6/9/13
"Going Places With Dr. Seuss"
Ephesians 3:7-9 Matt 17:14-21
F.U.C.A.
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Born a few years after the turn of the century in Springfield, Massachusetts., Theodore Geisel became known all over the world by his pen name, Dr. Seuss. By the time of his death in La Jolla, California, a few years before the turn of this century, Dr. Seuss had sold hundreds of millions of books. Seuss was the maiden name of Geisel's mother, a German immigrant. Doctor was a reference to his father's desire for him to earn his doctorate in literature at Oxford. Academics was not, however, to be the life journey of this imaginative and creative man. Early on, Geisel drew illustrations for advertisements and then became a political cartoonist during WWII but from his first book, *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street in 1937,* through the last*, Oh, the Places You'll Go,* Dr. Seuss was best known for his vibrant and ingenious children's books. These were the valuable legacy that he left not only the children but readers of all ages. A few of his beginner children's books came to be because Seuss was invited to help fight children's illiteracy by composing a book which was exciting to read but which used only a limited number of words. Many beginner reader's books, like *Dick, Jane and Sally,* were quite dull. Dr Seuss used only 220 words, for the imaginative *Cat in the Hat,* and later, for *Green Eggs and Ham,* only 50 words. He later reported that writing the simple books, was actually much more difficult.

As important as this kind of writing was to beginning readers, Dr. Seuss' books are significant for many reasons beyond teaching children to read. They are imaginative, rhythmic, amusing and easy to read, but their meaning runs quite deep. Without taking himself too seriously, his writing nevertheless offers insightful social commentary, psychological perceptiveness, and some would claim, even theological truth. We can see this easily in *The Lorax* with its environmental concern and in *Horton Hears a Who*, which focuses on the justice of seeing and taking seriously the

needs of all too invisible people. These are the books we will look at on the next two Sundays. But to a certain extent, this same depth is there in most of his 60 books.

Geisel wrote*, "Oh, the Places You'll Go*, his final book, at the age of 86. I think it is important to keep this fact in mind as we look deeper into this text. This delightful book, given so often as a graduation present, is not about just any one journey in life, but rather, about the journey of life itself. Last words always deserve a bit of extra attention because, in them, we sense we might find a key to open mysteries or to glimpse the shining star that guided the life of the writer*. Oh, the Places You'll Go* has some of that sage-like wisdom even with its playful, humorous rhyming words and typical rhythmic meter.

In *The Parables of Dr. Seuss,* Robert Short, uses the passage from Ephesians we just heard, to look at Seussian wisdom and how it relates to the Biblical message. Here Paul expresses that he is aware that his strength is in his weakness, with the words "I am the very *least* of all the saints." The name, Paul, means, "little man." Remember that Paul, named Saul at birth, received this name when *he* was on a journey. He heard a voice from heaven, was blinded by the light and fell from his horse. Because of this trauma, he was converted to the Christian faith and turned from persecuting Christians to founding Christian churches. God told Paul to get going and take his message past Judaism to the world beyond. Paul never felt personally strong or brilliant or even especially good, but he had a mission and a purpose. He knew that the grace of God had been given to him. In Dr. Seuss' hero from "Oh, the Places You'll Go" the little man in the yellow suit, one might see something of "Paul the Small." This little figure, or "everyman/everywoman" is "off to great places, off and away." And for him,, like Paul, all along the way the journey will be full of the best of times and the worst of times. Who knows what Theodore Geisel would have thought about any of these post mortem attempts by Christian writers to connect his books to scripture stories. He is quoted as having earlier said , "Preachers in pulpits (have) talked about what a great message is in the book. No matter what you do, somebody always imputes meaning into your books." I

imagine that, if he had lived longer he might have written a funny book in response entitled something like, *"Oh, What The Christians are Making of Me*." No doubt, his stories and drawings are better left alone to speak for themselves, but too late, I have already set sail on this ship.

