

The Grinch who Stole Christmas

Isaiah 60:1-6

Matthew 2:1-12

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I. Introduction

A few weeks ago, just before Christmas, you'll remember that we were all blessed with a snow day. We had this big prediction of snow and the Federal government and city government closed. It was actually sort of a pitiful snow day, but it was nice to have a day off. Our day at the Parker house started with Joshua crawling into bed with us and saying, "We've got to read *The Grinch*." Which, of course, we did and then watched *The Grinch* later on that day.

But you don't have to explain what *The Grinch* is, right? You just say Grinch and everybody knows because Dr. Seuss is part of our DNA as a people now. Many of us were raised on Dr. Seuss and have raised our children on Dr. Seuss and the images and the stories that Dr. Seuss shared, they're part of our cultural make-up now.

And while Theodore Seuss Geisel was not a religious writer, he certainly was a writer on morals and has a lot to teach us about how we go about living out our faith. He also had a very keen eye for hypocrisy, particularly the hypocrisy of adults. He has a wonderful way of pricking some of the defense mechanisms that we have set up around the things that we do and calling us to live in some more faithful ways. So, he's a great subject to spend the month of January reflecting on.

Over the last several years we have taken January to do what we call "a fishing expedition" in our church which is essentially to do a sermon series and a lot of

ancillary activities that are geared towards people who might not be part of a church community as a way of inviting them in, as a sort of low barrier time of our church year. And so if we've got folks in the congregation today who are not members of our church but are Dr. Seuss fans, I'm glad that you're here and hope that you will find this to be a rich experience for you.

For the regulars, this is an opportunity for you to share with a neighbor or a work colleague, somebody like a school friend that you know may not be part of a church community, an opportunity to come and explore what church might be like. So this is a great evangelism tool for you all, and I want to encourage you to use that.

II. Epiphany

Some of you might be asking if you're going to preach on Dr. Seuss, there's so much material, why would you start with *The Grinch*, when *The Grinch* is a Christmas story and Christmas is already over? Well, because Christmas technically isn't already over. Christmas in our tradition is not a day. It seems like a day but Christmas is actually a season of 12 days that starts on December 25th and ends on January 6th with The Feast of The Epiphany. The Epiphany is the day in which the wise men, the magi, come to visit the Christ child and give their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

The term "epiphany" means an appearing, a revelation. And you hear that when people would say, "You know I had an epiphany the other day." They understand, they see something in a different way than they had before. In the ancient context, epiphany tended to be an appearance of something that was divine, a revelation of the divine. And we call this Epiphany Sunday and Tomorrow Epiphany

because the wise men's coming to Christ was a revelation to the people around this newborn infant, that there was something special going on there. This was the revelation that this was God incarnate. This was the king that we had been waiting for.

And since our tradition of giving gifts comes out of this story of the kings giving their gifts to Jesus, this is actually the perfect day to do some reflecting on the story of *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas* because *The Grinch* is a story about how the activity of gift-giving has come to dominate what we understand Christmas to be about. It's a parable about how we have confused the way we celebrate Christmas with the meaning of Christmas itself.

And I'm not going to start criticizing gift-giving because gift-giving has some good theological basis. The whole idea behind our gift-giving is that in Christ, God has given us the ultimate gift of God's own self and that our very natural response to that gift is to want to share with everyone around us with the same kind of extravagant generosity. So, there are some good theological reasons that we engage in gift-giving. However, if you ask most of the children in our church you would find that idea a little bit muddled, right?

There's a great *Peanuts* cartoon in which Charlie Brown's sister Sally is writing an English essay that she has entitled *The Meaning of Christmas*. And she starts off as an elementary school student is taught to do with a good topic sentence, she says, "The true meaning of Christmas is the joy of getting."

And Charlie Brown who sort of sidled over to her and looking over her shoulders says, "No, you meant to say the joy of giving. The true meaning of Christmas is in the

joy of giving.” And Sally turns to him with sort of a quizzical look and says, “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Because we’ve all muddled that message just a little bit, right? And *The Grinch* is about how our understanding of Christmas got hijacked. How it got transformed from being a beautiful celebration of the incarnation of God into becoming this manic orgy of consumerism that is our national experience now of Christmas.

