

***Plain-Bellied and Star-Bellied***  
***Fall Focus Week 7***

Our first text is from James 2:1-7:

My brothers and sister, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sister, Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor... You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scriptures, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you show partiality, you commit sin...

Today we continue our Fall Focus with the story of the Sneetches. This is a story of a divided society. Those that lived in the blue states thought they were better than those who lived in the red states...oh wait, that's not it.

The issue was that those who have stars on their bellies think they are better than those who don't. So, they won't let their kids play or talk with the other kinds of Sneetches.

But—get this—not only do the Star-Belly Sneetches think they are better than the Plain-Belly Sneetches, but the Plain-Belly Sneetches think so too. And in their self-hatred, they want to become these Star-Belly Sneetches who put them down. One day, they get their chance.

Sylvester McMonkey McBean comes to town with his famous machine that can put stars on the bellies of those who want them. And for the first time in long time, the Plain-Belly Sneetches have smiles on their faces, for the machine works, and now they have stars and are just as good as everybody else.

But the story doesn't end. Instead, the original Star-Belly Sneetches, seeing what has happened and unwilling for everyone to be the same, are unhappy. And Sylvester McMonkey McBean has a fix for their problem too. You see, the machine not only puts on stars, but it can take them off. And just so we don't leave this detail off, all of this, of course, costs money.

On and off, off and on go the stars. Everyone is unhappy with the vicious cycle that has been created; everyone except the one who is growing richer, for Sylvester McMonkey McBean is making a fortune and stays around until all the money runs out.

This story is rich in social commentary. I made a list of all the things this story touched on for me. Here is part of that list:

- ✓ Divisions within society.

- ✓ Issues of inferiority
- ✓ Prejudices
- ✓ Judging by appearance
- ✓ Envy
- ✓ Greed
- ✓ Ancient and modern themes of who is in and who is not
- ✓ Our discomfort with diversity and our belief that diversity cannot exist for there to be unity.

This children's story is more complex than we might believe. But you know what I first thought when I read this story? I heard in it an echo of another time when stars were also used to divide.

The yellow star, inscribed with the word "Jude" (meaning Jew), became a symbol of Nazi persecution. Begun after the start of World War II, it began locally as a way to mark Jews, but historically its roots go much further back.

In 1215, the Fourth Lateran council, presided over by Pope Innocent III, decreed that all Jews and Muslims of both sexes were to wear a badge as a way to set themselves apart. This badge varied in shape, but was often yellow, and was widely used until the very late 18<sup>th</sup> century in many parts of Europe.

The Nazis picked up on this, eventually settling on the star, which was first white and then yellow, worn on the left side of one's chest. Not wearing the badge meant fines or prison, beatings, or even death.

How did you feel today, when some of you received a star to wear, while others of you did not? What we did is very minor, but for someone new or not sure what wearing it might mean, it could have provoked stress and even a feeling of being different. Some of you may have wanted the stars, thinking they were positive, while others were uncomfortable and uncertain.

Divisions, whether politically based or based upon gender, age, race, profession or religion, are found throughout our history. Why are we so easily drawn into dwelling on our differences? Why do our differences, more than what we hold in common, define us?

Oscar Hammerstein, II wrote these words in 1949:

You've got to be taught to hate and fear,  
 You've got to be taught from year to year,  
 It's got to be drummed in your dear little ear,  
 You've got to be carefully taught.

You've got to be taught to be afraid  
 Of people whose eyes are oddly made  
 And people whose skin is a different shade.  
 You've got to be carefully taught.

You've got to be taught before it's too late,  
 Before you are six or seven or eight,  
 To hate all the people your relatives hate  
 You've got to be carefully taught

You've got to be carefully taught

Or maybe you relate more to the Black-Eyed Peas and their song, "Where is the Love":

But if you only have love for your own race  
Then you only leave space to discriminate  
And to discriminate only generates hate  
And when you hate then you're bound to get irate, yeah  
Badness is what you demonstrate

I feel the weight of the world on my shoulder  
As I'm gettin' older, y'all, people gets colder  
Most of us only care about money makin'  
Selfishness got us followin' our own direction  
Wrong information always shown by the media  
Negative images is the main criteria  
Infecting the young minds faster than bacteria  
Kids act like what they see in the cinema  
Yo', whatever happened to the values of humanity  
Whatever happened to the fairness in equality  
Instead in spreading love we spreading animosity  
Lack of understanding, leading lives away from unity

This is not a new problem. It's as old as the world is. Our scriptures are full of these struggles. Before we hear our next text, let me give you the context.

