

Once and For All  
Hebrews 9:11-14; 10:11-14, 19-25  
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights  
April 29, 2007  
Pastor Dave Carver

I know that this is hard for those of you who know me to imagine, but I was really, really frustrated that day. I mean, I was trying hard to wear my "Pastor Dave" personality, but inside I was blowing up. It seemed like nobody was getting it right!

I had left specific instructions with the folks in the office of the church where I was working: don't interrupt me until the limo arrives. I was sitting in my study with a reporter from the Rochester *Democrat & Chronicle*, a host from the local National Public Radio affiliate, and three really squirmy young people.

Dr. Seuss was coming to Rochester that day. He was supposed to make a speech at a college about half an hour outside of town, but our congregation had somehow been able to snare him for three hours. On this beautiful spring time day, Dr. Seuss was coming to read *The Lorax* and talk about how we can help kids to care for the environment. Do you remember: "At the far end of town where the Grickle-grass grows and the wind smells slow and sour when it blows and no birds ever sing excepting old crows...is the Street of the Lifted Lorax..."

Again, some of you might find this hard to imagine, but not everything was quite finished when people had promised that it would be. There were streamers that were still being streamed, balloons being filled, chairs being set up, and cookies and juice to be set out. A squadron of people were in Fellowship Hall, each trying to out-organize the other...and I couldn't find the guest of honor. The limo had not yet arrived. I was on the phone to my folks at the airport – and this was before everyone had a cell phone, so we were calling back and forth from pay phones in the lobby. Yes, his flight had come in. Yes, he was on it. No, nobody knew where he was.

And in the middle of all of this pressure, my secretary buzzed me to say that an old man in a plaid shirt was here looking for me. This wasn't unusual. Our church was on a main bus line, and it was well known that I was a soft touch for food and gas vouchers. Irritated, I asked for the old guy's name. I was told that his name was "Ted". I just about spit into the intercom, "You know, Sandi, I'm a little busy now. Could you ask Ted to cool his jets for a while until I can find Dr. Seuss?"

I left my office and the reporters for a while and went out into Fellowship Hall. We were twenty minutes late now. The decorations were all hung up, but since the program hadn't started yet, nobody was sitting in the chairs. There must have been about sixty-five kids running around like maniacs – and at least seven of them had those ridiculous *Cat in the Hat* hats on. I looked over by the cookie table, and I saw an old guy in a flannel shirt putting away the Styrofoam

plates I had bought and three of my helpers carrying out real dishes. This was not in the program! I didn't have time to be doing the dishes today – I was supposed to be escorting Dr. Seuss. As I was striding over to reclaim my Styrofoam and give the old timer a piece of my mind, my secretary, Sandi, caught up with me and, indicating my nemesis in the flannel shirt, said, “Pastor Dave – that’s Ted. He’s the guy who is looking for you.” So I began to stride towards the cookie table trying to look somehow even more holy and more indignant than I already felt (which was quite difficult, by the way). I didn’t know who this guy was, but he was not going to ruin my chance to host Dr. Seuss.

Just when I got to the table, the NPR reporter came out of my study and said, “Oh, good! He’s here!” And she walked over to “Ted” and said, “Mr. Geisel, I’m so pleased to welcome you to Rochester.” And Ted Geisel, also known as Dr. Seuss, put away the last of the Styrofoam plates and said, “I hope that Pastor Dave doesn’t mind, but I’m not going to speak about the environment and then use these things.”

As you might imagine, I stopped in my tracks, suddenly feeling less holy, less pastoral, less human. Maybe you know that Dr. Seuss’s real name was Ted. But I didn’t. And it turns out he hadn’t gotten the message about the limo we’d sent to the airport, so he took a taxi and just come to the church himself.

So it turns out that we had everything we needed for the program – but we weren’t doing any of it. Why? Because I was looking for someone else. We couldn’t get started because I wasn’t paying attention to who was there – I was looking for someone who would match my expectations of what Dr. Seuss was like. Geez, did I feel like a moron.

Let me tell you two things about that story. First, it never happened. I was a pastor in New York, but I’ve never been close, so far as I know, to Dr. Seuss. We never had an environmental awareness day in Rochester, and I’ve never lost my temper or been frustrated. Never happened.

But here’s the second thing: it happens all the time.

