

July 18, 2021
Ephesians 2:11-22

To Sneech, Their Own
Rev. Meredith Kemp-Pappan

There is wisdom to be gleaned from children's literature, and perhaps among the most loved are those penned by Dr. Seuss. As a child, I always loved to read the tale involving 2 very different kind of Sneeches:

The story begins:

"Now the **star bellied** Sneeches had bellies with stars.
The **plain bellied** Sneeches had none upon thars."

The Star-bellied Sneeches believed they were superior to their plain-bellied brethren. They used their "star" status as a means to exclude others. Meanwhile, the other Sneeches—the ones who had “no stars upon thars”, were relegated to second-class status. They were marginalized. When the Star-Bellied Sneeches held parties or picnics, the Plain-Bellied Sneeches were left, quite literally, out in the cold.

Then one day, a mysterious stranger, huckster extraordinaire Sylvester McMonkey McBean, rolls into the neighborhood. He offers the plain-bellied Sneeches the deal of a lifetime--for a nominal fee, his magic machine could turn the plain bellied into star-bellied. And the plain bellied sneeches, seeing this as their chance to finally be included, eagerly fork over their money.

Proudly, with their newly minted belly tattoos, the ones who were have-nots have suddenly become the “haves.” With excited faces and expressions they say to one another, surely, now after all this, we will be accepted!

They could not have been more wrong. The star bellied sneeches are angered at the defiance and audacity of these second-class sneeches. Don't they realize their place?

So what else do they do but return to that traveling merchant. Who promises to remove their stars. Suddenly, what was in is now out. And once again, one group of Sneeches is marginalizing the other. What happens next is a series of tumultuous events. The plain bellied have become star bellied. The star bellied have become plain. One group is struggling for unity and acceptance. The other is hellbent on maintaining the social structures of dominance and oppression. They go in and out of the star-making machine, round and round, until—at last—every penny is spent. They have run out of resources. The man packs up his machine and drives away. The Sneeches are left, disoriented, befuddled.

Because in all the confusion—they have forgotten exactly who was starbellied and who was not. And so, they realize that *maybe they are all alike.*

We can learn a lot from a Sneech.

July 18, 2021
Ephesians 2:11-22

To Sneechee, Their Own
Rev. Meredith Kemp-Pappan

Sneechees aren't the only species that have the ability to separate based on physical differences. Today's reading from Ephesians confronts a similar problem in the Early Church—tensions between the Gentiles and the Jews. Understanding these tensions also means understanding a little bit about the circumstances of the Early Church.

Modern Western Christians have a harder time understanding these tensions because we tend to think of religious categories as pretty much cut-and-dry. Whether or not you are a Jew, or a Muslim, or a Hindu, or a Christian, or an Agnostic—we generally think in terms of neat little boxes. But for the early church, such categories were a little ambiguous. Some Jews did not become followers of Jesus. Some Jews, however, did become followers of Jesus, yet still maintained their cultural identity. To further complicate matters, Gentiles—those who were not Jewish—also became followers of Christ, but without the Jewish religious background.

So when Paul refers to the circumcised, he's referring to Jewish Christians. Likewise, the uncircumcised were the Gentile Christians. Jew and Gentile relations have always been a bit—well, complicated, at best. But now they both have found themselves united, at least in theory, by the common bond of discipleship to Jesus Christ. It's almost like one of those reality shows in which two disparate groups of people are thrown together on an island and forced to cooperate or perish. Drama and backbiting always ensues. Likewise, these two groups had their own clashes—the very conflict which Paul is addressing in today's epistle reading.

It seems, though that these Jewish Christians were acting not unlike those star-bellied Sneechees. Although they were under the same banner of Christ as their Gentile brothers and sisters, they believed their physical mark as people of the covenant was proof positive that they were a little more worthy than the rag-tag-bunch-of-Johnny-and-Jenny-come-lately Gentiles. Following Christ was a natural progression of faith, stemming from an ancient religious tradition. You don't become an Eagle Scout before you earn a single merit badge, you don't become the CEO of a major corporation after one week of working in the mailroom. You earn accolades, titles, and respect, because of hard work, determination, and discipline.

These Gentile Christians were troublesome. They weren't even circumcised—so how serious could they be? And yet, these people, too, were followers of Christ and members of the Church. It was almost like they were on the fast track to salvation, skipping all of the middle steps. You can understand how the Jewish Christians may have felt slighted and Gentile Christians felt like they were “less than.” Like an older sibling resenting a younger sibling, both groups are struggling for the Parent's attention.

And unfortunately, this is a prevailing attitude that has not escaped the modern Church. I once saw a bumper sticker that proclaimed in a tongue-in-cheek-manner “Jesus loves you, but I'm his favorite.” Funny, but I sometimes wonder if that the biting wit is also subversive commentary on how many Christians feel about other Christians.

July 18, 2021
Ephesians 2:11-22

To Sneech, Their Own
Rev. Meredith Kemp-Pappan

Jesus loves you—but I'm his favorite, because I've been a member of St. Elsewhere Church for 40 years.

Jesus loves you—but I'm his favorite, because I always remember to pray before meals.

Jesus loves you—but I'm his favorite, because I tithe 10% of my paycheck.

I'm not implying that faithfully attending Church, or a solid prayer life, or tithing are bad—these are some of the actions that are born out of response to the love of God. But believing that certain acts place us more in favor with God sounds dangerously to me like turning God's love into an economic change. Those with more faith will be loved just a little bit more than those of average faith.

Paul assures us that through Christ and in Christ, we are all unified, we are all equal. This is Good News to all of us—yet I can't help but speculate that this news is even more joyful to the newest members of the Christian community, just as this news can be of some concern for the more “seasoned” Christians among us.

Unity is never easy. It requires humility, patience, and flexibility. Christ broke down the walls of hostility, but he did not erase hostility itself. That's up to us. But what God gives us, through the gift of Jesus Christ, is freedom—freedom from laws and categories which sever the Christian community. The Freedom of Christ means that we are no longer subjugated to categories and we are not defined by our race, gender, orientation, class, or status. God sees us all the same and we are given the freedom to look upon each other with God's eyes.

And when we look on each other, we will notice that we are all marked, not with Stars on our bellies, but with the cross of the crucified and risen Jesus. It is the great equalizer, the great unifier. It is a mark that cannot be erased, it is a mark that can never be lost. It is a mark that cannot be earned, or bought, or duplicated. It is an everlasting mark, this cross of Christ, that brands our hearts. †