

Change? Me?

Psalm 51

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There are times when truths that may well have been learned for years, suddenly pop up in the strangest of places;
when you catch a whisper of grace sounding where you least expect it;
a hint of gospel where you weren't looking.

Like in the writings of Theodor Geisel.

Mr. Geisel was studying at the University of Oxford, with every intention of becoming an English professor, when a classmate suggested he become an artist instead. He ended up writing and illustrating works that have been loved by children since 1937. But the central themes of his books speak to all ages.

You may know him better by his pen name, which happens to be his mother's surname - Seuss... Dr. Seuss.

No, I've not lost my moorings, but - Yes - we are going to put our ear to the ground and, in this season of Advent, see what whispers of grace and hints of gospel we may catch from Seuss' playful, and yet deep, writings.

We'll do so with Advent filters fully engaged.

What filters are those?

They are the filters of self-examination, of spiritual growth, of new beginnings.

It is what the pre-Christmas time of Advent is really all about -

rather than being a count down time of shopping days remaining in the mad consumer frenzy we call December.

Today's topic - one of the most difficult tasks that any human being can pick up, and which every single one of us has to engage more than once.

Dare I say it, we really all need to become accomplished at this task, refining the skill and doing so in an authentic way.

When you master it, doors open.

When you minimize it or avoid it, walls go up and doors close in your face.

It's not a complicated task.

It doesn't have to take long.

You don't need advanced education to practise it.

Yet I'm amazed how few people are really good at it.

See this elusive skill through the eyes of Dr.Seuss.

The inhabitants of the kingdom of Didd called it "*The-Year-The-King-Got-Angry-With-The-Sky.*"

The king was tired of the same four things coming down from the sky: snow, fog, sunshine, and rain. He wanted something NEW to come down from the sky. And, since he was king, he would have his way, for he always got what he wanted, when he wanted it.

He called upon his spooky magicians, and with magic words they made it happen. It rained oobleck!

Ha!! The king - he got his way. He got what he wanted.

He got the new stuff coming down from the sky.

He got oobleck.

The king thinks it is wonderful.

The citizens of Didd think it is curious.
All except Bartholomew Cubins, the king's junior advisor. He sees the danger.
But no one listens to him. They are too taken with the king's brilliance.

And then they began to notice. The gobby, green, gooey stuff stuck to everything and wouldn't let go. It was everywhere. And it kept coming. More and more. Harder and harder - a rainstorm of oobleck, a flood of oobleck.

The entire kingdom was paralyzed.

Birds stuck to their nests, the royal musicians stuck to their instruments, and even the bell used to warn the citizens was silenced by the green, yucky stuff.

The king sat on his throne, his royal crown stuck to his royal head by that gooey, green oobleck.

Finally, Bartholomew Cubbins could hold his tongue no longer.

"It's going to keep on falling," he shouted, "until your whole great marble palace tumbles down! Don't waste your time saying foolish magic words. YOU ought to be saying some plain, simple words!"

"SIMPLE words? What do you mean, boy?"

"I mean," said Bartholomew, "this is all your fault! Now, the least you can do is say the simple words, 'I'm sorry.'"

No one had ever talked to the king like this before.

"What!" he bellowed. "ME . . . ME say 'I'm sorry!'"

Kings never say 'I'm sorry!'"

"But you're sitting in oobleck up to your chin. And so is everyone else in your land. And if you won't even say you're sorry, you're no sort of king at all!"

But then Bartholomew heard a great, deep sob. The old King was crying! "You're right! It is all my fault! And I am sorry! I'm awfully, awfully sorry!"

And the moment the King spoke those words, something happened.

Maybe there was magic in those simple words, "I'm sorry."

Maybe there was magic in those simple words, "It's all my fault."

They say that as soon as the old King spoke them, the sun began to shine and all the oobleck that was stuck on all the people and on all the animals of the Kingdom of Didd just simply, quietly, melted away.

Saying "I'm sorry."

Making a mess, offending, double crossing, letting down, being wrong...
(that's the easy part)

and then

owning up to it; accepting responsibility for it.
(that's the hard part).

