

He was known for his bitterness, his anger, and his snark. He snarled when he spoke. And his frown is iconically legendary. He isolated himself from his community, lived up on a mountain where he could literally look down on his neighbors and sneer at their lives, - which he did - their comings and goings, and most especially their celebrations. He seemed to utterly despise his neighbors and complained that the sounds and sights of their celebration reached him in his mountain cave, despite his attempt to isolate himself from it all, were the cause of tremendous irritation for him. He hated his neighbors and all their noisy celebration and life.

The reason for his miserable state of being was unknown but ruminated to possibly be that his shoes were too tight. Another possibility was his head was not screwed on quite right. But, the most likely reason for his anger and hatred was the condition of his heart, as it was believed to be 2 sizes too small.

By now I'm sure most of you recognize I am describing Dr. Seuss's beloved character known as The Grinch from his classic children's book *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* and the Chuck Berry cartoon by the same title that has become a classic Christmas tradition for many families. For those of you who might not remember, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* is a beautiful redemption story for a character who starts out hating his neighbors, called the Whos, and their Christmas celebration and decides to sneak into town on Christmas Eve and steal everything related to Christmas: the decorations, the presents, the food for the feast, even the logs from their fireplaces. Then the Grinch took all the stuff he believed to be Christmas to the top of the tallest mountain to dump, destroying Christmas in order to make his neighbors the Whos as miserable, angry, and hate-filled as he was. But on Christmas morning, as the Grinch was poised to hear the sounds of misery, instead he was utterly surprised to hear the sound of singing, as his neighbors greeted Christmas morning the way they always had, presents or no presents, with a song of joy and praise. In his muddled confusion, the Grinch experienced transformation when it dawned on him that what Christmas is really about, what is at the very heart of Christmas itself, really had nothing to do with all the stuff he had worked so hard to steal. The heart of Christmas, he realized can't be stolen, it resides in the hearts of those who believe. It was then the Grinch stared into the heart of Christmas, and his own heart grew – not 2 – but 3 sizes that day.

Once the Grinch's heart didn't feel so tight, he discovered there was room in it for more than himself. There was room for everyone else, even the neighbors he had despised. So, he returned their presents, decorations, food and all. And his neighbors,

instead of punishing him for his sin of selfishness and intention to cause harm, lived into the heart of Christmas themselves by forgiving him, and invited him to join in their celebration. Which he happily did, no longer isolated.

It's not only a good story for Christmas, it's a good story Dr. Seuss, other wise known as Theodore Geisel, wrote. Because it is a story that gets at the heart of matter – what causes isolation, anger, hate, and the intention to harm. And it shows what is at the heart of the matter is all about the condition of the heart. By heart, I hope you know I do not mean that muscle in our chest continuously pumping blood so it can circulate throughout our bodies. When I talk about heart today I mean the part of our being where our emotions reside, and where our relationships with God and each other are born and nurtured.

I believe that is what the author of Mark is getting at in today's Gospel lesson. Mark's Gospel has a lot going on in it, and one thing that is easy to miss is the author of Mark often sets up a sort of dualism between Jesus and the powers of evil, those powers and principalities opposed to Jesus and God. That may be why today's section of the Gospel begins the way it does: with religious leaders coming from Jerusalem and what they came from the big city to the rural countryside of Galilee to do. Scholars tell us these leaders were liked and trusted by the people of Jesus' day, and that Jesus himself was saying and doing things they probably would have approved of at first. The Pharisees were trying to teach their faith in ways that all people could follow or participate in. That is where all those traditions came in. When the Pharisees saw what Jesus was doing as pushing against those traditions and then breaking them, scholars believe the Pharisees made up their minds to find a way to get rid of Jesus and turn public opinion against him. That is why they went to Galilee in today's Gospel, to plant the seed that Jesus was not the good guy he said he was.

That may very well be what was at the heart of their question in today's Gospel about why some of the disciples did not observe the tradition of washing appropriately. It was their attempt to sow discord, to cause harm.

