

Arvada
United Methodist Church

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**The Sneetches, Madoff, You and Me!
Galatians 3:28; James 2:1-4**

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Now if you've just come here for the first time, you might wonder, "what kind of church is this?" Using a children's story to get at the gospel, for goodness sakes. The gospel is a serious thing and one shouldn't make it lighter than it is, especially in this time of Lent. Lent should be heavy, you know a time for being penitent, a time for self flagellation, and all that.

I understand, I really do. When you use something like The Gospel according to Dr. Seuss, which was written by a Duke Divinity Graduate and United Methodist Minister by the name of James w. Kemp, you've got to be careful...you really do.

Everyone knows that people from Duke Divinity can come up with some heavy duty theological information. Didn't we have a Duke Divinity graduate for a pastor here for about 16 years? So this book piqued our interest. How do these children's stories match up with the stories in the Bible, what can they teach us alongside what we know of the Bible. That is what we've been doing for the last couple of weeks and today we are taking a look at one of my favorite Dr. Seuss books, The Sneetches. What does that have to do with the Bible...well, I invite you along for the next few minutes as we think about the connections between the Theology of Dr. Seuss, the letter to the Galatians from the Apostle Paul, and the stories of our lives.

Would you pray with me?

O God may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts lead us deeper into the realm of faith. Amen.

This week, the Board of Ordained Ministry of the Rocky Mountain Conference met in Colorado Springs with a number of candidates for ministry. That is part of the process to become a minister. The candidates go in one by one to a room with a few of the members of the board and the members of the board will ask various questions of the candidates based on the papers they have written, sermons they have preached, Bible studies they've created and so on.

It is a nerve wracking thing to be judged by your peers like that. It's tough and this week, there were a number of the candidates who were told that they would not be ordained as ministers this year.

The star bellied Sneetches told the plain belly Sneetches that it wasn't going to happen for them this year. It is a hard thing to say, "no." And it is even harder to hear the "no" when you have done work and put in time to get to that point. In fact, some candidates in the past have just quit the whole process after they've heard that "no".

But I can tell you this, sometimes it has been those people who have been denied ordination in one year who have gone back through the next year and then become some of the strongest, most well respected ministers in the conference.

I tell you that just to let you know that the story of the Star Bellied Sneetches and the Plain Belly Sneetches goes on all the time in our culture and probably every culture if the truth be known. There seem always to be those things that put people in different hierarchical categories don't there?

In junior high school it is the popular kids versus the rest of the youth. When you graduate from college, it is the large college graduates versus the small college graduates and the community college graduates. In the business world it is the people with huge capital versus the small mom and pop shops, In your neighborhood, it is the people with the perfectly mowed yard versus the guy who likes dandelions. Well you know what I mean.

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When I think about this whole sad story of how Bernie Madoff made off with all that money, 50 billion dollars of it. I can't help think about the fellow who had that machine that would take the stars off the Sneetches bellies or put them back on.

You see, Madoff just played on people's trust and I think, to an extent, their greed. At some point in his salesmanship, he told people they could make a 46% return on their money. People liked the sound of that of course, but they didn't think about the fact that if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

So he rode away with a cart full of their money and now they are in dire circumstances. I suspect that like the Sneetches who learned who they were whether it was with a star on their belly or not, the people Madoff took will learn who they are with or without the money that had given them a sense of who they were.

In the Sneetches story, there is nothing inherently better about having a star or not having one. The Star Bellies are willing to have their stars removed if it will make them different. The perception that one appearance is better than the other is just that: perception, not reality. (The Theology of Dr. Seuss, p.68)

This brings us to the story of the church in Galatia which is in modern day Turkey. The Apostle Paul had founded a church there and then went on with founding other churches, traveling around, sharing the Gospel message. When he left, there was a leadership vacuum. There were some people who came in, who made the case that the Gentiles, the non-Jewish people needed to become Jewish before they could become Christian. That means they had to follow certain dietary restrictions, the men had to be circumcised and so forth. For the sake of our purposes, they had to have a star on their belly.

Paul got wind of it and wrote the church a letter. At the beginning of Chapter 3, he lays into them. Paul writes, "O foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified. Let me ask you this: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by hearing with faith?"

Later he says, we are all one, there is neither Gentile nor Jew, neither free nor slave, neither male nor female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

It's not whether you have a star on your belly or not, it's not whether you follow the Jewish dietary restrictions or not, it's not whether you are a male or a female...no you see you are all one in Christ Jesus.

It comes down to this, there are people, institutions, companies, advertisers, the list goes on and on of the people who want to tell you who you are. Is that who you are going to let tell you who you are? Or is it going to be God who tells you who you are?

If it's God who tells us who we are, then we don't have to prove ourselves at all. It doesn't matter what car you drive, what kind of house you live in, what kind of job you have, how pretty or handsome you are, Because if God is the one who tells you who you are, you are precious, you are unprecedented, you are irreplaceable, irreplaceable, and in the divine view, indispensable. You don't have to prove who you are, all you have to do is to express yourself. And there is a world of difference between proving yourself and expressing yourself.

What a different world it would be if as those Sneetches finally found out at the end of their story, if all we really need to do was to express the beautiful selves that we are made and meant to be by God.

May it be so with you and me. Amen.