Like all of Dr. Seuss' books the text is clever and succinct with the word play, the repositioning of words and the making up of words that fit the mood and meaning so perfectly you just can't imagine why they are not in the dictionary: like "un-slumping yourself" to come out of a slump, the contrast between windows that are lighted and ones that are "darked", and being the "winning-est" winner of all. The text is powerful enough to stand alone as a sort of humorous story poem, but when you add the brightly colored free flowing illustrations you are taken on a wild ride, You enter the journey with smiling self satisfied elephants, dumbfounded wide eyed folks waiting for life to begin--for "mail to come, or the rain to go or the phone to ring or the snow to snow, with boom bands, banners and howling Hakken-kraks.

And somehow in the midst of the larger than life characters and scenes, you recognize your life so easily. The yellow suited figure flies high with jubilation and sinks low with trepidation, and faces challenges with determination. And in the process, he becomes himself, or as Seuss puts it, "Out there, things can happen…. And when things start to happen don't worry. Don't stew. Just go right along. You'll start happening too." As small as Paul is, Ephesians says, his journey will "make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages by God who created all things. Paul had a mission and so, somehow does the yellow suited hero who might seem clueless at times along the way, but he has everything he needs to carry on (brains in his head and feet in his shoes) and he knows what he knows. Not more not less.

As Robert Short writes, "the mission is the message…To get lots of mileage, you must have a great mission. If you really want to go great places, then you've got to have something great to go for. The greater the goal, the farther you'll go.

Furthermore, if you really want to be unconquerable in this quest, if you want to be a winner no matter what happens, then what you are going for must also be unconquerable. It must already be the winner.

I am not always sure exactly what brought me into the ministry. When I went to seminary, my plans were to be a pastoral counselor. Even after graduation from seminary, I would go into a cold sweat over the idea of writing sermons and preaching in front of people, especially the prospect of having to do it every week, year after year. The saddest event on my life journey was also a confirming one for my ministry. My father was diagnosed with kidney cancer and was dying. The school system in my county had an award banquet to honor his work as a community leader. As I sat at the banquet table I glanced at the program that was to follow and noticed that my name was on it to make remarks about my father's life. I panicked… and then, at some point, started jotting notes on the margins. I walked into the gym with my legs almost buckling under. The bleachers were filled and chairs were set up on the stage behind a podium. When they called my name to speak, a strange calmness came over me. This was my chance to honor my father. This wasn't about me, whether I was scared or unsure, it was about this man who was the foundation of my life—it was for him. He was worth it. And I was no longer scared.

I have seen this same thing happen at funerals when a very introverted son or daughter or grandson or granddaughter somehow finds the strength to speak, they thought they didn't have, because the mission they are on matters--it is worth it. There is really no way to fail if you truly love and believe in that about which you are speaking. When the ego lets go and the mind and heart in harmony move forward you will always succeed, "Yes! You will, indeed! (98 and ¾ percent guaranteed.) KID, YOU'LL MOVE MOUNTAINS."

When I first read the passage from Matthew, I thought Jesus was too hard on the disciples when they proved unable to cure the boy with epilepsy. "Jesus confronted

them harshly, “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you?” Wow, I thought if these guys were catching heck for not being miracle workers, I am, with my limited “skill set”, in deep trouble. Well whatever happened or didn’t happen that day, the words which followed were worth the story, “For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, Move from here to there,” and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you. “

Hmm. I sometimes wake up in the night worrying about the future not only of this church, but of all progressive churches. Sometimes our church’s life and future seem so fragile to me, as if we could be in danger of not paying our bills with the loss of only a few pledges or in danger of not having new members to replace those we lose or new leadership to follow in the path of the current leaders. We are assured by good (Biblical) authority, that we need only faith the size of a mustard seed in order to move mountains. What does that say about the faith necessary to preserve and grow this church? Believe that about which you speak, Preacher Lady. You are not the director of this mission, no matter how “brainy and footsy” you are. Keep walking.

We also have it on the authority of the good “Dr.” that if we trust the journey
“Step with care and great tact and remember that Life’s a Great Balancing Act” that
Be our names, Bower, or Brewer or Bunting or Shea
Or Mordecai Ali Van Allen O’Shea
We are off to great places!
Today is our day!
Our mountain is waiting,
Let’s get on our way.