to preserve life. We are not to exploit or consume recklessly, but to care for those in need. God gave us everything we need. To have dominion over God’s creation is to be good stewards of it so we can continue to have what we need. To have dominion does not mean that we are to be greedy and take whatever we want with no regard to the balance of nature.

This is not how the Lorax interpreted dominion. Do you remember how Dr. Seuss has him appear in the book? He comes out of the stump of the Truffula tree. Does this remind you of any biblical image? What about Isaiah when he speaks of a shoot that comes out of the tree of Jesse who will have wisdom, understanding, counsel, and knowledge (chapter 11). Christians see that shoot to be Jesus as Messiah or Savior. So the Lorax becomes the Christ image in the story, the voice crying in the wilderness. He speaks out against and stands up for the injustice of the lack of food, clean air, and clean water for the animals in the story. He speaks out for the weak and those in need. Then he sends them away to find clean food, water, and air. In addition the Lorax ascends into the clouds and there is a promise of his return. Thus, the Lorax becomes the Christ figure in the book.

As a side note, there is a play on words with the term, Lorax. Robert Short, author of *The Parables of Dr. Seuss*, mentions that the Lorax is a combination of the words, Lord and Christ. If you drop the “d” in Lord, add the “a” for the word, “and.” Then add the first letter in the Greek word for Christ which looks like an English letter, “X” we get, “Lorax.” We have no idea if this was Dr. Seuss’ intent. Who knows? But it is an interesting idea.

Towards the end of the story, we learn that the Lorax leaves one word written on a rock, “UNLESS.” Jesus uses this word in his parable of the vine and the branches. Listen to his words, “Remain in me, as I in you. As a branch cannot bear fruit all by itself, *unless* it remains part of the vine, neither can you *unless* you remain in me.” Unless we, the branches remain connected to the vine, Jesus, we are about as worthless as a chopped down Truffula tree. We can pollute our space with vile words and actions, but those who are connected to the Vine, to the Holy One, who we as Christians see as Jesus the Christ, we can produce fruit that will serve the needs of those around us. We will act in loving ways, stand up for injustice, provide shade, food, clean water and air both literally and figuratively. The word, “unless,” means there is choice involved. And the choice is ours. Do we choose to remain connected to the Vine of Christ so that we can provide fruit for the world, to be the loraxes who both speak out for those who are hurting and being destroyed as well as provide protection and healing? Or do we choose to bear no fruit and pollute our lives with greed and selfishness, to pollute our world so God’s creation is defaced and dies? Some may see harming our environment as a political issue, but God sees it as a spiritual one. The Once-ler states, “UNLESS someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It’s not.” Do you care? The Vine, Jesus the Christ, can provide us with the resources to care a whole awful lot so things in our personal lives can get better, things in our communities can get better, and, yes, even things in nature and in our world can get better. Are you connected to the Vine? How do you bear fruit?

**Resources:** *The Lorax* by Dr. Seuss; *The Parables of Dr. Seuss* by Robert Short; “How to Bear the Unbearable” <http://robinwestenra.blogspot.co.nz/>; [worldwildlife.org](http://worldwildlife.org); [earthjustice.org](http://earthjustice.org); “Rethinking Dominion in Genesis 1:27-28” by Lee Canipe in *Christian Ethics Today*