

Over the four Sundays of Advent this year, we moved through a worship series based on the Dr. Seuss classic The Grinch Who Stole Christmas. At the same time, the children in Sunday School watched a modern version of it. And while the graphics in that new version were better than the original, and there was more storyline, it had the original plot lines. As the story opened, for instance, the children were told “*every WHO down in WHOville liked Christmas a lot . . . but the Grinch who lived just north of WHOville . . . did NOT.*” They were told “*whatever the reason, his heart or his shoes,*” the Grinch would get to Christmas Eve each year and stand at the edge of his cave on Mt. Crumpit “*hating the Whos.*” And they were told that after the Grinch put his “*wonderful awful idea*” to steal Christmas into action, he had a revelation that “*maybe Christmas doesn’t come from a store; maybe Christmas . . . perhaps . . . means a little bit more.*”

That is because Dr. Seuss understood that Christmas is not just a holiday where people decorate homes, have parties, and buy presents. Christmas is about the proclamation that God is love, and those who celebrate it must let God’s love permeate who they are how they behave toward others - even when those others do not act in loving ways. Which is why the modern version of the Grinch story added a whole new section to the storyline in between the Grinch returning the trappings of Christmas and him sitting down to “*carve the roast beast.*”

That new section began right after the Grinch returned home after giving back the trappings of Christmas to the Whos, unsure why he had not followed through on his “*wonderful awful idea.*” As the Grinch stood there in confusion pondering what happened, there was a knock at his door. Opening it, he saw none other than Cindy Lou Who. He had met her the night before when he was stealing the trappings of Christmas from her home. And while he might have expected her to be the most angry of all at him because she had caught him in the middle of putting his “*wonderful awful idea*” into action, she didn’t seem angry. In fact, she did something that confused the Grinch even more: she invited him to her home for Christmas dinner.

So while he already couldn’t get his mind around the idea that someone would be willing to forgive him for what he had done, the idea they might want to have him at their dinner table floored him. But nevertheless, standing at his front door, was someone he had harmed who had walked up Mt. Crumpit to speak to him. Here was someone who not only wasn’t angry, but had forgiven him. And here, greatest of all, was someone who said she wanted him at her dinner table. And not just Cindy Lou Who. Her mother. Her mother’s friends. And all the Whos.

I share the added storyline of the new version of The Grinch Who Stole Christmas with you because there is no better illustration of what Christmas is about than the Grinch not only being forgiven by those he sinned against but being welcomed into to their home with open arms. And not only welcomed into their home with open arms, but being given the honor to “*carve the roast beast.*” That is because the story of what God did in a manger long ago is about more than an unexpected birth. It is about more than singing angels and mesmerized shepherds. And it is about more than wise men coming to visit a newborn king.

It is about a Creator who was saddened when His creation rejected Him and how He responded to that sadness by showing one a cross that He was not only willing to forgive that transgression but do everything He could to restore that broken relationship. It is about a Redeemer who was willing to suffer the pain that separation had caused God's children, and took upon Himself their transgressions so reconciliation could take place. And it is about a Sustainer who continues to give wayward children the power they need to not only be restored to relationship with God but to help bring other estranged children back into relationship with Him as well.

Maybe that is why the darkness of this fallen and sinful world gives way to light for a few fleeting days at this time of year. Maybe that is why people who say they do not believe in Jesus still decorate their homes with the trappings of Christmas for a few short weeks at this time of year. And maybe it is even why those who do believe in Jesus are at this time of year able to show just a bit more unconditional love and gracious forgiveness to those who normally try their patience and cause their blood to boil. For in this time of year, more miraculous things can occur than a virgin birth. Sinful people can be transformed. Broken families can be healed. And angry societies can begin to follow the way the Prince of Peace originally created the world to operate.

But such Christmas miracles do not happen automatically. The sweetness of the Seuss story, and the power of the nativity story, does automatically make us act in unconditional love and gracious forgiveness toward others. The story of the Christ child later being crucified reminds us of that fact. So in order for divine love and forgiveness to be part of who we are not just at this time of year but year round, there are things that we need to do to let the grace of God grow our heart three sizes and enable us to live a life of faith. Let's look at three of them.

First, we can let God grow our heart a size by making the commitment to view other people (and their needs) with as much compassion as we view ourselves (and our needs), just as Jesus did when He went to the cross for us. We see this in a play by Timothy Thompson about the parable of the vineyard workers. It tells how two brothers were on a street corner begging to be hired. John was strong and able. But Philip had lost a hand in an accident. So when a vineyard owner came by he took John and put him to work. All day long, John looked for Philip.

And while wave after wave of additional workers were brought in, Philip was never among them. John was grateful to have the work, but lamented that Philip was not being employed - as he knew that his family needed the income just as much as his own. Finally, at almost the end of the day, a last group of workers was brought in. And this time Philip was among them. John was relieved see him and to know that Philip would at least get to work for an hour or so.

