

“The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss: The Butter Battle Book”

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1 Peter 3:8-12a.

Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called—that you might inherit a blessing. For

“Those who desire life
and desire to see good days,
let them keep their tongues from evil
and their lips from speaking deceit;
let them turn away from evil and do good;
let them seek peace and pursue it.
For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,
and his ears are open to their prayer.

1 Thessalonians 5:15-21

See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.

Matthew 5:38-39; 43-45

[Jesus is teaching.] “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

I’d like to say that hatred is not Biblical, but it would be a lie. Throughout the OT and Psalms we find hatred, war and violence. This is not to say that God espouses these things. But discriminating “us” from “them” – however we define these two camps – has long been a part of the human experience.

In Biblical times, there were Jews and Gentiles, foreigners, Canaanites, Babylonians. People divide upon national and international lines and also one-on-one. Today, we talk about xenophobia... homophobia... and addressing the elephant in the room, all the folks who come to this nation later than our ancestors did. It doesn't make sense that a nation of immigrants hates immigrants.

Somebody thinks differently than you do. Loves differently than you do. Values different things. Wears different clothes. Connects with God differently than you do. Butters their bread on the wrong side.

The Butter Battle Book may be Theodor Seuss Geisel’s most direct venture into social commentary. Written in the early 80s, it’s a response to the Cold War. It tells the story of a long-standing conflict between the Yooks and the Zooks. We listen as a grandfather tells his young grandson about the feud between his people and those horrible Zooks on the other side of the wall. He explains the horrible truth that the Zooks eat bread with the butter side down when everyone knows that the Yooks’ way – butter side up – is the correct way.

Those not familiar with the book may laugh at the foolishness of arguing about something so trivial. Yet I think of how often in my own marriage we argued about trivialities. Maybe you do, too?

In the course of the story, the Yooks and the Zooks escalate their confrontation from slingshots to bigger and bigger weapons capable of great destruction. Finally, the Yook guard receives the ultimate weapon – the Bitsy Big-Boy Boomaroo, so small it can be held between two fingers. Everyone is sure this will destroy those Zooks once and for all. But when he takes goes to the wall he finds the Zook guard holding the exact same weapon. What will they do?

Sometimes human institutions assume a life of their own, with a momentum that can be difficult

to control. We find this in government and business. But having acknowledged this challenge, let's step back to learn what today's story can teach us about human nature.

At any time, every person is operating from either an ego or a Spirit perspective. The ego works from a place of fear. "If he has it, there won't be enough for me... If I'm kind... or gentle... or generous... she'll take advantage... If I don't stand up for myself, they'll think they're stronger than me." The ego leads us to fear whatever's different.

Within us, God as Spirit offers another way. Whenever we work from a place of love, we're following it. God knows that we are all one, the woman who got released this morning... Britain's new PM... the African child who didn't eat yesterday, you, me.

When we have conflicts, either ego or Spirit take the lead as we respond in fear or in love. What makes it tricky is that the ego is so good at convincing us it has our best interests at heart.

Last month, I wanted to tell a friend something I thought they should hear. I wrote it down because that's what I do. I texted Kellyn, Tiny and my sister Karen, "Is this a good idea?" Karen's response was slow to come so I knew she thought about it a while: "I'm sorry but I don't think it's a good idea..." I'd been so sure. Yet as I continued processing I realized she was right. I was working from a place of fear. I recycled my paper.

The Ancient Middle Eastern admonition of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth may seem crazy today. But in its time, it served to limit the escalation. It was a step in the right direction. God through Jesus offers us an even better – albeit more difficult – way. Do not resist. Don't assume that the others' way is inferior. That their ways of loving or leading, **balancing a checkbook** or **buttering bread** are wrong and yours, right. They are different. That's all.

Yes, some things are more right and some others definitely wrong. Evil exists in the world. But most of what we encounter in our day-to-day is about differences and nothing more. We are always going to experience people who talk and act differently from us. What are we going to do about it?!

What does it take to follow a different way? How do we dismantle our ego responses? One way is through intentionally getting outside of ourselves, listening, and learning about another perspective.

Many of our conflicts, both the international ones and the familial and interpersonal ones, can be worked through as both sides strive to understand the other. A common exercise in couples counseling is to have one person repeat what the other one just said, without interpreting, analyzing or responding. Simply repeating, to make sure they're clear on what the other is saying. Many times the first one will respond, "That's not what I'm saying." In this moment, progress begins, as both make it concerted effort to be truly present and to understand the other's viewpoint.

This idea can be applied to all kinds of conflicts. Problem will not go away magically. Even understanding each other, we may still be at odds. Yet, many conflicts can be resolved as we open ourselves to others' ways. To listen fully, without an agenda, is to practice love.

A second way to dismantle our ego response is something I learned five years ago. I've used it. And it works.

When you're having trouble with somebody, when someone just rubs you the wrong way with every word they say or everything they do... Sit on the floor (though it might work in a chair), draw a circle around yourself. I've only ever drawn a mental circle but you could use sidewalk chalk or whatever works. Okay, here's the next step. Pray. But... get this, pray for God to transform everything within the circle. I don't mean this lightly. Since I'm the one sitting on the floor hopefully you accept that.

When you have trouble with the person sitting next to you, or someone at work, or me, or Andy or Joan or Martie... When I have trouble with one of you, or President Trump or Bishop Jung, or anybody else... We can draw a circle around ourselves and pray for God to effect a transformation... on us.

This isn't to say that your perspective is without truth or reasonableness. You might be right most of the times. But that doesn't matter. When anger or white supremacy or fear or hatred cloud our vision, it is impossible for us to live as Christ's hands and voice in the world. And that is God's expectation for us as Christians.

Marianne Williamson asks, "Would I rather be right or would I rather be happy?"

Dr. Seuss said he never started a story with a moral. Kids could smell a moral a mile away. Still

we can find God's word anywhere, if we're willing to see it. So, ask yourself, "Who are the Zooks in my life?" Then think about how you'll respond to them. One way leads us down a path of hitting harder and harder. The other offers peace and hope.

Amen.

Adapted from James W. Kemp, *The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss*, Judson Press, Valley Forge, 2004, 72-76.