

The Parables of Dr. Seuss: For All Who Have Trouble Getting to Solla Sollew

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2 Corinthians 12: 7b-10 "even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong." This is the word of God, for the people of God. Amen.

Today we begin a four weeks series based on the Parables of Dr. Seuss. This week we explore the story entitled **For All Who Have trouble Getting to Solla Sollew**, next week- **Green Eggs and Ham**, Aug. 7th- **Marvin K. Mooney Will You Please Go Now** and finally- **Near and Far How Lucky We Are**.

How many of you have either read a Dr. Seuss book yourself, or read one to a child? Dr. Seuss books are iconic, part of the American landscape in educating children and enhancing their childhood reading skills. Ted Geisel, the real name of Dr. Seuss, grew up in a Christian home and espoused distinctly Christian views throughout his publishing life. Dr. Seuss wanted to be known as a children's author, and did not publicly speak of his Christian faith. Yet looking at his books we find many New Testament ideas and concepts, such as "do no harm to others, forgive others, and love others." Like in the Charles Schultz **Peanuts** cartoons, Dr. Seuss espouses parables from the popular culture designed to teach, just as the parables of Jesus are analogies from popular culture, (his own culture) designed to teach his message- "the Christian Message."

This scripture from St. Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth has application with the story line of our Dr. Seuss book today. The apostle Paul was given the equivalent of a punji stick, more than a thorn, more like a stake in his flesh. The Greek word "**skolops**" indicates the affliction of being impaled by a stake. So maybe a larger affliction is indicated, not a mere splinter or thorn.

It doesn't really matter what the thorn was. Speculation abounds that it could have been malaria, chronic dysentery, a stutter, or epilepsy. The fact remains that Paul prayed the affliction would be removed, it wasn't. Yet Paul speaks this key phrase in the NRSV of the Bible; "Therefore I am **CONTENT** with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecution, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong." 2 Cor.12: 10

What does **contentment** mean for us today? For some people it means having all of their physical needs met. Food, shelter, clothing. For others contentment means not having any worries. Life is great, no stress, no pressure, no strife, and no anxiety.

Contentment in Biblical tradition comes from living your life in accordance with God's intentions, with complete confidence in and a dependence on God's ever present love and grace. Some people look for places named Utopia, Elysium, and El Dorado as places of contentment. No fuss, no muss.

St. Paul and our Dr. Seuss character have something in common don't they? It is the fact that they have troubles in their lives. Sometimes in life people want no ups and downs, only ups and ups and ups. They may try a geographical cure to end their consternation to find contentment. They move to St. Louis, or Dallas, or a small rural area thinking that all problems related to them will stay in the old locations. It does not happen like that. "Some people set off to the city of Solla Sollew...where they never have troubles. At least very few!" In the Dr. Seuss story our hero has never had troubles before, Never until "one day he stubs his toe on a rock and SOCK! What a shock!"

For us as humans, the call from God is one that is a startling shock. Think how you arrive on the scene of life, young, happy maybe carefree? "O give me a home where the buffalo roam, where the deer and the antelope play, where seldom is heard a discouraging word, and the skies are not cloudy all day." Perfection on the plains. "Oh I wish I was in Dixie, away, away!" We might look for that utopian form of government, or the ideal job, relationship, even our church. If only the pastor would do... then all would be well.

There are three points for us to recognize and identify in the Dr. Seuss book.

First, be careful who leads you to seek peace. Our hero catches a ride with a man going to Sollow Sollew on a camel. The man claims that there is nothing troublesome in Sollow Sollew. It is bliss and perfection. "Join me," he declares. But soon the man on the camel and the camel itself are being carried by our hero. Our hero deposits his load of troubles at the door of a camel doctor and hears the parting words of the camel driver, "Your troubles are practically all at an end. Just run down that hill and around the next bend." Sometimes those who ally with us and give us good sounding advice, are in need of being restored and saved themselves. And sometimes we can actually find ourselves spending all of our time trying to make them better and forgetting about ourselves. That is not particularly healthy.

Our everyman hero rounds the bend and then encounters an epic flood and cries in a tone of voice reminiscent of Job, "Now I really don't see why troubles like this have to happen to me!" Ever felt like that? That you get hammered more than others? That you live a good life, and if God really loved you, he'd not allow these things to occur? I know God loved Paul and he loved the Christ, his son Jesus. Both suffered. Both loved God. But both were content with their lives and understood that sometimes hardship comes to us, and in the midst of our troubles, God journeys through it and with us.

After the flood our Seuss everyman floats for days and finally grabs hold of a rope, only to find the other end held by General Genghis Khan Schmidt; whose rope should remind us that, when we are the end of our ropes, we can really be dopes. We'll often frantically glom onto anything like mystery, miracle, or authority, you name it. We can make a false savior out of anything if we are desperate enough. Sex, drugs, power, self esteem gurus, false teaching espoused by someone we think has all the answers. It does not take much to have us get off the path and into the bar ditch full of weeds.

