

***Horton Hears a Who***  
Jeremiah 26: 1-11  
Mark 7:24-30  
January 26, 2014  
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## **I. Introduction**

Today we're finishing up a month of soaking up some of the wisdom of Dr. Seuss, Theodore Seuss Geisel. And last week we commemorated Martin Luther King Day weekend by talking a little about *The Sneetches* and Dr. Seuss' indictment of racism in that wonderful story.

I noted as we talked about that last Sunday that while Dr. Seuss was a lifelong advocate of racial equality and breaking down the barriers between people of different races, that he had an interesting blind spot in his own life as it came to the people of Japanese descent. And Dr. Seuss was responsible for hundreds of very racist, vitriolic depictions of the Japanese during World War II. And a number of you came up to me after the sermon last Sunday and talked about how helpful it was to reflect a little bit on the paradox that makes up human nature in that regard.

Talking about Horton this Sunday is a nice way to follow up on that story because Dr. Seuss, Ted Geisel, visited Japan after World War II was over and had a little bit of an epiphany himself about his own racism. He came to regret very much the work that he had done during World War II that had fanned the flames of our racism against the Japanese during the war and led to the interment of our own Japanese citizens.

He also became very concerned in that post-war visit to Japan with the way in which all of the international forces were reshaping life in Japan without much regard for listening to the voice of the average Japanese citizen. And *Horton* was his plea for us in the midst of the tectonic forces that shape our nations to listen to the voice of the average person, so that the theme of Horton here is, “A person’s a person, no matter how small,” that we need to listen to the voice of the voiceless if we’re to move into the future with integrity and power.

## **II. Horton**

Horton was a character that Dr. Seuss had written about in 1940 before the war started in a book called *Horton Hatches the Egg*. Horton, of course, is an elephant. So, an elephant nesting on an egg is a wonderful, classically Dr. Seuss sort of image to play with. And it was such a popular book that Dr. Seuss brings Horton back in this next installment which was published in 1953 called *Horton Hears a Who*. In this Horton story we find Horton playing in a pool in the middle of the forest and he hears a voice. He doesn’t know where it’s coming from but after he starts exploring he finds out that the voice is coming from a tiny speck of dust. And he ends up in a conversation with the mayor of Whoville. Whoville is a culture, a city, a world that lives on this dust speck. And the mayor pleads with Horton to find a safe place for them to be.

Now, Horton has very sharp ears, so he hears their voices when nobody else does. And all of the other animals in the Jungle of Nool respond as most people do when they encounter something they can’t see or understand, which is, they respond

with hostility and anger and fear. And they try to destroy this little speck of dust that Horton has promised to save.

### **III. Faithful 100%**

The first and obvious message of the story of *Horton* is the importance of listening to voices who are on the margin, voices who are vulnerable, voices who are fragile. And frankly, this is something that we're pretty good at here in Metropolitan. We have a long history of being advocates for the poor and the marginalized and the vulnerable. And it's one of the things I am most grateful for in terms of being part of our community. And it's our very passionate commitment to social justice.

Dr. Seuss' own story, however, provides us with a sort of an additional invitation to that because Dr. Seuss was also a passionate advocate on behalf of justice, and yet had this one very significant blind spot in terms of his prejudice towards the Japanese. And I think what we have here is an invitation to even while taking pleasure and satisfaction in our history and commitment to justice, to look at where the places are in our psyches, personal and communal, where we don't see people who are vulnerable and marginalized.

There are some groups of marginalized folks that we're very good at advocating for. Our rich history on working on homelessness issues and on hunger issues and on GLBTQ issues, we've been very wonderful advocates. But are there other places where maybe we have been a little blind and need to listen with more careful ears?

That's actually what this wonderful story from Mark is about that we heard this morning. It's a place in the gospel in which Jesus has been deeply engaged in ministry to the marginalized and the oppressed and he needs to take a little bit of a break. He needs to get a breather, a little sabbatical. And so, he goes up to the northwestern corner of Galilee, which is an area that is heavily populated by Gentiles and where he might be less recognized and have to engage in less ministry. He just needs a break.

But even up there he is known and people start approaching him. And he is approached by this Syrio-Phoenician woman whose daughter needs healing. And she asked Jesus to help and Jesus' response is not only "No," it's a pretty rude "No." And he says to her, "The children," that is the Jews, the Jewish community, "The children need to be fed before the dogs."

And "dogs" in Jewish idiom of that day was pejorative used to apply to non-Jews. So Jesus has just called this woman seeking help, a dog, and denied her request for help. It's a pretty uncharacteristic picture of Jesus but one in which we can see very clearly that in Jesus' own mind, his ministry was to his community, to the Jews, to the poor and marginalized, yes, but to the Jews. And the wonderfully plucky Syrio-Phoenician woman says to him, she throws the term right back at him and says, "Yes, but you know what, even the dogs eat the crumbs under the children's table. So, what have you got for me?" And Jesus -- and this is why he's Jesus and not us. See, we would have responded with defensiveness and anger, right? Jesus responds by saying, "You know what, you're right! You're daughter is well, go in peace."