And of course the irony of this is we know that that’s bizarre and unhealthy on so many levels and we know it’s not doing our children any good. In fact most of us know that the gifts that our children got last week they’re bored with today and they’re on to the next thing that they want, right? And that’s a very natural human response. But it’s not one that we should probably cultivate, Amen?

We know that we’ve got this insatiable desire and we know that we can’t fill it by buying more stuff. Our children haven’t always figured that out yet and while we’ve intellectually figured it out we haven’t always emotionally figured it out, either. We know that the gifts that we get do not substantively enrich our lives.

I don’t know about you but I don’t know that I can remember a single gift that I was given as a child. I don’t think I can. But I have very, very vivid and powerful memories of the Christmases with my family and all of the grandparents and the cousins gathered around and all of the wondrous play that we did. We all understand like the Whos that that’s what Christmas is about. But we get sidetracked very, very easily and keep falling into the trap of assuming that buying just a little bit more is going to get us where we want to go.

III. Reclaiming Christmas

So, how do we start to break this hijacking of Christmas, this endless cycle of consumerism? And I'm not raising this so that we beat ourselves up about this because I know that if you're like me we often come out of Christmas feeling a little bit queasy with sort of how events unfolded.

So, what I want us to do is take a look back and reflect and see what we can figure out about doing this better moving forward. And the place to start obviously is our own emotional state over the course of the Christmas holidays. It's always easy to blame rampant consumerism on those people who inflict their advertising or whatever on us. But it's us. We fall into the trap over and over again and this is the moment at which we can start to look at what motivates us in that. How are we motivated by our desire to not disappoint our children, for example? Or how are we motivated in our own deep desire for the new toys of an adult in a highly sublimated way? Where is our part in that process? Where are the places we're getting hooked? That's an important place to start the reflection.

But then how do we start to build in the counterbalances to re-engage Christmas in a healthier way? And there're lots and lots of tools that we all know and lots of good resources for helping us do this. It can be as simple as starting out with an agreement among a group of family members or friends, "Today, this year, we're just not going to exchange presents," or "Maybe we'll make a donation to a charity that we all love." Maybe, the way to do it is instead of exchanging presents, somebody host a big party that we all get to celebrate and come together to create some stronger

sense of community. Maybe, it has to do with the kind of gifts that we buy each other. Maybe, instead of buying more stuff that we are accumulating we take the family on a trip that can build us as a family unit. Maybe, we find a loved one that we normally buy some gift for and we'd take them out to a concert, to a movie, to dinner, to start to engage one another as people in a different sort of way. Maybe, it's working with our kids at a very early age to stop the process of accumulation. So maybe, we tie the gifts that are coming in as new presents with an effort to give away some of the old stuff to someone who might be able to make use it. Maybe, we can start engaging as a family in a service project of some sort.

IV. Conclusion

There are all kinds of interesting and wonderful ways to start to break the cycle of consumerism that dominates Christmas, but here's the catch, we've got to figure out how to do that today, right? Because if you're like me you come out of Christmas with all kinds of great resolutions about how to do this healthier next year. And then Advent rolls around next November and you know what? It's too late. The kids has started making the lists, the family has started setting plans. You can't put the brakes on it at that point.

So, what I want to invite you -- what I think *The Grinch* is inviting us to do today is to not wait till next Advent but to sit down today or this week with the family, with friends and say, "How do we do this in a richer more healthy way in the coming year?" What are the systems, what are the structures we put in place now?

And, parenthetically, this is a great time to do this with kids because they're not all ramped up getting ready for what they want to get. They've just gotten it and this is a good time to reflect a little bit -- in a somewhat less emotionally charged way -- to figure out how we do this in a more life-giving manner next year.

The message of *The Grinch* is that we can change. His heart grew three sizes that day. Maybe Christmas, he thought, doesn't come from a story. You see, *The Grinch* had a thought he hadn't had before. He had a new insight that allowed him to engage the season of Christmas in a way that was more life-giving and healthy. We have that opportunity today, too.

Dr. Seuss speaks to us over generations because he's got such a wonderful way of poking holes in our defense mechanisms and allowing us to see ourselves with a little bit more of an eye to truth, a world that is a little more stripped of our own rationalizations and gives us the clarity to engage the world in a healthier, more life-giving way. And Christmas is a great place to start because as the Grinch realized, "Maybe Christmas," he thought, "might be a little bit more."

Amen.