

November 6, 2016

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First Reading: “The Sneeches” by Dr. Seuss

Second Reading: James 2:1-13

2My brothers and sisters,* do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? 2For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, 3and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, ‘Have a seat here, please’, while to the one who is poor you say, ‘Stand there’, or, ‘Sit at my feet’,* 4have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? 5Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters.* Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? 6But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? 7Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

8 You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ 9But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. 10For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. 11For the one who said, ‘You shall not commit adultery’, also said, ‘You shall not murder.’ Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. 12So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. 13For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church.

Sermon:

Will Campbell preached his first sermon at the tender age of seventeen, in a tiny wooden church tucked between farms on the outer edges of Liberty, Mississippi. He was skinny and nervous and looked it. He

placed his grandfather's pocket watch on the lectern in front of him so he wouldn't ramble on too long and then just took a breath and shot from the hip, pouring out a passionate sermon on the first verse of Genesis. The old men and women of the church were tough old farmers and lifelong Christians. They listened him speak and heard the voice of a preacher. So they held a meeting and then a special service. They gave him a hand-written certificate of ordination and told him that God had called him to share the Good News of the Gospel with anyone who would listen. It was a moment of calling that touched him and shaped the rest of his life. ¹

He did go on to college and seminary, eventually earning a doctorate from Yale. But even late in life, when he was famous for all kinds of other reasons, his degree from Yale was barely visible on the wall of his study. He had long-since taped the weather-worn, handwritten certificate of ordination from East Fork Baptist Church overtop of its ornate Latin script. It's clear that he didn't believe the power of his ordination came from an ivory tower.

Will Campbell was a preacher, for sure, but he came to describe himself as a "bootleg preacher," because he turned out to be a bad fit for most churches. He had a habit of doing his own thing that didn't sit well with committees and congregations. He also had a habit of drinking whiskey, cursing, and chewing tobacco, which the congregations didn't love so much either.

In 1954, he accepted a position as a chaplain at the University of Mississippi. It was the same year the Supreme Court declared school segregation unconstitutional. And when he preached in that university chapel, it was just like that very first sermon: he shot from the hip and shared the truth of God's love, grace, and justice as he understood it. He became a fierce advocate for racial equality at a school that was completely opposed to it.

One morning Will Campbell opened the front door of his house on the edge of campus and found his front yard covered in ping-pong balls.

¹ Appreciating Will Campbell, "Preacher To The Damned," by Frye Gaillard, www.theprogressive.org, June 5, 2013.

Not only were the ping-pong balls spread all over his lawn, but each one of them had been painstakingly colored with markers, half-black and half-white. ²

It wasn't too hard for Campbell to figure out why this had happened or what it meant. The day before, he had played a game of ping-pong with a black minister at the local YMCA. Shortly thereafter, the Dean of Students called him into the office to warn him that he needed to "adjust" his thinking on race relations. He was fired from the position less than two years after he arrived.

I've been meditating on that lawn full of ping-pong balls, half-white, half-black. I've been thinking about bellies that have stars, and bellies that don't. Dr. Seuss – a.k.a. Theodore Giesel – wrote *The Sneetches* in 1953, one year before Will Campbell took accepted his job at Old Miss. He wrote *Sneetches*, he explained later, because during his college days he was twice denied access to a business because he was perceived to be Jewish. He was actually Lutheran but that experience chilled him to the bone. The Star-Bellied Sneetches, then, are a nod to the Golden Star of David forced upon Jews in Nazi Germany, and what Seuss considered to be the sin of discrimination. ³

I've been thinking about how Dr. Seuss' story is clearly meant to be a metaphor for all kinds of discrimination but lately the racist, sexist, and homophobic voices in our country have been so overt that it feels less like a metaphor and more like a documentary. Every minute Sylvester McMonkey McBean shows up with a new and marketable way to separate *us* from *them*. Or, even worse, to help us find new ways to broaden differences between *us* and *them*. Perhaps, at a time like this, it is so important for us to ask the question the Sneetches failed to ask themselves. Who is profiting from all these divisions?