The story that I just told you about Dr. Seuss is essentially what was happening with the folks who heard the Book of Hebrews for the first time. As we’ve talked about in recent weeks, these were people who didn’t “get” Jesus. They were disappointed in his suffering and death and in his refusal to solve the problems that the Romans were creating. They were unsure about the reality of the resurrection in the face of the persecution that they themselves were enduring. Oh, they hoped for a messiah, all right. But it just didn’t seem like Jesus could be the guy that they were looking for. So they were a little deflated, a little defeated, and a little frustrated.

And the preacher who wrote the Book of Hebrews walks them through the history of God’s relationship with his people. He shows them how Jesus really is the message from God, and how his ministry was superior to the ministries of the

angels, of Moses, Aaron, and even Melchizedek. Using examples from their own religious system, he demonstrates how Jesus is not only the perfect High Priest, who makes sacrifices for the people of God, but also the perfect offering.

In the passages we've heard today, the preacher points out how Jesus the priest offered Jesus the sacrifice to the Lord, and in so doing, he put an end to the whole sacrificial practice. The old system had been based on flawed men praying on behalf of the nation, and on humans bringing their best – or their least bad – offerings to God in the hopes that they would be accepted. When Jesus, God the Son, laid down his own life – his perfect, sinless life – on our behalf, he was raised from the dead to live in God's presence forever. With the perfect offering made by the perfect priest, once and for all, Jesus made things right between God and his people. Amen!

Now the preacher continues to press home his point in the lives of the Hebrews. There's no need for us to keep pushing the sacrificial system, he says; there's no need for us to keep trying to earn something with God. If you do that, he says, you'll just wear yourselves out and die frustrated. Literally.

The other option, he says, is to stop worrying about getting it all set up and go out and enjoy the life that Jesus has given to you. Instead of being disappointed in the fact that the salvation you were looking for did not show up in the ways and the places that you thought that it had to, why not accept the gift of God as given in Jesus Christ? Quit trying to manage and program and plan out God's business and instead, live in the love and forgiveness of Christ.

There is a word for us in this passage from Hebrews, my friends. Do you sometimes get worn out by trying to be perfect? Are you tired of pretending that you have it all together, or afraid that maybe your friends will find out that you don't?

The Good News for us is that Jesus has already shown up. Jesus has already done what needs to be done. There is nothing that you or I can do to add to that. As hard as it is for me to accept, God doesn't need me to rearrange the chairs or serve the cookies at his party. God invites me to enjoy it. To live as though I am already forgiven. To gather with people like you for worship and trust that God's grace will meet me here so that when I leave here, and when you leave here, we will go out into the world not only transformed by His love, but as agents of that love.

Eugene Peterson's translation of a part of our reading today really challenges and encourages me. He writes, "So let's *do* it – full of belief, confident that we're presentable inside and out. Let's keep a firm grip on the promises that keep us going. He always keeps his word. Let's see how inventive we can be in encouraging love and helping out, not avoiding worshipping together as some do but spurring each other on, especially as we see the big

Day approaching.”<sup>1</sup>

You know, there are a lot of people who aren't here now. People who in many ways ought to be here. They've taken the vows of membership. We've baptized their babies. But they are not here. Where are they?

Some of them are just bushed. They're tired after a long weekend. Maybe they're traveling. But others haven't been here in a long time. Why not?

Could be that they've joined another church. Could be that they don't believe in Jesus anymore. My hunch is that neither of these extremes accurately conveys where most of them are. Maybe they just fell out of the habit. Maybe they got angry at God, or angry at someone here. Maybe they really fell down and can't figure out a way to get up again – or to show up again.

Can we look for them? Can we “see how inventive we can be in encouraging love and helping out, not avoiding worshiping together as some do but spurring each other on, especially as we see the big Day approaching”?

I'm not going to lie: Theodor Geisel died in 1991. He's not coming here under any circumstance. You don't need to put on a big show to welcome him. More importantly, you don't need to put on a big show for Jesus, either. Be yourself. Accept him for Who he is and for what he has done. Know that he has accepted and loves you. And in the strength of that love, join me in reaching out to a world that is dying because they cannot recognize the face of Jesus when he shows up in their lives. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Hebrews 10:23-25 *The Message* (NavPress 2002)