"I was wrong. I'm sorry."

Not a tongue twister.

Takes about 2 seconds to say.

The challenge lays in what those words represent.

For they are words representing a turnaround, a new direction, a change of heart, a sorrow, a regret.
Words that represent a desire for a fresh beginning, a new life.

[James Kemp, *The Gospel According To Dr. Seuss* p.63]

How hugely important these words are.

For imagine a life where all wrongs, all errors, and all violations remained.

What if there was no way to get past them?

What if they kept piling up, one upon the next in a great, rotting heap of transgression?

Few friendships would last.

Few families would stay intact.

Few marriages would survive.

Perhaps none.

For, you see, the king of Didd does not stand alone.

I stand with him.

And I rather suspect that each one of you does, too.

our friendships, our families and our marriages depend on these words

and our being able to say them – a lot!

The hard thing is accepting that.

We like to think of ourselves as basically good people.

We like to gaze at others with generous hearts, especially in the season of Christmas, and think of them as basically good, too.

We like to suggest that if there is a problem with their life, if there is a short-coming, it is a fault of **nurture** - of their environment, their education, their family.

We **DON'T** like to suggest that if there is a problem with their life — or with **MY** life — that it is a problem of **nature**;

that I am fundamentally prone to mess up, skewed to sin;

that the need to say, “I’m sorry” is inevitable;

that I need to accept responsibility for it.

“I am sorry.”

Sometimes the things we say sorry for are accidental.

They were a slip.

A momentary lapse.

An error in judgement.

A miscalculation.

A missed step.

But sometimes not.

Sometimes it was deeper than that.

Deliberate.

Of the first degree.

Even habitual.

The wrong we committed comes somewhere from deep within.

From a place that is not so pristine; less than ideal.

And if it comes from there,

especially from there,

then to say these words,

to say them sincerely

is a humbling act

is self-effacing

is to become vulnerable.

It is, quite simply, to admit that we are kin to the Grinch.
Ah yes, another of Theodore's famous characters, living on a mountain just north of Whoville.

Every Who down in Who-ville
Liked Christmas a lot...
But the Grinch,
Who lived just North of Who-ville,
Did NOT!

The Grinch hated Christmas! The whole Christmas season!
Now, please don't ask why. No one quite knows the reason.
It could be that his head wasn't screwed on quite right.
It could be, perhaps, that his shoes were too tight.
But I think that the most likely reason of all
May have been that his heart was two sizes too small.

But,
Whatever the reason,
His heart or his shoes,
He stood there on Christmas Eve, hating the Whos,
Staring down from his cave with a sour, Grinchy frown
At the warm lighted windows below in their town...

Seuss continues telling how the Grinch dressed as St.Nick, slunk into Whoville, and committed a Christmas Eve home invasion...

...He slid down the chimney. A rather tight pinch.
But if Santa could do it, then so could the Grinch.
He got stuck only once, for a moment or two.
Then he stuck his head out of the fireplace flue
Where the little Who stockings all hung in a row.
"These stockings," he grinned, "are the first things to go!"

Then he slithered and slunk, with a smile most unpleasant,
Around the whole room, and he took every present!...
...And he stuffed them in bags. Then the Grinch, very nimbly,
Stuffed all the bags, one by one, up the chimney!
Then he slunk to the icebox. He took the Whos' feast!
He took the Who-pudding! He took the roast beast!...
...Then he did the same thing
To the other Whos' houses
Leaving crumbs
Much too small
For the other Whos' mouses!

<play clip from "You're a mean one, Mr. Grinch...">

Would you admit to any “grinch-ness” in you?

Would you admit to the need to turn in your tracks and change direction in one part of your life, or another?

Would you admit that perhaps there was a size issue in your heart?

“I was wrong. I am sorry.”

If you know the story, you’ll know that the Grinch acted it.

After carting all the Christmas treasures from Whoville to a mountain top to destroy them, he has a change of heart.

He comes down off his mountain top with the toys.

He returns them to Whoville.

He sits with the families at the table.

He even carves the roast beast.

The Grinch makes amends.

