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United Methodist Church

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Would the Good Samaritan Eat Green Eggs?
Luke 10: 25-37

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As of a few years ago, Dr. Seuss's *Green Eggs and Ham* was the 4th bestselling English language hardcover children's book, ever.¹ And it was written because of a bet. His publisher wagered \$50 in 1960 that Theodor Geisel could not write a book using only fifty different words.² "Dr. Seuss" won the bet with 50 words exactly. Forty-nine of those are one-syllable, and the 50th word is "anywhere."

Now if we were applying methods used to study the Gospels to *Green Eggs and Ham*, we would stop and note that there must be some significance to that sole 3 syllable word tucked into the midst of all those other monosyllabic words. And we would probably be right.

For the word "anywhere" is limitless. It points us to a boundless place where there are no borders, no walls, no fences. *Anywhere* is a word of ultimate possibility, and into that word's world Sam I Am invites us. Most of the story is spent naming these places of anywhere-hood:

*Would you could you on a boat?
Would you could you with a goat?
Would you eat them on a train?
Would you could in you the rain?*

And our nameless little protagonist continues to refuse. *Nowhere* is his unspoken mantra. Green eggs and ham? I do not like them Sam I Am!

*I could not, would not, on a boat.
I will not, will not, with a goat.
I do not like them in a box.
I do not like them with a fox.
I do not like them here or there.
I do not like them anywhere!*

*I do not like green eggs and ham!
I do not like them,
Sam-I-am!*

Ahhh... but then... in a tender moment similar to that beautiful scene in *The Grinch* when the Grinch's shriveled heart cracks open and begins to grow, and grow and grow, our nameless protagonist in *Green Eggs* has a heart-warming transformation. Okay! If you'll stop bothering me, I'll try them! But I won't like them!

And in a manner that echoes our own John Wesley, our nameless little guy who is being chased all over anywhere trying so hard to stick to nowhere suddenly finds his heart strangely warmed. And our little guy decides that he will not only eat green eggs and ham, but he will eat them *anywhere*:

*Say!
I like green eggs and ham! I do! I like them, Sam-I-am!
... and I will eat them here and there.
Say! I will eat them ANYWHERE!*

¹<http://www.publishersweekly.com/article/CA186995.html>

²<http://www.cnn.com/2009/LIVING/wayoflife/01/23/mf.seuss.stories.behind/index.html>

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This little book about moving beneath what we resist, looking beyond our closed systems and protected ideas, and being open to new possibilities, has made it to the top of the children's book sales. This little story that uses merely 50 words echoes an eternal call of the human heart: I set before you death and life. Choose life. It's a call to true freedom, letting the power of boundless *anywhere* reach in and redeem the confinement of *nowhere*.

That, I believe is the call of our Christian faith as we are led wandering through the wilderness of our Lenten days in search of a promised land. That, we might argue, is the call of our Christian faith as it leads us to look out for the marginalized, the poor, those lying wounded by the side of the road.

Which do we choose? Anywhere? Or nowhere? Which do we choose individually? Communally? Hold that question if you would as we look at our second story for the day.

"Who is my neighbor?" The lawyer asks Jesus. But the real conversation is about eternal life. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" The great commandments are quoted—love God and love neighbor.

And who is my neighbor? Jesus responds with the story known to us as the parable of the Good Samaritan.

By the time Luke gets hold of the story and tells it to his gentile, non-Jewish audience, we get a nice little parable about what it means to be a neighbor: Have compassion for all.

Everyone is your neighbor, Luke's story says to his Gentile audience. Or, in other words, your neighbor is anywhere, not nowhere. Don't be like the priest and the Levite; don't pass by those in need. Instead, reach out a hand.

It's a fine story like that, the way it's been passed down to us-- a good lesson, a vital invitation, and indeed a call upon our lives. But it's not the story Jesus told.

The story Jesus told loses something by the time Luke gets hold of it and shares it with his gentile audience; it loses its punch—that punch that Jesus was so fond of sneaking into his parables. That punch that changes minds. And hearts. And lives. That punch that got him killed.

The story Jesus told to his Jewish audience, in typical Jesus fashion, would not have been a nice little story. It would have turned their world upside down, inside out.

Samaritans and Jews, in general, didn't get along. In general, they were closed to each other. Some say, in general, they hated each other. We have to qualify with "in general" because surely there were many who *did* get along in the midst of the many who didn't.

So Jesus was stretching the palate of his audience when he tells of the Samaritan being the good guy in the story. After the priest and the Levite pass by the wounded man, Jesus' Jewish audience would be expecting a regular ol' Joseph—any Israelite in no particular position of authority -- to be the hero and stop to help the wounded man. They were used to that from Jesus; he regularly took on the priests and the Levites and those in power in defense of the common person.

So they likely expected a common person to be the hero, for they knew a hero was coming. But Jesus' Jewish audience didn't get what they expected. Instead they got a Samaritan.

No doubt shock would have rolled through the crowd, maybe gasps of disbelief, likely frowns at Jesus' story-telling. And the conversations at coffee time afterward would have been filled with explosions of "A Samaritan... Well I never..." followed by numerous nods of agreeing disbelief.

We might hear it today echoed through history... A Muslim... Well I never...

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Jesus' story as he told it to his Jewish audience would not have been merely an invitation to reach out to those in need rather than pass them by—which is a substantial message in itself; his story included the second, more piercing invitation –or request-- to remain open where we're closed, to let go of our rooted opinions about others, about our situation, perhaps about our church or our world; he was asking that his hearers replace what is closed with what is open, to move from life-confining *nowhere* to life-freeing *anywhere*.

How often are we closed in on ourselves so much that we can't even consider the possibilities of goodness around us? In other people, in other ideas, in new ways of doing things?

We think we know what we are, and who. Most of us are, if only subconsciously, pretty fond of our opinions, our ideas, the way we have the world figured out.

But what else is out there that we can't see? What is being presented to us that we simply refuse? What possibilities have we turned our back on, either without realizing it or because we just don't want to go there? And how many of these might actually be truly good?

What if we walk through our days with a sense that goodness could be *anywhere*? And stay open to it? Could that be part of what grace is? Could that be part of seeing our neighbor in all persons? Could that openness be part of abiding in an eternal quality of life?

Could that openness even strangely warm *our* hearts? The heart of our church? The heart of the world?

I enjoy finding the Gospel's message in our secular world—songs on the radio, scenes in movies (which is one that occasionally gets me in trouble), even TV commercials.

The Life Cereal commercial comes to mind as an example of both of today's stories. None of the kids wants to try the new healthy cereal that Mom brings home. So they pass the bowl to their little brother. And you know the line. He likes it! Hey Mikey!

Our little guy in Green Eggs and Ham was being invited to try Life. And so were the people around Jesus as he told the story of the Good Samaritan.

May we try Life—with an open heart. It is good for us, and we might just like it.

Amen.