

The Sneetches, Revisited

By Paul Attaway

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.”
(Matthew 5:9)

Theodor Seuss Geisel, writing under the pen name Dr. Seuss, not only introduced millions of children to the world of books, but he also wrote stories that entertained children and adults alike while teaching something worthwhile along the way.

His book “The Sneetches” was published in 1961 and is an excellent example of just such a book, and one I recently reread and enjoyed, again. Inspired by his opposition to antisemitism, Dr. Seuss highlights the destructiveness and futility of discrimination between races and nationalities.

The story goes like this: A society of yellow, bird-like creatures called Sneetches was divided by whether one had a star on his or her belly. Those with stars on their bellies saw themselves as superior to those without stars and would have nothing to do with the starless lot going so far as to exclude them from their lives. A huckster named Sylvester McMonkey McBean came to town with a machine that would place a star on your belly, for a price, of course. The Sneetches without stars, longing to be accepted by those with stars, all went through the machine and came out with stars on their bellies. But those who had stars to begin with were now outraged because they could no longer tell the Star-Bellied Sneetches from those who were not. The industrious Mr. McBean told them that for a price, they could go through a machine and have their stars removed thus allowing them to feel superior again, this time to those with stars, and so they did. And round and round it went, Sneetches having stars placed on their bellies and Sneetches having them removed until no one could tell from whence the other had come. McBean left town with all their money but in the process the Sneetches learned to live together.

In conversations with friends, I have noticed that the ugly, divisiveness prevalent in our culture today ranks as one of our greatest concerns. We worry about the world our grandchildren may grow up in, one characterized by self-righteous anger directed towards anyone who disagrees with the then prevailing morality. So, does Dr. Seuss offer us any insight or guidance? I believe so.

First, while race and nationality still divide some Americans, that is nowhere near a complete list of what is tearing at this country today. Every position on every issue, from sports to climate change to masks and vaccines to Taco-Tuesday is now interpreted to mean that, “oh, well, if you think that then that means you’re racist or a communist or a ‘fill-in-the-blank-phoebe’, etc...” Virtually every word spoken or not spoken, and every action taken or not taken carries political overtones in the mind of someone. Sadly, the propensity to see ourselves’ as superior to others and therefore to discriminate against a group for such-and-such a reason is still alive and well.

Secondly, there are those who seek to profit from fueling mankind’s tendency to fear those who are different from them. Just as Mr. McBean did, there are people today who will profit from the divisions that already exist. In Dr. Seuss’ book, the divisions were in place before Mr. McBean entered the scene, but he was more than willing to fuel those divisions and make money off the Sneetches vulnerability to judging themselves superior to others. Today, not only are there people who will capitalize on divisions that already exist, but there is no end to those who will sow *new* divisions in pursuit of the riches and power they hope will flow from the resulting chaos and brokenness.

If you want to know whether divisions are real, then follow the money. If someone is profiting from the division then rest assured the division, to the extent it exists at all, is not nearly so grave as the world would have you believe. Mr. McBean knew the differences between Sneetches with stars and those without were meaningless and contrived and that all Sneetches were valued equally. But he didn’t care, he was an opportunist in it for himself.

Finally, what to do about the division? Dr. Seuss offers hope in his book because once Mr. McBean leaves with all their money, the Sneetches learn that Sneetches are Sneetches, none better than another. One may conclude that the Sneetches suffered from their actions and as a result learned a powerful lesson and

came to see the foolishness of their actions, but I believe Mr. McBean's departure played a significant role in bringing the peace. Well, we can't count on the Mr. McBeans of today leaving so we'll need to take some active measures.

Before acting, let us know this – if we oppose troublemakers, we're in good company. We are told in Proverbs 6:16 – 19 that “[t]here are six things that the LORD hates, seven that are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers.”

So, then what are we to do? How are we to oppose troublemakers? There's no easy answer. We're often provoked to react, and the reaction is exactly what the troublemakers want. They want us at each other's throats. In the Bible, we're told to love our enemies, but that can be extremely difficult. I'm not saying don't do it, I'm just saying it's hard and I don't always know how to. I do think we can love our enemies while at the same time opposing what they are trying to do.

How then can we oppose what they are trying to do when what they are trying to do is divide us? Back to the Bible for answers.

Romans 16:17 - I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them.

Titus 3:10 - As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him,

And finally,

Romans 12:18 - If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

There was a time when I sought to win every argument. Today, not so much. Instead, I stand ready to make a good defense, but only when necessary. No, I believe there is another way. Let's just ignore those loud, clanging voices that seek to put us on the attack. Don't appease them, don't engage, just ignore them, and walk away. If we try to win the argument, we lose. If we don't yell back, they'll become like a tree falling in a forest with no one around to hear them.

We're better off showing them a better way. And who are they? "It is these who cause divisions, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit." (Jude 1:19)

And how do we show them a better way? By living a Christ centered life and allowing the Holy Spirit to be front and center.

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law."
(Galatians 5:22-23)