

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

July 19, 2020

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Matthew 5:38-48

So last week we read what was arguably the most well-known and well-loved of all of Dr. Seuss's books. *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. This week, we are swinging in the opposite direction and reading a far lesser-known book. It's a book that I grew up with – in fact, the copy that I have here now was my own copy from when I was a kid. It is titled *The Butter Battle Book*.

The Butter Battle Book is probably the one book where Dr. Seuss delves the most overtly into the social and political issues of his day. In fact, it's so overt that it makes me wonder if maybe this book was intended more for adults than for kids. This book was published in the year 1980, during the Cold War. Tensions with the former Soviet Union were at a boiling point. Nuclear powers across the world were all flexing their muscles at the same time, which led to a great sense of dis-ease, since it had become clear that we all pretty much had the power to wipe one another – along with ourselves – off the map.

So that is what Dr. Seuss is responding to when he writes the *Butter Battle Book*. But I think even without this historical and social context, the message of the book, for us, continues to be a powerful and poignant one. The Cold War has been over now for close to 30 years, but human nature is still human nature. And in this day and age when we as a country are probably more divided than we have ever been, at least since the Civil War, this story still carries with it a huge ring of truth.

The Butter Battle Book is a story about two groups of people: The Yooks and the Zooks. The Yooks are the good ones. The right ones. Hands-down, the Yooks live on the right side of history. Because the Yooks eat their bread properly. The only way anyone *should* eat their bread. With the butter side, facing *up*.

The Zooks, on the other hand, these guys are unforgivable. Because they openly, and unapologetically, and without remorse or repentance, eat *their* bread with the butter side facing *down*.

[Gasp.] I know. It's awful. How could they? Why would they? Not only does it not make any sense, but it is just evidence that the Zooks cannot be trusted. Plain as day. We have to protect our children from them, because evils like that – influences like that – no. We just can't allow ourselves to go there.

And in fact, it's *such* a travesty that those awful Zooks would dare to eat their bread upside-down, that the Yooks decide it's time to take some extra precautions – you

know, just to make absolutely sure that some stray Zook doesn't come into *our* town and teach *our* children the wrong way to eat bread.

So a wall was constructed between the land of the Yooks and the land of the Zooks. On the Yook side, one Yook was assigned the task of patrolling that wall, and when a Zook would get too close, he would get whacked over the top of the head with a Snick-Berry Switch – which looked...pretty much...like a branch from a cactus.

And all that worked pretty well. The Yooks stayed safe from the Zooks, until one day one Zook by the name of Van Itch decided he had had enough. He took a slingshot and destroyed that Snick-Berry switch. And then it was on. The Yooks had to get a stronger weapon. Something that couldn't be destroyed by a tiny little slingshot. But then the Zooks responded in kind. If the Yooks' weapons were getting bigger, then the Zook's defenses had to get bigger. And then the Yooks got even *bigger* weapons. And so did the Zooks. The wall got taller. All the Yook and Zook people get shuttled into underground bunkers so that they can stay safe. And the last scene of the book has one Yook and one Zook, both standing on top of the wall, staring each other down, with a big bomb in hand, wondering *which one of them* is going to be the first to drop it and blast them all to smithereens.

All of this, because they couldn't agree on the right way to eat bread. Butter-side up, or butter-side down.

"You have heard it said, an eye for an eye," Jesus says to the crowd gathered around him, as they listen to him preach the Sermon on the Mount. This passage comes at the tail end of a long string of passages, in which Jesus takes pieces of the Jewish law, bit by bit, and turns them on their head. "You have heard it said...but I say to you."

- "You have heard it said 'Thou shalt not murder.' But I tell you, don't even get angry at your brother."
- "You have heard it said 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you it's not just the act – it's the lustful desire leading up to the act."
- "You have heard it said 'Here is what is necessary if you get tired of your wife and want to divorce her for no good reason.' But I say to you, don't you even think about it."

So basically, Jesus is taking the law, point-by-point and saying "All these rules that God has asked you to follow? Yeah. That's just the bare minimum. All of these things – they are just there to help ward off death and disease and total social chaos. But I'm telling you, that I am holding you to a higher standard.

The law tells you that if somebody slingshots your Snick-Berry Switch, you have every right to slingshot theirs right back. If somebody punches you in the face and knocks out your tooth, you may punch them in the face and knock their tooth out too.