Our New Testament reading is from the Epistle of James. James is known for his practical, no-nonsense advice to the church. In fact, the

² "The First Church of Rednecks, White Socks, and Blue Ribbon Beer," by Lawrence Wright. *Rolling Stone*, December 13, 1990.

³ "Dr. Seuss and the Jews." By Saul J. Singer. *The Jewish Press*. February 2016.

letter is so focused on the right way to live your life that Martin Luther worried that it threatened the core theological conviction of the Reformation – that we are redeemed not by what we do but only by the grace of God.

Martin Luther hated the letter so much that when he edited a new edition of the Bible he listed James at the bottom of the Table of Contents, and didn't number it like the other books. Compared to Paul's letters to the Romans and Corinthians, with their elegant arguments about grace, Luther called James' letter "a right strawy Epistle" with "no Gospel character to it." Ouch.

But as I read James' letter, I can almost hear the author pushing back against Luther. "Yes, yes, saved by grace alone. No one is disputing that. But still – what do your actions *say* about your beliefs? What do your actions say about your God? Assuming we've been graced with a life-changing love that is entirely undeserved, how then shall we live? Surely such a question matters.

To James, it was outrageous to watch the people of God gather for worship, to claim themselves as followers of Jesus – the carpenter king, the lover of orphans, widows, and the poor – only to posture and preen before the wealthiest members of their own community. "Do you, with your acts of favoritism, really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?" An interesting alternate rendering of the Greek here is, "Do you, with your acts of favoritism, really believe in the *glory* of our Lord Jesus Christ?"

I like this translation better because it gets closer to the heart of the matter. Are you hedging your bets? Proclaiming your faith in the crucified one, the friend of sinners, the intermittently homeless, downwardly mobile Christ? Or are you just *saying* you are doing that, while cozying up to the rich and powerful people you think will truly save you?

That's a question with the capacity to make people uneasy. It certainly makes me uneasy. I'm a servant of Jesus Christ with a pension plan *and* a Roth IRA. Where I put my faith varies a little bit from moment to moment, if I'm being totally honest.

Having been booted out the University of Mississippi, Will Campbell moved deeper and deeper into the struggle for racial equality. He found himself an unlikely friend of Martin Luther King, Ralph Abernathy, and John Lewis. He was the only white person Dr. King invited to the first gathering of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. He was one of the adults who escorted black students through angry white crowds at Central High School in Little Rock. He advised the Freedom Riders and marched against fire hoses in Birmingham. ⁴

All the while he preached sermons of righteous passion, his wife accompanying him on the pipe organ. And all the while, hate mail poured in from political right like so many painted ping-pong balls. The letters made him angry, but they also convinced him that he was honoring the calling originally given to him by the good old men and women of East Fork Baptist Church – to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with anyone who would listen. The fact is, a lot of people were listening. He had become something of a folk hero of the liberal Christian church.

And then, around 1967, Will Campbell awoke to a realization that chilled him to his bones. He came to the realization that he had begun to hate his enemies. Specifically, he hated the Klu Klux Klan. “After twenty years my ministry had become, without my realizing it, a ministry of liberal sophistication,” he told a reporter later. “A ministry of human engineering...of worshipping at the Shrine of enlightenment and academia, of making an idol of the Supreme Court, of a theology of law and order.” ⁵ While he was succeeding at becoming a good liberal, he realized, he was failing to follow his calling. He believed that God loved no one more than the least, the last, and the lost. Who was more lost than the Klan? It troubled him that in their angry faces he recognized the friends, family, and neighbors of his past. He began to reach out to various Klan members, wondering if any of them would agree to meet with him for prayer.

⁴ Rev. Will D. Campbell, Maverick Minister of the Civil Rights Era, Dies at 83. By Robert D. McFadden, June 4, 2013.

⁵ Wright, 1990.

So it came to be that he spent many days driving across the farmlands of the South with a Bible and a guitar and an occasional bottle of bourbon, meeting with Klansmen to hear their stories and sing and pray. He never changed his positions on racial equality but maybe predictably he was widely criticized on both the left and right for his actions, called a traitor by so many who had once called him a hero. Many in the Civil Rights Movement distanced themselves from him, viewing his ties to the Klan with suspicion. Hate mail starting pouring in from the left.