At the end of the day, the vineyard owner had everyone line up to receive their wages in the opposite order they were hired, with those working a short time first. As John watched, he saw that Philip was paid a full day's wage. And John rejoiced! For he knew that Phillip now had the money to feed his family. But as the next wave of workers stepped forward, and the ones after that, down to the first group that had been hired, there was moaning and groaning and whining. For they were all paid the same: a day's wage. Or at least everyone but John was moaning and groaning and whining. John

responded to the generosity of the vineyard owner by shaking his hand, and saying *“Thank you, my lord, for what you’ve done for my brother this day.”*

Second, we can let God grow our heart a second size by making the commitment to forgive others, just as Jesus did when He died on the cross for us. We see this in the story of a pianist who was giving concerts in Germany. Since she was not widely known, she began to announce that she was a student of a famous pianist named Abbe Liszt - even though she had never even met him. A few months later, she arrived in a town and advertised her concert that way. And then, the next day went to the front desk for something. But when she saw the hotel registry, she began to panic. For there was the signature of Abbe Liszt - who just happened to be in town.

Fearing that her deception would be discovered, and she would never give a concert again, she decided to come clean and went to the room of Abbe Liszt. Trembling, and full of sorrow, she threw herself at his feet there, confessed her fraud, and begged forgiveness. He had her stand up, and then asked her several questions. As he listened, he discovered that she had been an orphan and had only set upon her course of deceit because she felt she had no other options. In response, he led her to the piano that had been put in his suite so he could practice. *“Let me hear a piece of what you intended to play tonight”* he said. So she sat down and began to play. At first she played timidly, but then with reviving hope that maybe her career was not over.

Liszt stood near her. As she played he gave her advice. And he suggested a few improvements to her technique. Then when she finished, he looked her in the eye and said *“My child, you have finished your lesson. You are now a student Abbe Liszt.”* But before she could compose herself enough to thank him for his kindness, he asked *“Are the programs for your concert printed?”* *“No,”* she said, *“I was on my way to finalize them when I saw your name on the hotel register.”* *“Good,”* he said with a kind smile, *“make a change to the program. Add that you will be assisted by your master, and the last piece of the concert will be played by Abbe Liszt.”*

Finally, we can let God grow our heart a third size by making the commitment to help others be freed from the pains and limitations of this fallen and sinful world so they can become everything God created them to be, just as Jesus did when He rose from the dead and ascended to heaven. We see this in a story Jennifer Young Whelan tells about her father and his bees. In that story, she explains how when she visited her father once he took her out to collect honey from his bees. As they did so, he took the lid off of a bucket of honey. Laying on top of the honey, completely covered in its stickiness, were 3 bees struggling to survive. Jennifer assumed it would be the end of them when her father scooped them out and put them in an empty yogurt cup. But as they went about the rest of their collecting, she saw something miraculous happen.

When she looked into the yogurt cup the next time she was nearby, she saw that there were no longer just 3 honey covered bees in it. There were dozens. And each additional bee was hard as work cleaning off the sticky bees. When she came back a second time, there was only one of the original honey covered bees left in the cup. And she was still being tended to by several others. And by the time she and her father had collected all the honey they could for the day, and began to get ready to

go back to the house, she stopped by the yogurt cup again to see that there were no more bees in it. All three of those original honey covered bees had been cleaned off by their nest mates and enabled to fly away to rejoin the hive to do what bees do.

As we ponder the fictional storyline of The Grinch Who Stole Christmas along with the true story of Bethlehem, the voice of God is calling out to us to realize that if we want His divine love and gracious forgiveness to be part of who we are, we need to let Him grow our heart by helping us live as a person of faith. One way we can let Him grow our heart a size so we can live a life of faith is to make the commitment to view others (and their needs) with as much compassion as we view ourselves (and our needs), just as Jesus did when He went to the cross for us. A way we can let Him grow our heart a second size is to make the commitment to forgive others, just as Jesus did when He died on the cross for us. And a way we can let Him grow our heart a third size is to make the commitment to help others be freed from the pains and limitations of this fallen and sinful world to become what God created them to be, just as Jesus did when He rose from the dead and ascended back to heaven.

For as we see in tonight's bulletin picture, the Good News is not just about an event on one particular night in Bethlehem. The Good News is about what our Heavenly Father started to do one particular night in Bethlehem, continued to do in the earthly life of the Child born that night, and has persevered in doing by being present to the world through the Church He brought into being at Pentecost. So celebrate Christmas with joy! Rejoice in this time of year! And then continue to rejoice every day of the year and work to enable others to do the same. For as the Grinch learned, "*Christmas doesn't come from a store; Christmas [DEFINITELY] means a little bit more.*" We see this spoken to by a theologian named Howard Thurman. He writes that:

When the song of the angels is still,  
When the star of the sky is gone,  
When the kings and princes are home,  
When the shepherds are back with their flock,  
The work of Christmas begins:  
    To find the lost,  
    To heal the broken,  
    To feed the hungry,  
    To release the prisoner,  
    To rebuild the nations.  
    To bring peace among others,  
And to make music in the heart.