In the church in Galatia, people were struggling with who was in and who was out. Could only those who were first Jewish become Christians? What about these outsiders, these Gentiles? Was one group superior to the other?

Here is what Paul says in Galatians 3:6-9, 28:

Just as Abraham "believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," so, you see, those who believe are the descendants of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel before to Abraham, saying, "All Gentiles shall be blessed in you." For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are on in Christ Jesus."

Paul is trying to get across the point that, because of Jesus, in Jesus there is unity, and there is no "better than." Yet we live in a world that thrives on putting people in their place, on highlighting divisions, on focusing on differences. What are we to do?

First, I invite you not to participate in putting people in boxes based on what they look like, what age they are, or where you meet them. Being part of

the church of Jesus Christ means we see one another not only through human eyes, but also through the eyes of God, who sees each person as precious and beautiful.

William Wilberforce lived in the late 1700s. He worked tirelessly against the slave trade in England. After a series of terrible defeats, one night he opened his Bible to see a letter written by John Wesley shortly before his death. It read: "Unless the divine power has raised you up...I see not how you can go through your glorious enterprise in opposing that (abominable practice of slavery), which is the scandal of religion, of England, and of human nature. Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of people and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you? Are all of them together stronger than God? Oh, be not weary of well-doing, go on in the name of God, and the power of His might."

It does cost to be a person who won't be about focusing on what divides us. But what would our lives look like if we did this globally? Aren't many of our problems based on our letting differences divide? Who said that differences are bad anyway?

Second, get out of your ghetto and mix with those different from yourself. I believe one of the most important things about the church is that, at its best, it is a place for knowing people who aren't like you. Many times in our work lives and our neighborhoods we only know people like us, at least like us in superficial ways. Yet we are called to more.

You and I are called to get out of our little worlds and be exposed to people of other opinions, races, tastes, ages, lifestyles. What can you do? Eat together, worship together, invite people over to dinner and get to know each other. Learn how to disagree in ways that don't divide. This universal spirit is echoed by John Wesley, who said, "If your heart is with my heart, give me your hand."

Third, don't let others define you because of your color, age, race, faith or opinions. You are a child of God, no matter what anyone says. Don't let others put you and who you can be in a small box.

I recall a classic study from many years ago. A teacher comes into a primary-level classroom and tells her students that a new scientific study has proven blue-eyed children are a lot smarter than brown- or green-eyed children.

The results are both immediate and dramatic. The blue-eyed children immediately began to outperform their brown- and green-eyed classmates in all aspects of their studies.

Then two months later, the teacher calls a special classroom meeting. She tells the students that she's made a serious mistake. She apologizes, and says the scientific study had actually proven that brown- and green-eyed children are the most intelligent.

Again the results are dramatic and immediate. The blue-eyed children lost their edge and began to underperform. The brown- and green-eyed children's grades, on the other hand, immediately soared to the "superior" range!

How is that? Because the children believed in what they were told about themselves. Instead of only being at the mercy of what others says, we are

called to grow within—and help our children growing within—that core that comes from worshiping and knowing the living God.

Fourth, stand up against injustices, especially those that one can easily turn away from. There are many injustices against which people of faith have taken a stand. Of course, not all people of faith. We have been as guilty of practicing the abuse as we have been working for freedom, yet still we are called. Where does your faith come in contact with your life? What do you hear Jesus speaking into today's world?

But there's one important caveat. Don't demonize those who stand against you. Unfortunately, this is easy to do.

On the issue of homosexuality, we say those who stand in a different place than we do are closed minded or immoral, depending on our position. Likewise on the war, abortion, women's rights, poverty and more. Isn't it human nature that, once we start calling each other names, our lowest natures come out? Why can't we listen, dialogue, and sometimes just agree to disagree? This will happen, this agreeing to disagree, but sometimes we require more time, information, and most certainly the power and insight of God to guide us.

In the book, *The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss*, which is the touchstone for this series, author James Kemp writes:

“Proclaiming and celebrating unity in the church means learning from our differences instead of allowing them to divide us. It means encouraging others and not boasting about our own accomplishments. It means courting a spirit of gratitude instead of pride. It means that we cannot separate love for God from love for one another.” (page 71)

Let us pray.