

The Sneetches
Genesis 4: 1-9
Ephesians 3: 1-6
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I. Introduction

When World War I broke out in July of 1914, Theodore Seuss Geisel was 10 years old. The man who would become Dr. Seuss was living in Springfield, Massachusetts, with his family. All four of Ted Geisel's grandparents had emigrated from Germany and settled in Springfield where his grandfather had founded a brewery, where his grandfather had worked and his father was working through Ted's growing up. But being of German extraction in 1914 was not a great thing and Ted Geisel experienced a lot of bullying and abuse from his community and developed a life-long sensitivity to racism and prejudice and made opposing those forces one of his causes throughout his life.

Since we've been talking about Dr. Seuss in general this month, as we gather on this Martin Luther King Jr. Day weekend, it is appropriate to reflect on some of his wisdom around the issue of racism.

II. The Sneetches

And *The Sneetches* is the place where racism finds one of its clearest statements. *The Sneetches* as many of you know was published in 1961, which was the year that The Congress of Racial Equality started doing the Freedom Rides throughout the South and coincidentally, I'll just mention, was a year after the sit-ins at the Woolworth luncheon counter in South Carolina. And I mentioned that specifically

because Pastor Tom Ogletree who is going to be tried by our church for officiating at his son's same gender wedding -- was at those counters -- integrating those lunch counters with Representative John Lewis 50 some years ago. And it's not coincidental that a man who is arrested for civil rights in one area is now on trial for civil rights in another area, this time, sadly, by our church.

The story of *The Sneetches* is the story of two groups of bird-like creatures. You probably all know them, I don't know how else to describe them, who are divided by whether or not they have a star on their belly. And the people who have the star on their belly are the dominant group and the ones without the stars are excluded from full participation in Sneetch society, for lack of a better term.

So the story of the stars, I should mention, parenthetically were Dr. Seuss' nod to or acknowledgement of the stars that Jews were forced to wear by the Nazis during World War II. So, there's a subliminal message there about what happens when we exclude and demonize people of other race and ethnicity. And *The Sneetches* is a fairly straightforward indictment of our prejudice against people who don't necessarily look like we look.

III. Stars or No Stars

Now, one of the interesting pieces of the story, of course, is that we don't know any of the history of the Sneetches. Why one group is superior to the other but it seems to be innate that one group self-identifies as being superior to the others and the others are on the outside trying to get in. But that's I think a helpful place to start

our dialogue on racism because what Dr. Seuss is highlighting is the fact that all of us, on a very instinctual level, identify with the group that we look like.

There have been lots of interesting studies done by evolutionary psychologists and all kinds of scientific disciplines to explore why this might be and lots of different theories, which I'm not going to try to unpack today. But it is important to be mindful of the fact that we all carry this propensity to gravitate towards people who are like us inside of our genetic make-up. So that the journey to start to work against racism is a process of starting to recognize in ourselves that tendency to self-identify with a group and to start to figure out in very explicit ways how we work against that innate tendency. This is why we create legal structures around civil rights because they are structures that are geared towards keeping us mindful of the ways in which this deep-rooted genetic tendency is going to express itself. This is also, of course, why education is such a critical part of the journey of working against racism because we need to be explicit with our children all the time about watching for this in themselves.

St. Paul, of course, is talking about exactly this in this wonderful passage from him to the Ephesians where he says, "For years past it has been hidden that we are all brothers and sisters." We could easily separate ourselves into Jews and Gentiles and other ethnic groups. Gentiles, of course, representing a broad range of ethnic groups but everyone who wasn't Jewish. And Paul saying, "For years we could see ourselves as a separate group from those people."

But we can't do that in Jesus Christ because what we have realized and come to understand in the revelation of Jesus Christ is that we are all children of God and

therefore, brothers and sisters of one another. And because of that revelation we can never see someone else as “them.” It is interesting that nobody -- except the villain of the piece, who I’ll get to in just a minute -- nobody in *The Sneetches* has a name, it’s all “them” or “us.” And what Paul says is that is who we can never be as children of God because we are all children together.

