

The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss  
(based on Luke 19:1-10)

Dr. Seuss was one of the world's most prolific and most popular children's authors, though some of us who have read the books only as adults believe that they are intended for more than just children.

Dr. Seuss published 44 books in his lifetime. Every one of them is still in print and collectively they have sold more than 500 million copies. The Seuss website gets more than 100,000 hits a day. Three Oscars were given to films made from his books and there have been two more movies made in the last several years about the Grinch and about the Cat in the Hat. There is a theme park called Seuss Landing in Universal Islands of Adventure in Orlando. There is a Broadway musical called "Seussical".

Dr. Seuss was born Theodore Seuss (which rhymes with rejoice) Geisel on March 2 1904, in Springfield, Massachusetts of parents whose families immigrated from Germany. He changed the pronunciation of his middle name to Seuss (to rhyme with goose) because that was the way the name is pronounced in English.

He actually came up with the cadence of his books from hearing the rhythm of a ship's engine when he was on board and wrote *And to think I saw it on Mulberry Street*, his first book, which sold in 1937.

One of the most well-known characters created by Dr. Seuss is the Grinch. This most unusual character, who is at once both lovable and "hateable", is immortalized in the book *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!* and for millions of children and adults over the past several decades, Christmas just isn't Christmas without at least one viewing of this classic work of art that was brought to film in an animated series narrated by Boris Karloff and in a fairly updated version starring Jim Carrey as the Grinch.

Believe it or not, but the story of the Grinch reinforces today's Gospel message on several different levels and in more than one way. Of course, it is not the Grinch, but the *Whos* down in *Who-ville* who provide the most fundamental lesson of this story, but we learn three lessons from the Grinch himself, who teaches us something about others and, more importantly, something about ourselves.

The Grinch is an altogether miserable fellow. Whereas some would look at a glass of water and call it half empty while others would say it's half full, the Grinch would likely say that it doesn't matter whether the glass is half empty or half full because the water is probably contaminated anyway. In other words, the Grinch goes well beyond mere pessimism; the Grinch is a totally negative person.

Our natural reaction when we encounter such angry, despicable, miserable people is to wonder why. Who did something to this person to provoke such anger? What happened to cause such a negative approach to life? In the case of the Grinch, no one seems to know:

It could be his head wasn't screwed on just right.

It could be, perhaps, that his shoes were too tight.

But I think that the most likely reason of all

May have been that his heart was two sizes too small.

If we could isolate one thing in the story that makes the Grinch most angry, most miserable, it is this: other people's happiness. The Grinch seems somewhat content in his own misery until he witnesses others who don't share in his misery, others – namely the *Whos* – who have found happiness, contentment, love.

We've all heard the saying, "Misery loves company." Well, the Grinch's problem is that he is miserable – extremely, intolerably miserable –

but he has no one to keep him company in his misery. So, having no company, he sets out to create some. The Grinch reasons that if he can't be happy, he'll fix things so that no one can be happy. And he targets those despicable *Whos*.

The Grinch's whole motivation for trying to ruin, to "steal" Christmas, is to drag other people down to his level of misery and discontent. The Grinch is captive to one of the seven deadly sins: envy. He is envious, jealous. Because he is not happy, he can't stand other people being happy either.

In contrast, the clear message of Scripture is that we are to uplift other people – to rejoice in others' happiness, to assist others in their needs, and to support others in their sorrow. But if we are to learn from the Grinch, we must sincerely ask ourselves whether there are times and situations in our lives when we follow the example of the Grinch instead of following the message of Scripture.

We live in a highly competitive society, one that produces winners and losers, not only in sports, but also in the business world, in office settings, and even in the church. Are there times when we seek victory or some sense of solace by secretly rejoicing in others' misfortunes or failures? Are there times when we, like the Grinch, seek to raise ourselves up by dragging or putting other people down?

As much as we must guard against this attitude in ourselves, we must also protect ourselves from the consequences of such attitudes when they emanate from others. Mature Christians need to be in tune with their feelings and in touch with their motives. They need to be open to changing when these feelings and motives are impure, but should also be firm in not allowing others to influence them when their motives are pure. Lesson one

from the Grinch: we can't pull ourselves up by putting other people down – and we shouldn't allow others to do so either.