Our 2nd point is "**Who do you hitch you wagon to and why?**" If it is not the Christ, be prepared for the one to whose wagon you have hitched yourself - federal government, school district, institution, business partner, enlightened teacher. If there are humans involved, there is a good chance you will be disappointed at some time.

Our little everyman gets sucked into a vent and spends three days in the dark, similar to Jonah in the belly of the whale, or the Son of man in the heart of the earth for three days. (Matt. 12:40) He pops out in Sollow Sollew and is greeted by a wizard who tells him that all is not perfect in

Sollow Sollew. He says, "Join me and go to the town of Boola Boo Ball, whose townsfolk have no troubles at all." Wait, didn't we just start out here at the first of the book? Didn't we acknowledge that there was trouble in life? Unlike Paul who said he would be content in his situation and knew God was sustaining him, our everyman hero is getting advice from another to flee, to make the geographical cure and look for greener pastures. Is that grass is greener on the other side of the fence, or not?

Here is the question for us: **How do we face trouble so that there will be no running away?**

Three points:

First- In our faith as Christians we are aware that there are some benefits that can actually come from trouble. No, we don't ask God to send us trouble, but trouble does and will come and in it we can be formed more deeply in our faith. Through a deeper spiritual life and devotion, we can gain a sense of discipline, and we can engage in problem solving. You know that good judgment comes from the opportunity to make a bad judgment. If you never take a chance and make a decision, you miss the opportunity to develop good judgment. Learned experience comes from bad judgment. It is bad judgment to pay a contractor of any kind the full amount before the job is done. Why? Because they might not return to finish the job.

I think in the Christian faith there is an infinitely greater appreciation for trouble than the world has. That's because our faith realizes that suffering, or trouble in Lubbock, or Solla Sollew, is the path where the world learns of the Christ, and that our trouble, suffering, and hardship may also be used by us to draw closer to God. Faith is always strongest when the believer is weakest. Ever been on your knees crying out to God for help, healing, or guidance? Your position of surrender and vulnerability before God may look like weakness to humans, but in reality you are approaching God from a position of weakness that is very strong. Your weakness strengthens you. That is why Paul wrote our 2nd Corinthians text today. *"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong."*

In one way our troubles are one of God's greatest gifts to us. When we have trouble we know we are living, breathing humans and not some inert objects with no trouble. There is a scene in the

movie, "**Zorba the Greek**" where the boss wants to meet a young woman but exclaims, "I don't want any trouble!" And Zorba replies, "You don't want any trouble, what do you want then....Life IS Trouble!" Life, my friends, can have TROUBLE.

My second thought is that Christians are better able to face hardship because we know that troubles are not forever. Paul says, "Our troubles are slight and short lived; and their outcome an eternal glory which outweighs them far." 2 Cor. 4: 16-17

Listen, church, if there is no eternal glory, if Christ did not defeat death with his bodily resurrection, then why battle against trouble when ultimately it means nothing if Christ is defeated? So why bother resisting trouble? We understand Christ DID defeat death. We know Christ DID overcome the grave on our behalf and sin was taken away and we are offered eternal life, the gift of the Father's unfailing grace.

As Christians we have a faith and courage and perseverance and tenacity that the world does not know, and we have a hope and courage that nothing, not even death can disappoint, defeat, or overcome.

Romans 5: 3-5 Paul says, "*We also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope---and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.*"

This courage makes us as Christians unafraid to get in trouble or to even make trouble on behalf of the Lord.

Third- Dr. Seuss's story has one more powerful thing to suggest about overcoming trouble. The comfort and familiarity of Psalm 23 lets us know that at times we will walk through the valley of the shadow. But we draw solace and comfort from knowing that "surely thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." The rod and staff in the 23rd Psalm are kind of like our little guy at the end of the story in the Dr. Seuss book. He picks up a bat and says he will face his troubles.

Paul says in *Philippians 4: 11-13 "Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well fed and of going*

hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me."

What trouble are we speaking of? We are speaking of trouble in the all inclusive, yours and mine, everyone's, now and in the future. Sin, evil guilt, suffering, injustice, death and taxes, bad news, broken relationships, lay offs, everything we call trouble. Here is a question for you. Is there anyone or anything that will finally overcome and defeat all trouble? Yes. Jesus Christ has already done it. God himself will get us all to Solla Sollew, to the soley heaven. And because of that Jesus can say, *"I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage: I have conquered the world!" John 16:33.*

Hear these words of comfort, encouragement, and boldness: until this final victory completely takes over, batter up!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

May we pray together? I invite you to offer your troubles to the Lord. Right now in the silence, offer those troubles, those difficulties, those challenges you are encountering, to God.