As does the king of Didd, who comes off his high horse, leaves his pompous demands behind and the attitude that “NO ONE EVER TALKS LIKE THAT TO ME!!” and exclaims,

“You’re right! It is all my fault! And I am sorry! I’m awfully, awfully sorry!”

Bartholomew is the agent of change in the king’s life.

For the Grinch, it was something mysterious that happened as he stood on the mountain’s edge, listening to all the children in Who-ville singing their Christmas songs in the empty town square – something that made his heart grow two sizes.

Through other people, or through a mysterious, wonderful inner change - however it works

“I’m sorry” breaks the power of a destructive past and opens new beginnings.

Can you believe that?

Can you believe that this is more than just the stuff of childrens’ books and whimsical narration?

Can you believe that in Oobleck and the Grinch we hear something more than just magic in those simple words “I’m sorry”?

That we are hearing a whisper of Grace?

A hint of Gospel?

The Bible tells us of another king who sat in pompous might on his throne.

He, too, had a heart that was tight and twisted.

He, too, let his power and position get the better of him.

And ended up committing murder in order to fulfil lustful thoughts with another man’s wife.

He covers it up.

He excuses it.

Until the prophet Nathan confronts him and says to King David,

“You are the man.”

David’s bravado collapses.

He says, "I'm sorry."
Sorry for the lust.
Sorry for the murder.
Sorry for the misuse of power.
Sorry for thinking he was so big.
"I'm sorry."

Here's the real deal -
When you read David's "I'm sorry" words,
which we will in just a minute
Something hits you like lightning.
It's about the one to whom he speaks.

He doesn't say "I'm sorry" first of all to the woman he abused.
He doesn't say "sorry" at the grave of her murdered husband.
He doesn't say "sorry" to his subjects, whose trust he has violated.

He turns his eyes first of all to heaven,
and says "I'm sorry"
to God!

*"Against you,
you alone,
have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight." (Ps 51:4)*

All violations on earth are first of all violations against heaven.
And there is no excuse.
No blaming it on some element of nurturing.

David says,
"Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me." (Ps 51:5)

David knows he needs change.
No excuses.
So he prays,
*"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me."
(Ps 51:10)*

No pretend story.
This is deep and real.
And it is an "I'm sorry" that is answered by God Himself.

For every violation on earth is first of all a violation against the Creator.
Every wrong done is a wrong against His divine standard.
Every bit of damage done to creation or to the humanity that God created in his image, is damage done against God Himself.

Meaning, like David, that our repentance -
- for that is what "I'm sorry" is all about -
...our repentance comes **first** to him.

And know this.

Know this deep and for sure -

that every whisper of "I'm sorry" is greeted with a divine response of absolute forgiveness.

The oobleck of sin in our lives is melted away and divine pleasure smiles on us with warmth again.

We are invited back into His holy home and presence,
to share the heavenly feast again.

Not because of magic.

But because of divine, gracious forgiveness.

Forgiveness that is real.

Forgiveness that is sure.

Forgiveness granted to all who, like King David, will look to heaven with a full admission of responsibility and say,
"I'm sorry."

It is forgiveness that comes to us through Him who was born on Christmas Day - the Son of the Creator, Jesus.

Who receives every whispered prayer of repentance.

And carries it to heaven on our behalf.

And who then sends us a mysterious power, a spiritual power, the power of the living Holy Spirit, to enlarge our heart -
two sizes, maybe more!

Granting us new capacity to live right lives.

Granting us new capacity to experience joy.

And granting us new power to say it again,

to heaven

and to each other,

"I'm sorry."

So, let me ask you now to take a moment of quiet.

What is being whispered into your conscience right now?

What is God's Spirit pointing out?

Has He, perhaps, sent a Nathan or Bartholomew into your life recently?

Or has He allowed you to see with your own eyes how you've blundered? How you've sinned?

Where do you need, in this Advent season, to look to heaven and say,

"I'm sorry"

I'm going to give you a couple of minutes for silent reflection and prayer, and then am going to ask Harrison to come forward and read for us David's "I'm sorry" prayer.

<SILENCE>

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 p.8

Bible Reading: PSALM 51 p.520 (Old Testament)