When he was challenged, as he often was, Campbell would pull out a worn copy of the Bible, King James Version. "Here," he would say, thumping his finger on a passage from 2 Corinthians 5: "Reconciliation!" he would say. "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself. No longer holding men's misdeeds against them." He would pause. "It's a hard idea to accept, and that's why the gospel's a whole lot more drastic than most folks have ever dreamed."

I'm spending so much time telling this story about Will Campbell because I think it helps restore some of the sting of James' letter. It helps restore the scandal of the Gospel.

I love *The Sneetches* but I guess if I have a quibble with the story, it's with the ending. Dr. Seuss imagines a world where we realize that our differences are trifling – just a distraction from the real work of building authentic community, Sneetch to Sneetch. Alright. But of course we *do* have differences, and they *do* matter. That is precisely why the work of pursuing justice is so important.

To love God is to love people. And to love people is to pursue justice. But in pursuing justice, we run the risk of losing sight of the grace that caused us to fall in love with God in the first place.

The world Will Campbell describes is touched by tragedy on every level. Each and every one of us broken, to various degrees. Our favoritism isn't flawed because it acknowledges our differences. Our favoritism is flawed because it tries to maintain the delusion that we will somehow

maneuver ourselves into righteousness. It fails to recognize that it is the nature of God's grace to invert the scales. Grace doesn't obliterate our differences, nor does it make them irrelevant. Grace inverts their meaning. It imbues them with irony. It turns our weeping into belly-laughing. Why?

Because, of all people, the least will be greatest and the last shall be first. God's good news comes first to the Plain Bellied Sneetches, *precisely because* they don't have stars on thars.

Will Campbell woke up to the realization that his fight for equality was allowing him to paint a picture of himself as righteous, and to paint a picture of his adversaries as demons. He was playing favorites in the church. He was beginning to lose his grip on grace.

I've got to tell you, it's tempting to view this Presidential election as a dance with the apocalypse. It's tempting to feel as though we live or die by the ballot box this week. It's tempting to direct both all of our anxiety and all of our hope in that direction.

And look – by all means, get out the vote. Speak your mind. Fight for justice. But let's also remember who – at the end of the day – will save us. Let's remember how each and every one of us is touched by the brokenness and fear that animate so many of the people whose actions we find unfathomable. Let's remember the love that someone showed us, listening to us, forgiving us, healing us. Let's summon the courage – even in teensy ways – to seek God's face in the face of the stranger.

Because the real work - the real *real* work – begins November 9th. No matter who wins this election we will still have to face each other. If there is anything we have learned from this election is that is much harder to hear each other, to see each other, to listen to each other, than it used to be. And as much as we pursue justice, this must also be our work. The seeing, hearing, healing, mending, redeeming, and recreating of all those who feel lost, left behind, neglected. That will require more than righteousness indignation. It will require God's grace. And that, friends, is a gift that the church actually has to offer.

One night, Will Campbell got in his truck with his bible, his guitar, and his bottle of whiskey. He drove to Granite Quarry, North Carolina, a few miles east of Charlotte. Bob Jones, the Grand Dragon of the Klu Klux Klan, had finally been arrested, tried, and convicted, and the following morning he would be going to jail for many years.

By the time Will reached the small cinderblock house where Jones lived, the living room was full of friends and family. They were telling stories and drinking and trying to stay upbeat. Will stayed there for hours, listening and reminiscing. They drank most of the bottle of whiskey and it was nearly 2am when Will asked if he could lead a communion service.

“Well, yes,” Jones said. “Let’s have communion.”

The entire family gathered in a standing circle as Will Campbell broke the bread and cup and passed them around the room. Then he picked up his guitar.

“I’m gonna sing a song that to me is the essence of the Christian faith,” he said. “It’s called ‘Anna, I’m Takin’ You Home,’ and it’s about a whore and a lover who forgives her and takes her home. That’s what Christianity is all about -- being forgiven and taken home to where you’re loved.”

He stopped talking and started strumming the guitar. As he remembers it, there were a few tears in the room at that moment, not least his own, as finally he started to sing.