

August 28, 2022
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

*Invite people forward....to move up.
Children first. Guests next.*

This past week has been a real struggle. I had an idea about what I wanted to focus on from the gospel lesson, but I wasn't sure about how to relate it. So I turned to my bookshelf and found *The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss*. While he doesn't relate today's reading to a Dr. Seuss story, I did find some inspiration there. And so, without further ado, we go to that great theologian, Dr. Seuss.

Read Sneetches.

What does this story about star-belly sneetches have to do with what the gospel teaches? No, Jesus has not taken up work as a wedding planner or decided to fill in for Miss Manners. He is talking to us about pride. Just like the sneetches who at first had stars upon their bellies had decided they were better than sneetches who had none upon theirs, Jesus warns against deciding that we are superior to others. If we decide on our own that we deserve to sit at the head table and then the host asks us to move to a lower table, what a blow that would be to our ego, especially since it would be seen in front of many. But pride can also disguise itself as false humility, as when we purposely sit beside the bathroom door and wait for the host to come, and in front of all, ask us to move up to a higher table. No matter how you slice it, the problem with pride here is that it causes us to focus, not on others, but on ourselves. We differentiate on some basis, like whether or not we have stars on ours, and use that as a barrier between us and everyone else. In effect it turns everyone else into a rival. And we do it all the time. We have divided ourselves into first world and third world; liberal and conservative; Jewish, Christian and Muslim; Roman Catholic and Protestant; evangelical and mainline; United and Pentecostal; lower class, middle class, and upper class, and.... Well, you get the idea.

Let me ask you, why did you choose to sit at the rear of the sanctuary today? Am I better or worse or somehow different than you in some way that I am unaware of? Does that difference mean that you are inferior or superior? Then, why the barrier between us? Why the rows of empty pews? Why the furniture between you and I, and why the elevated chancel? The barrier between people doesn't stop there. The barriers we create are also barriers between us and God. When you sit at the back, it's as though you are not only putting a distance between you and I, but also between you and God.

Jesus came to tell us that we need to stop looking and assessing ourselves from our perspective and start evaluating ourselves from the perspective of others, especially from God's perspective. Instead of deciding our own seating place based on our own assessment of our self-worth, we need to ask how the host values us and where does the host think we are best placed? And if we can do that, even for an instant, then perhaps we can also see others from that same perspective. And if we can do that, perhaps we will stop seeing the differences and start seeing what we have in common. Perhaps we could be like the Sneetches at the end of the story, who realized that it mattered not whether they had stars on their bellies, because we would see that we are all created by God; we all sin and fall short of the glory of God; we are all called to serve God in our own way; and we are all saved by God's grace.

There is far too much intolerance and hatred in our world right now. Just yesterday there was news of a random attack on a man on the streets of Vancouver, at the end of their Pride week. The three young men, without provocation, kicked the man and shouted homophobic slurs at him – a complete stranger. From the slurs they shouted it is obvious they made a judgment about who the man was, and that he was somehow inferior to them. The question I have, in this attack and in all other instances of intolerance and hatred, is this: Is it fear driving it, or could it be pride? You know, the feeling that we are better than everyone else; that we know better

than everyone else. Ultimately, our judgments and prejudices say more about us than about others.

The path to ending intolerance and hatred starts with getting to know other people as they are, and in order to do that we must first set aside our own judgments and prejudices of others. The first step really is getting to know ourselves, to be aware of our own judgments and prejudices in order to be able to set them aside.

Imagine what this world would be like if we could all put aside our judgments and prejudices; Christian, Jew, Muslim and other; first world and third world; heterosexual and other; housed and homeless; addict and not; conservative and liberal; able-bodied and differently abled; blue eyed and brown eyed; American, European, African, and Asian. Imagine if we could all live and work together for the benefit of all, especially for the benefit of those who cannot fend for themselves.

Fortunately, the news was also tempered with the celebration as Nazem Kadri, a Muslim of Lebanese descent, brought the Stanley Cup to London. It was something for the Muslim community to celebrate shortly after the first anniversary of the alleged hate crime that ended the lives of four members of the Afzal family.

God either created all of us, or none of us. I choose to believe that God created all of us, so who am I to judge and condemn someone who God created and values? That doesn't mean that I have to like everyone, but I do have to accept them as one of God's beloved, and to do that, sometimes I have to swallow my pride. I am no better than anyone else. This is a lesson that I constantly have to learn. It is a lesson that we all need to learn, over and over and over again.

They say, 'Pride goeth before the fall.' And I say, may none of us fall or even stumble. As you head off to your ministries this week, check your pride at the door.