Lesson two focuses on how the Grinch became so “grinchy.” Many Dr. Seuss purists were disappointed with the Hollywood version of the story, perhaps because it took a great deal of liberties with the original, but mostly because it could never be the same; a classic can never be replaced.

Nevertheless, one thing that the movie version did was enable the viewer to consider how the Grinch got to be that way.

In the non-animated version with Jim Carey, we see the Grinch as a child. He is very unpopular – an outcast. The other children ridicule him. It is in response to his pain and poor self-image that he flees to Mt. Crumpit to escape his tormentors and to wallow in his misery.

As Christians trying to minister to others in a hurting world, we will encounter people who are, for all intents and purposes, Grinches – angry, mean-spirited, and selfish. Being kind and polite to such “hard-to-love” persons is a challenge, to say the least. But, ironically, it is those people who need love the most who are the hardest to love.

If the goal is to learn to love a hard-to-love person, it helps to learn a little bit about how he or she got to be that way. One of the hardest-to-love people from the Gospel accounts is Zacchaeus. It seems that he managed to make an enemy of just about everyone. Sometimes I wonder whether people didn't like Zacchaeus because he was mean-spirited, or whether he was mean-spirited because people didn't like him. Perhaps it was a little, or a lot, of both. We know little about Zacchaeus's background. But we do know something important about him: he was short. And he must have been unusually short, or else the Gospel writer would not have made a point of it.

Perhaps Zacchaeus, like the Grinch, was a target of ridicule and scorn ever since he was a child. Perhaps he learned to hate and mistreat other people as a response to the pain that others had inflicted on him. If we think about it, probably all of us can identify a few Zacchaeuses we have known in our lives – people who have been hurt, people who need to be loved.

Zacchaeus needed someone to love him. And Jesus was the one who did just that. Instead of making him a target of ridicule, Jesus showed him respect, treated him not just as a human being – which would have been good enough for Zacchaeus – but as a special person. He went to be a guest in Zacchaeus's house. This not only made Zacchaeus's day; it changed his entire life. This expression of love and respect was enough to overcome all the pain that Zacchaeus had endured up to that point. He was a new person. He went from feeling unloved to learning to love, from hurting other people to helping other people.

If we are to follow Jesus, we too must learn to recognize and to love people who, like the Grinch, are miserable and difficult to love because they are in so much pain. Engulfed in their pain, they find it hard to think about anyone but themselves. If we can show such hard-to-love persons how it feels to be loved, perhaps they, like Zacchaeus, will be transformed.

Lesson three from the Grinch is closely related to the second lesson. It is the message that people *can* change. This sounds at first like a simplistic message, but it is in fact a profound, even radical statement.

For many years, our culture has carried on a “nature versus nurture” debate. In essence, the debate centers on whether we became who we are because of our genetic makeup or because of our environment. What this debate overlooks is that nature and nurture are not the only factors. Biblical faith presupposes that regardless of our genetic makeup or the environments

that shape us, we can make choices between right and wrong. People who have all the right genes and were brought up in an ideal, nurturing environment still can make bad choices, while those who seem to have both nature and nurture stacked against them can overcome them by making good choices. Human beings are more than the product of genes and environments. Christian theology rejects fatalism: God gave human beings free will with which to influence the reality that they experience.

The Grinch is a model of someone who, in a moment of realization, changed. It had nothing to do with nature or nurture. It had everything to do with a realization in his soul, with a change of heart.

“And what happened *then*...?”

Well...in *Who-ville* they say

That the Grinch’s small heart

Grew three sizes that day!

The change took place not as a result of force or torture or punishment for the Grinch’s crime of stealing Christmas. Coercion can successfully modify a person’s behavior, but it cannot change a person’s heart. Change that rises up from within is inspired by a new insight, a new model, a new way of looking at things, a new set of priorities. This is what the unassuming *Whos* provided for the Grinch, perhaps without even realizing it. The Grinch’s actions deserved punishment. But instead of punishment, those humble *Whos* gave the Grinch a healthy dose of grace. And it was enough to change him forever.

Let us never be held captive by the idea that people cannot change. In the end, even Zacchaeus and the Grinch knew better.

AMEN.