And that law is there in the law for a good reason. The point was two-fold: First, for those who were getting constantly beaten down and trampled by stronger and meaner

people, it was there to give them some protection. To say “you are legally allowed to stand up for yourself.” But it was also there to set some limits to how far a person can go. It was meant to keep people from dragging folks out into the street and stoning them for minor offenses. “You give me a black eye, so I’m going to break your leg.” Or “you call me a mean name so I am going to jump you in a dark alley.”

We know the narrative. We’ve known it since we were kids. Anyone who grew up with a sibling, or who raised kids knows exactly how this works. My sister hits me, so I hit her back, but a little harder. And in the Old Testament, God says, “no, this is not how it works. You don’t get to flex your muscles and prove to her that you are stronger than she is. An eye for an eye. That’s all you get. Then let it go. Any more than that and you are eventually going to find yourselves standing on top of a wall threatening to blow each other to high heaven.”

So that sounds great. An eye for an eye. No more, no less. You are allowed to stand up for yourself, but you are not allowed to take more than you are given.

But then Jesus gets ahold of it. And as much as we love Jesus – we couldn’t live without him – we owe...literally *everything*...to him – he rarely makes things easier for us.

- “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. 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.”

And then, Jesus wraps up this whole long section by saying “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

So, we have this law in place, meant to protect both me and you. This baseline standard of behavior, that acknowledges that we are people, after all, and sometimes we are going to lose our cool. Sometimes we are going to lash out and say or do something unkind. And this law is here to protect others from us when that happens, and it is there to protect us from others when our tendency as people is to allow that conflict to quickly escalate.

But Jesus says, “Folks, you are children of *God*. You are not just any random creature walking the streets. And therefore, you are not governed by these laws that are intended for little more than to keep us from killing each other. I am holding you to a higher standard. How high? Well, perfection sounds about right. For you, it’s not about what you can legally get away with. It’s about what’s kind, and generous, and loving. The law is here to teach you how to do no harm. But I am here to teach you how to make life worth living. If *these* are the standards you are keeping, then you are missing the boat. So let me teach you how to not only not *escalate* conflict, but how to stop it in its tracks altogether.

Here's how you do it:

If a Zook captures you and forces you to eat bread with the butter side down? Bring those Zooks a jar of homemade jam to go on that bread. Sit at their table, eat that bread, and ask them about their families. Learn their stories. Share your stories. Laugh together. As the Apostle Paul writes, become "all things to all people so that by all possible means we might save some." And if that means eating your bread with the butter side down? Well, then, so be it.

If your enemy forces you to walk a mile, walk with him two miles. Take that extra time with him to learn a little something about him.

If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well. Make sure their kids have clothes to wear and their family has food on their table. Step up and help those who are angry, and afraid, and hurting. You don't file a lawsuit unless some part of you is feeling pretty broken. So see if you can identify that place of brokenness and try to step in and help.

Love your enemies. It doesn't mean you have to like them, or trust them. But love them. Show them tangible signs of love. *You* set the bar for conduct, rather than allowing them to do it. Rather than allowing their hatred to breed hatred in you, see if maybe your expression of love can instead breed love in them.

And then, two things happen:

- 1) The conflict starts to go away. It's hard to point an *Eight-Nozzled, Elephant-Toted Boom Blitz* at somebody you've shared a meal with. And,
- 2) You now have the upper hand. In refusing to allow their tactics to define yours, you are now the one doing the influencing. You are writing the narrative. And it has become a story ripe with the love of God, rather than a story that closes with two people standing on a wall, wondering who is going to deal the fatal blow.

Friends, it feels these days like we as a country really need a deep crash course in how to relate to one another. How can we disagree without doing irreparable damage to ourselves and others? How can we take different stances on an issue without demonizing those on the other side? How can we learn to live with those whose ethical standards might not line up with our own? How might we American Yooks and Zooks find a way to stop lobbing verbal grenades at one another, stop trying to one-up each other, stop trying to gouge each other's eyes out and knock each other's teeth out over our differences? Pick your issue: Masks. Racial tensions. Law enforcement. Mail-in ballots. The role of the media. Butter-side up or butter-side down? And on and on it goes.

And in the background we have the voice of Jesus saying STOP IT! You are children of God. And this is not what you are about. Quit it, with the hateful rhetoric. And remember what I have taught you. Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute

you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven. Period. Full stop. No more eye for an eye, plus maybe a little bit more. The time for that is ended. If we are going to have any hope whatsoever of surviving this season in life, it is time to put a stop to all of this and change the narrative. And that change starts with us.