And in that wonderful brief couple of verses we see Jesus getting a new insight on his own ministry that he now realizes is not just to his community but to all people. That theme, of course, takes over the early Christian church which is -- becomes completely about breaking down the barriers between Jew and Gentiles, slave and free, male and female and recognizing that we are all sacred children of God. That comes because Jesus recognizes a blind spot he had and starts to turn it around.

Who are the voices that we don't listen to both personally and in our community? Are they the disabled, the immigrant? The voice of the earth? It's interesting that, given our current scientific understanding, this whole story is about a whole world contained in a dust speck. What does that say for the way we care for the "dust specks" around us?

And of course, the second theme of this story's that once we have heard those voices we have a sacred calling to start to speak on their behalf so that others hear them. So, in the midst of the forces of violence and power that dominate the world, the voices that are more fragile get hurt. And of course, the sort of subtheme to this is that when people in power are confronted with the voices of the powerless their response is not always positive, Amen?

Power does not like being confronted with the places in which it has expressed injustice. So that when Jeremiah, in today's passage is called by God to speak the truth to the power structure of his day and confront it with its injustice it responds by arresting him and trying to kill him.

Now, Jeremiah had no power. He was not a political official. He had no ability to really challenge the power structures but he spoke a word of truth. And when we speak the truth to power the response is often pretty hostile and violent. It is intended to make us fearful so that we stop speaking, right?

So that for example -- we have been spending a lot of time on reflecting on the trial of Frank Schaefer, my Methodist colleague in Pennsylvania, who was stripped of his cleric credentials, because he officiated in his son's same-sex wedding and the prosecuting attorney for the church, for the church, said to the jury in that trial in his closing arguments that they should strip Reverend Schaefer of his orders so that, and this is a quote, "Reverend Schaefer would be openly rebuked and that other pastors may fear to do the same." The goal of that punishment was to make other pastors fearful of doing what they thought might be right.

When power responds with that kind of violence it is a sure sign that it is uncomfortable with its own position. It is not accidental that this story of Horton was published at the height of the McCarthy hearing in the Senate. When fear of being labeled a communist was at its height, and powerful voices like Bishop Oxnham, our Methodist Bishop, like Edward T. Murrow, confronted the power structures with their injustice and called them to account. That process is never an easy or short one. If we are changing the structures of power and forcing people empowered to listen to the voice of the voiceless we know we've got to be in that struggle for the long haul, Amen? That doesn't happen overnight. It happens through persistence and doggedness and commitment.

Horton displays all of those in this wonderful story as he, in spite of all of the opposition and hostility and violence offered by the other animals in his forest, seeks to take sacred care of this speck of dusts. Now, the story of Horton has a happy ending but interestingly not because of Horton's force of personality or commitment. That's a piece of the puzzle but if you recall the story, the story ends with all of the animals dragging Horton towards a pot of boiling oil and in which they're going to dump this dust speck.

Horton pleads with the mayor of Whoville to get all of the Whos together so that they can shout loud enough that the other animals in the forest hear them so that Horton is not the only one who knows they exist. And the Whos are shouting and shouting and shouting and shouting and nobody hears them and so, the mayor of Whoville runs around the entire community to find who might not be shouting and he stumbles across Jojo. Jojo is a little tiny, tiny Who and they're all living on a speck of dust. So, this a really tiny Who, who is in a corner some place playing with a yo-yo. The mayor grabs Jojo and runs him out to where everybody else is shouting and holds him up, and Jojo adds his little tiny voice and that voice is what tips the balance and allows all the animals to hear the Whos' call. And their community is saved.

What a powerful message about the significance of each of our voices in the struggle for justice and what a powerful call for us to not simply be advocates, but to teach people on whose behalf we are speaking to speak for themselves, also. The systems will never change unless the people who are marginalized and unheard make themselves heard. We are very good advocates in this community on behalf of marginalized folks.

I wonder if there's a piece there that's a call to us to look at how we empower the communities that we are committed to, to join in that struggle for justice in more robust ways. It's just a thought, not a sermon.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Ted Geisel dedicated *Horton* to a friend that he made on his trip to Japan, a professor at the Kyoto University whose name was Mitsugi Nakamura. And in dedicating this book to Professor Nakamura, Ted Geisel models what he is always calling us to do which is to be able and willing to change a little bit. To recognize the places that we have fallen short and to start setting them right.

Friends, it's frankly not a particularly profound insight. Dr. Seuss was not a great philosopher or theologian. But he had a very powerful ability to point out the places where, in spite of all of our insight and intellectual sophistication, we fall short in very simple elementary ways of who God calls us to be. And Dr. Seuss in every one of his books encourages us to take a step to be just a little bit better.

Amen.