It's such a good attempt many commentators and preachers have a hard time not falling into the trap of pitting tradition against following Jesus. I have read quiet a few commentaries and heard or read many sermons that quickly go down the path of either justifying church traditions or advocating for their change all in the name of Jesus and this section of today's Gospel. But I'm not convinced that is what Jesus response to the Pharisees question is about. To me, I hear Jesus take us back to the heart of the tradition, to remember what the purpose of traditions, any and all traditions – be they from Jesus' day or our own parish traditions - really is.

Back in the Old Testament, the Israelites received the 10 Commandments with the expectation that they were to practice them in order to be a people different from those who had not heard of God. They were to show the people of the world that God is love, and God wants all people to know God loves them and wants them to love God back by living in ways that show respect for all life. In an attempt to figure out how to put that life into practice, rules and traditions sprang up to help the people fulfill their purpose, and to create a sense of stability, and a form of comfort. But like any good thing, it can become too easy to focus on the tradition itself and forget about why it's being practiced in the first place. To forget the heart of the tradition. And a neglected heart can become small, tight, with limited room for anything or anyone other than self. Which is what sin is.

That may be why we heard Jesus respond to the Pharisees question by talking about the heart and its condition as the source of evil, those powers that oppose God, and what can defile a person. The Grinch may be a fun story, but it is a very good one that exemplifies this perfectly: a heart too small, a heart neglected, a heart that does not practice loving God and loving one another fills with self and shrinks in on itself until a person begins to shrink away from God and others, become isolated. Perhaps some of you know a person or persons who have had that same heart condition. It isn't always individuals who can suffer from such a condition; churches can become small in that way too: not in number, but in heart, so can families. Or businesses. Or schools, colleges, or universities. Or health care industry, or governments. These aren't just folks or institutions who say, "We've always done it this way.", its that sense of being separate from the world not to show the world God's love, but to attempt to create a false sense of superiority and justify criticizing and hating neighbors, which only creates further isolation. All from losing heart, from losing that connection to what those churches, families, schools or universities, governments, or other institutions were created for in the first place.

Which another reason why what is at the heart of the Dr. Seuss' story is more than just a holiday. It is the Incarnation, it is God among us, dwelling with us, in Jesus who calls us to follow him by taking time to examine our hearts: our emotions and our relationships with God and one another. To reflect on how our practices, be they traditional or new, reflect God's love for us and our love for God.

I've spent a lot of time this week interviewing people who have applied for our new CrossRoads Café staff. In each interview, I've taken a great deal of care to explain to each candidate what is at the heart of CrossRoads Café; our belief in a loving, generous God and our attempt to practice what we believe in a new context in partnership with our local community, diocese, and even the world through the farmers who grow, harvest and prepare the coffee beans that are sent to Deeper Roots

in Cincinnati who roast the coffee and send it to us after we order it. It's big hearted stuff we are endeavoring to share with our community and invite our customers into. I can tell you it has been awesome to see so many faces light up when I explain the heart of CrossRoads to them. It inspires them, and every person we interviewed expressed a desire to practice this faith with us, no matter their religion.

I see so many of our ministries as sharing the same heart or purpose. When I share lunch on Wednesday with the folks who come in for free lunch, I don't see a competitive endeavor where each week's group tries to outdo the others with higher numbers served or better food. I see that the heart of Wednesday free lunch is to show God's love for all people by offering a meal and a rest to the members of our community, and at the same time to be a safe place for conversation and connection, no matter how the traditions of that ministry have been practiced.

We have so many ministries, I could go on and on about them all, but I want you to know I value and am so proud of all our ministries here at Church of the Good Shepherd, and how each in its way keeps to the heart of the matter, even when they make changes, as those changes reflect not isolation, they reflect hearts that grow because they are hearts that remain connected with God's love as we experience it through Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension by participation in worship, prayer, study, and ministry. Such hearts reflect the resurrection life of Jesus, without ever having to say so specifically, which is at the heart of practicing what we believe and is a light shining in the world every day, bringing life and God's love to a world where that is always good news.