So the story of *The Sneetches* is about learning who we are so that we can then engage other people in healthier and more life-giving ways. But here’s an interesting twist on the story, Dr. Seuss, Ted Geisel experienced racism and persecution as a German-American. He was a very vocal opponent of anti-Semitism throughout his career and as the Civil Rights Movement kicked into gear, he was a very vocal participant in the Civil Rights Movement.

But here’s an interesting piece, during World War II this man, who’s so deeply committed to civil rights and racial equality, drew some of the most virulent racist propaganda pictures against the Japanese that came out of that whole period. He was a very active part of the U.S. propaganda machine in villainizing and demonizing the Japanese and drew some just horrible racial cartoons that fed into the fear of our country during World War II and led to the incarceration of large numbers of our U.S. citizens of Japanese descent.

I bring that up to say we can understand on an intellectual level the evils of racism and how we need to work against them, but Dr. Seuss provides a cautionary word that even when we understand that on a very fundamental level, we can find ourselves in places where our fear and our anger cause us to revert to our more

primitive mindset. World War II was a scary, terrifying time for our country, and Ted Geisel's fear caused him to move to a place that was in opposition to everything that he had stood for and continued to stand for, for the rest of his life.

We should have the humility and honesty to start to understand that we can also find ourselves in that place when we are in a place of fear. And whether that's responding to 9/11 or walking alone in a dark street at night, our fear causes us to revert to a piece of our make-up that is, I'm going to call more reptilian, it's more instinctual. So that when we find ourselves in those places we need to bring a special intentionality to noting our tendency to look with anger and anxiety at those who do not look like us.

This is also why, dear friends, whenever somebody tells you that we either are or are working on being a color blind society, that is never going to happen, okay? And as long as we think it's going to happen we give ourselves permission to stop paying attention to our own racism.

The work of Dr. King is not done. And I'm going to argue it may never be done because this is such an elemental piece of our genetic code that we need to continue to work at it all the time and especially in those places where we find ourselves fearful. Fear and anger move us to a place where we are very vulnerable to acting out of instinct. This is why God tells Cain, "Sin is lurking at the door looking for an opportunity to get in and your anger is that opportunity."

Our anger and our fear is the place where we revert to our more primitive selves and start to think in terms that propagate racism against people of all sorts who are not

like us. And if there's not a crisis that brings that fear and anger about there are plenty of people who are willing to manufacture a crisis for us, Amen?

And in the Sneetches, of course, this is Sylvester McMonkey McBean. You all remember Sylvester, who comes in to take economic advantage of the racism that the Sneetches are in the midst of. So, he talks to those groups about how they can either maintain their superiority, or get to be a part of the in group. And he gets them all running through his star on and off machines until he has fleeced them of every dollar they have and then he goes off down the beach.

There are plenty of folks who are willing to exploit us financially or politically through our fear and our anger. And again we need to bring great self-awareness and intentionality to recognizing when that happens and how people very often use coded language to elicit a fear response from us.

It was an interesting coincidence that when President Putin was in a news conference this week and was asked about the Russian policies against gay and lesbian people, he said, "Oh, you're very welcome to be here as long as you stay away from our children." We get exploited all the time here and I'm going to suggest, dear friends, as people who are active participants in a participatory democracy that we let that happen, because if our politicians didn't get the response they wanted they wouldn't keep doing it, right?

So that when we have a Willie Horton ad, for example, I'm dating myself now, we need to pay attention and I'm going to argue, punish politicians who try to exploit our racism, our inherent tendency to racism because if we don't punish them they're

going to keep doing it. We punish them, obviously, by not voting for them. I'm not suggesting revolution or something. I'm just suggesting that we have it within our power to cause our political leaders to be leaders, right? And to not play off of our most base fears but we only get a chance to do that if we hold them accountable for trying to do that to us. It's on us, we have that power.

IV. Conclusion

So, Sylvester McMonkey McBean drives away with all of their money and he says as he drives down the beach, "No, they never will learn. No, you can't teach a Sneech." Dr. Seuss, of course, was somewhat more optimistic than that and writes these stories to help us learn a different way. And he closes this wonderful parable with these words, "But McBean was quite wrong, I'm quite happy to say. The Sneetches got really quite smart on that day. The day they decided that Sneetches are Sneetches and that no kind of Sneetch is the best on the beaches. That day all the Sneetches forgot about stars and whether they had one or not upon thars."

Amen.