

This Sunday we're starting a new sermon series called, "The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss." Over the next 7 weeks, we'll explore scriptural themes related to stories by Dr. Seuss. To some this might seem shallow, strange, superficial, even sacrilegious. But the important question, beyond how many words beginning with 's' I just used, is this: can exploring Dr. Seuss really help to shape us as more faithful disciples of Jesus?

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Let's begin by taking note that Christians – at least of the Catholic and mainline Protestant variety – are heirs and practitioners of a religious tradition that respects truth, *wherever it is found*. The apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians 3, writes to a church where some members really like Paul's preaching, but others prefer to hear a preacher named Apollos. Still others favor Peter's preaching. So in vv. 21-23 Paul writes: ²¹*So let no one boast about human leaders. For **all things** are yours,* ²²*whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—**all belong** to you,* ²³*and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.*

In other words, don't cut yourself off from truth, whether it comes from Paul or Apollos or Peter or elsewhere in the world... and even if it comes from Dr. Seuss! Lay claim to the truth wherever you find it. Why? Well, as one theologian says "if we trust Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, we have no reason to fear that truth from **any source** will undercut our faith. Indeed, we have every reason to believe that **all truth**, wisdom, and reality cohere in Jesus." (John Cobb)

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Acts 17 tells of an incident where the Paul ventures to Mars Hill – the Areopagus – in Athens Greece where educated Greeks of that day gathered to debate and argue philosophy. [Read Acts 17: 24-28]

Take note: in v. 28 Paul is quoting two Greek philosophers – which means they are pagans (non-scriptural pagans!) – as revealing the truth of who God is. Paul doesn't quote scripture nor even Jesus, revealing quite clearly that for Paul, truth is bigger than his religion; because God – not religion, not theology, not scripture – God is the **ultimate and only source** of truth.

Folks, the Gospels were not even written when Paul, Apollos, or Peter were preaching, so of course Paul would not have limited the "Truth" to what we read in our Bibles. (I should repeat that: our Bibles,

with the Gospels and much of the NT did not exist when Paul was alive!)

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The idea that faith, by its very nature, calls us to stretch normal boundaries as we pursue truth, finds correlation in the **Now** Testament of Dr. Seuss, in *On Beyond Zebra*. The story tells of two boys, one of whom is just learning his alphabet, and another who has gone beyond the conventional alphabet -- on beyond zebra. And why not? Who says we have to stop at 26 letters? Why can't there be more?

Seuss's story is pointing us to deeper issues and questions critical for people of faith. Why do we stop with what has always been, whether it is in spelling or in faith or the ways we worship? Why believe – or at least act – as if there are no new frontiers, no new revolutions, no big transformations that God wants us to be ready for? Don't we know better? Wasn't Jesus pushing us to live our lives well on beyond zebra?

So Dr. Seuss didn't invent this idea. It has much more ancient roots, this going beyond where it's comfortable to go. The Bible is filled with stories of folks who risked and dared and dreamed. Our faith story begins way back in Genesis 12 when an elderly couple accepts God's invitation to go on beyond zebra.

In Genesis 12:1-3 God speaks to 75-year old Abram, and says, "Pack up, leave your relatives and your inheritance behind. Go to a land that I will show you." And God doesn't even say where Abram will end up! And so, even though Abram and his wife are well into their retirement years, Abram packs up and goes.

There is a verse from a hymn that appears in an UM supplemental hymnal called *The Summons* that goes like this: "Will you come and follow me if I but call your name? Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?" Abram did. How about us? Are we able to go past zebra if God calls our names?

Our reading from the gospel of Luke tells us of an encounter between the risen Christ and two disciples on the road to Emmaus. The last thing these disciples expect is an encounter with a dead man walking and so their "eyes are kept from seeing." Their non-recognition of Jesus makes a lot of sense to me, because of what they absolutely know from their A to Z way of thinking: that dead people never ever become traveling companions.

For many, the resurrection is a stumbling block to faith, something rational, educated, A to Z people, we cannot quite affirm. And, because the resurrection cannot be proven in a court of law, we are right to have our doubts. But what we can't deny is that numerous disciples experienced the risen Christ in such a way that they came to believe, and to act on the belief, that they too could enter into an unbound life and share God's boundless love. Death no longer scared the disciples who had all previously fled and when Jesus was killed!

I have to believe that it would take something outside of our A to Z experiences to free us from the fear of death. Wouldn't it take some kind of an unprecedented miracle for most of us to become free to really live life?

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The Bible, as I've said before, tells us of several resurrection appearances and none of them are exactly alike. But they do have one thing in common; in all the resurrection accounts, Jesus' comings and goings startle his followers in the same unexpected way that Jesus' teachings pushed them to look at God and the world in a very different light -- on beyond zebra.

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Now I know I'd be a much more effective pastor if I emulated the more successful versions of Christianity by preaching a formulaic A to Z approach for how we can know and possess the ultimate truth. I could fashion myself as a defender of that "Truth" and call people to join in the battle of defending that Truth. I could assert that whatever you name you can claim because Jesus wants you to have everything your heart desires so long as you grab hold of "the Truth."

But the Truth towards which our faith orients us cannot be held or defined by a formula. Jesus never said to his disciples, 'here's the truth, class: write it down.' Jesus said, '*I am* the Truth.' Which wasn't an egotistical statement. It was a way of saying that truth is a living reality, an *incarnate* Word, because Jesus is the living Word. And so the Truth with which we Christians have to deal **can only be lived**; it can't be held or contained or controlled or even defended. It must be *lived*. Christ must live in us if people are to have any sense that Christianity is somehow true. (Douglas John Hall)

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This God of ours (and I don't mean 'ours' in terms of a possession; but this God revealed in Scripture)

calls us to do things beyond our understanding and comfort... like Abram and these two disciples on the Emmaus road. You may know this firsthand or maybe, as you walk this journey, you're still learning that our God is a God of risk-taking and transformation, of justice and righteousness, and certainly not a God of the status quo. **And just to be honest, this can be totally unnerving.**

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Today's Dr. Seuss story explores what the alphabet might look like beyond Z; it calls us go outside the norm, beyond the "way we've always done it," and to listen for what is new; to see other possibilities. As we emerge from the pandemic the temptation will be to go back and do things the way we've already done them. I am certain that this is God's desire for us, not at all. And so if you are ready to go deeper, to push beyond the comfortable boundaries of your current faith, I'd recommend three different books where the authors demonstrate the courage to go beyond comfortable Christianity: *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* by Rob Bell, *If Grace is True* by Philip Gulley and James Mulholland and *The Irresistible Revolution* by Shane Claiborne. (But here's a warning: Don't read any of these books if you are not prepared to go on beyond Zebra. And, know too, I don't recommend these books because I agree with everything in them, but because I think the questions these authors are exploring are worthy of reflection and discussion as we live into the living Truth of our living faith.)

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But why bother? What bother to go on beyond zebra? Isn't that too much of a risk? Well, yes. But where did we ever get the idea that we are called to adhere to a safe, status quo, religion? For gosh sakes, ***we are called to adhere to Jesus***, which means putting ourselves fully into God's hands so that God may transform us more and more into the image and likeness of Jesus Christ -- who lived and died, and rose again, to take us way, way, way on beyond Zebra.

Amen.