

***“The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss:
How the Grinch Stole Christmas”***

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Luke 19:1-6

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it. ² A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. ³ He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. ⁵ When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” ⁶ So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.

Matthew 6:9-11

Pray then in this way:
Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.

The Grinch *hated* Christmas! The whole Christmas season!
Now, please don't ask why. No one quite knows the reason.
It *could* be his head wasn't screwed on just right.
It *could* be, perhaps, that his shoes were too tight.
But I think that the most likely reason of all
May have been that his heart was two sizes too small.

The Grinch is, arguably, the most widely known of all Dr. Seuss' characters. He's both lovable and hate-able. For many of us, Christmas wouldn't be Christmas if we didn't watch the classic video at least once. More recently, Jim Carrey has put his comic touch on the character. *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, like many of Theodor Seuss Geisel's stories, is a one with a lesson. Actually a few lessons. Almost any book or movie can teach us more about ourselves and each other, and even God. What can this story teach us?

The Grinch is a thoroughly miserable character. While some would say that glass is half empty and others half full, the Grinch would sneer that it didn't matter what you call it because the water was probably contaminated anyway. We might wonder what fills some people with such anger and misery. Why are they the way they are? What has left them with such a sour view?

I'm not speaking of depression which can suck all joy from a person's life. Depression can be truly devastating to the one with the disease and those around them. It's not something one can talk well about in passing. If you or someone you love is facing depression, please understand I am not making light of this illness.

The Grinch is thoroughly, terribly, negative. And the thing that makes him the most angry, the most miserable, seems to be others' joy. Knowing that Christmas is coming and that the *Whos* will be celebrating, having witnessed their joy for 53 years, the Grinch just can't take it anymore.

You've probably heard it said that, misery loves company. In his misery and solitude, the Grinch decides to create some company. He will deprive the *Whos* of their Christmas joy so that they will be as thoroughly wretched as he is.

Can you recall a time when you tried to sabotage someone else's joy so that you would not be miserable alone? Have you ever, like the Grinch, been unable to stand seeing other people happy because you were so unhappy? Tony was adopted as a small child and then returned at age 8. Happily, another couple soon adopted him. But, after the initial honeymoon phase, he became a terror. He had been so wounded by that first family that if his new parents were going to return him, he needed them to do it quickly before he really came to love them. But as he kicked and screamed at them, "Let me go!" They quietly answered, "We love you too much to let you go," and gradually he came to trust them.

Sometimes, we have valid reasons for being unpleasant. No judgement here. We simply need to look within ourselves now and again to see why we do what we do. And if this reflects the person we want others to see.

Society today is quite competitive. From childhood, we learn that there are winners and losers – not only on the playground and in sports, but in business and even in church. Even friends can try to drag us down in their efforts to make themselves feel better. You start a new business and she says, "Oh, that'll never work, 80% of small businesses fail." Or you're living your life and paying the bills as best you can and you hear, "Why do you work so hard? Stop taking things so seriously and enjoy yourself!"

We tend to resist when someone acts differently than we expect. We sometimes resist another's success or happiness because it reminds us of our shortcomings or missed opportunities. When Sally was in middle school, she sat on the bench during most basketball games. But she hustled and played hard and the coach noticed, eventually giving her a chance. For two weeks, Sally was a starter and she made the most of it. But when she heard some of the other girls suggesting she was the coach's pet, Sally was more concerned about peer relationships than about being a starter. She stopped hustling so much. And soon she was back on the bench. She let herself be dragged down to someone else's level.

People of faith are called to tune into our feelings and to be aware of our motives. And when we realize that they're not good, we work to change them. We also try not to allow others to influence us when their motives are not the best. This is one message The Grinch's story suggests.

I haven't seen the feature-length *Grinch* movie, but I understand that one thing it did well was to help viewers understand how the Grinch got the way he was. He was so unpopular as a child. The other kids teased and bullied him until in despair and pain, he fled to Mt. Crumpit to wallow in his misery.

We've all tried to comfort people who were angry, mean-spirited, or selfish. Being kind to prickly people is a challenge. Yet it's these, hardest-to-love ones who most need what we would offer. Knowing something about how this or that person got to be so unpleasant can help us act caringly toward them. In today's scripture lesson, we meet Zacchaeus, a tax collector at a time when this meant skimming the profits for oneself. He is also a collaborator to the occupation government. Not surprisingly, Zacchaeus is friendless. His neighbors avoid him.

We know almost nothing about Zacchaeus. Maybe, he too was a target of teasing and abuse as a child. Maybe he treats others poorly as a response to the pain inflicted upon him. When we think about it, most of us can name a few Zacchaeuses we've known, people who have been hurt and need help to get beyond their pain.

Zacchaeus needs to be accepted. And Jesus does just that. Jesus shows him respect. Treats him as a human being deserving of dignity. He tells Zacchaeus that out of all the people in Jericho he's going to come to his home. This changes Zacchaeus' life. He is a new person.

Living as followers of Christ, we are to practice loving the sad, lonely, miserable and hard-to-love. Practice loving the ones who are in pain. When people are hurting, it's hard to think about anyone but themselves. When we can show them that they are cared about and accepted, lives can be transformed.

A third lesson we might take away from *The Grinch's* story is related to this. People can change! Such a simple message but it's truly radical.

For generations, people have debated nature-versus-nurture. Are we who we are because of our genetic makeup or our environment? This argument misses a key point: nature and nurture are not the only factors. Faith presupposes that regardless of our genetics or our environment growing up, we can make choices. People with the right genes, brought up in an ideal environment can still make bad choices. People with both nature and nurture stacked against them can still make good choices.

As human beings we are more than the sum of our parts. God gives us the free will to make our own choices and to influence the reality that is our lives. The Grinch is a model for this. Standing on the tiptop of Mt. Crumpit, "his grinch-feet ice-cold in the snow," he puzzles and puzzles as he hears the *Whos* singing down below, "How *could* this be so?"

And what happened then...?
Well... in Who-ville they say
That the Grinch's small heart
Grew three sizes that day.

And the Grinch changes. It has nothing to do with nature or nurture. But everything to do with a change of heart. Listening to the *Whos'* joyful song on Christmas morning, the change comes from within as the Grinch finds a new way, a new set of priorities.

This is the gift the *Whos* offer him, without even realizing it. They give him grace. They accept him. The Grinch is embraced and loved. And he will never be the same.

Amen.