

Let's be honest. Even as a kid, you knew something was up with these Dr. Seuss stories, right? There was something lurking in the background, hiding behind Horton and the Cat and the Grinch and Whos down in Whoville. Something finding its way into your subconscious. And then later in life, you started reading the books to your nephews and nieces and kids and grandkids, and then you knew for certain: there's something subversive going on here. These really aren't just stories with great rhymes and wacky creatures, are they?

If you are one of those people who always suspected that Dr. Seuss was really interested in more than just parades on Mulberry Street and green eggs and ham, then you won't be surprised to learn that "Yes! There is something deeply subversive going on in many of Dr. Seuss's stories" – just as there was always something subversive lingering in the background of the simple stories Jesus would tell about mustard seeds and lost sheep and prodigal sons.

Off the top of your head: What's one of your favorite Dr. Seuss stories? Ever wonder why that story sticks with you? What was it trying to tell you? Why did your brain grab onto that story? Over the next few Sundays, we are going to explore some of Dr. Seuss famous and not-so-famous children's stories and, if we listen carefully, we might even find the gospel within the pages of these wonderful stories.

Today we begin with one of his best-selling stories: Yertle the Turtle

Most of us are aware that Dr. Seuss was just a pen name of the artist and writer Theodore "Ted" Geisel.

- German-American – grew up in a German-speaking household
- Had an early successful career as an illustrator for print ads
- Between the two world wars, he travelled to Europe and particularly to Germany.
- While there he became alarmed at the rise of Hitler and the Nazi party
- This combined with his left-leaning politics, resulted in his choice to leave advertising and focus on political cartooning.
- He created hundreds of cartoons and his targets were often European fascists and American isolationists (including Charles Lindbergh who had made several pro-Hitler statements)
- In fact, Hitler was the focus of many of his political cartoons.
- One particular cartoon shows a mother reading to her children a book entitled "Adolf the Wolf" in which she reads that Adolf chewed up the

children and spit out their bones... But (she adds) “they were foreign children so it didn’t really matter.”

- Geisel could see the danger of Hitler’s rise that he felt others in our country were ignoring.

He eventually transitioned from political cartooning to writing books for children, leaving behind politics – or so he thought! Book reviews quickly began to notice that many of his stories carried political themes – particularly about the use and abuse of power, even in the midst of seemingly silly and innocent narratives.

In fact, many critics over the years have noted the parallels between the rise of Hitler and the story of Yertle the Turtle. And in fact, a proto-version of Yertle and that stack of turtles showed up in some of Geisel’s earlier political cartoons and in those the Yertle figure does sport a little Hitler-like mustache.

Geisel did eventually acknowledge that his desire to condemn fascism, totalitarianism and Hitler’s tyranny inspired the story of Yertle.

...And you told your kids it was just a story about some turtles!

Of course, I think we are doing the book a disservice if we just see it as some veiled allegory of Hitler and fascism. Because of course, children reading this story would have little to no awareness of this historical context.

Instead, it’s clear Dr. Seuss also has a broader more universal theme in mind as well. And it has something to do with that stack of turtles and a King with an appetite for power. Yertle is not satisfied to just rule over what he can see from the stone throne he sits on in his pond. And so he insists that the turtles keep stacking themselves higher and higher, so that he can sit atop them and increase his Kingdom and his power.

He cares nothing for those at the bottom of the stack, whose shells are creaking from the weight and who are hungry and looking for any relief. He ignores their cries for help, believing only the one at the top really matters.

But in the end, all it takes is one little burp from a turtle named Mack, to bring down the stack of turtles and to end the King’s oppression.

Dr. Seuss reminds his young listeners about the importance of giving a voice to those at the bottom – of caring about the least among us, caring about those in need – especially the vulnerable ones that those in power care little

for. To Yertle, those at the bottom are nameless, not worthy of listening to. But Seuss empowers Mack, the turtle at the very bottom, to speak up and change his situation. Listen. Did you hear that? It sounds like the gospel, the good news, to me.

Matthew's Jesus, in his sermon on the mount, offers the same message. He declares the worth of those on the bottom of society. He affirms that they have a place too -- that their voice matters, that they have value in the eyes of God.

Jesus affirms them as part of the blessedness of the Kingdom of God – a Kingdom that couldn't be more different from Yertle's throne, piled high, with the King not only ignoring, but benefitting from the pain and despair of others.

More than once I've heard someone ask why Christians are so quick to erect monuments to the Ten Commandments but not "The Sermon on the Mount." You don't see politicians insisting we post copies of the Beatitudes in public buildings. Why is that? Could it be that the Ten Commandments, with its list of "things you shouldn't do," is an easier ethic to follow than Jesus' subversive teaching that we are to call the poor, the hungry, the meek, the mourning, the merciful, the peacemakers "blessed?" How different would our world be if we truly empowered those sorts of persons, the ones at the bottom of the stack, to claim their blessedness, to find their voice?

Of course, we don't really have to imagine what that world might look like. Jesus has already told us. He talked about it over and over. He called it the Kingdom of God: what the world would look like if God and God's love ruled instead of coercive power, nationalism, hatred, distrust, anger, bigotry and violence.

And for Jesus, it wasn't some hoped for future. He described the Kingdom as a present reality we can choose to live in right now. All it takes sometimes is a little "burp" to set things in motion. In a sense, for those living in 1st Century Palestine, Jesus was that burp. His declaration of the King of God was the "burp" that toppled the hold the Roman Empire had on those who chose to follow the way of God's love.

By the way – an interesting side note: When Geisel sent the manuscript of "Yertle the Turtle" to his publishers, it wasn't the subversive storyline that worried them. It was that "burp." Apparently there had never been a burp in a children's story before. They thought it might be indecent, or in bad taste, or offensive.

Of course, to those in power, the “burp” is always offensive...because it threatens the way things are. But ironically, as we move closer to bringing heaven to earth, of living out an ethic of the Kingdom of God in our very midst in the here and now – it is good news for everyone: for the toppled and humbled king in the mud, and the innocent turtles yearning to live in freedom and peace.

The final line of Yertle has often puzzled those looking for a concrete conclusion. Dr. Seuss writes *”And today the great Yertle, that marvelous he, is king of the mud. That is all he can see. And the turtles, of course, all the turtles are free – as turtles and, MAYBE, all creatures should be.”*

Why the “maybe” some have wondered. Why didn’t Dr. Seuss use the word “certainly?” Certainly all creatures should be free...Yes? When asked, Geisel said he didn’t want to be didactic or preachy. He wants you, the reader, to decide for yourself. To realize that yes, it’s not maybe. ALL people should be free.

In the same way, Matthew’s Jesus offers us a vision of the world as it could be. Where all people are free to know they are blessed and loved by the source of Love – especially those at the bottom of the stack.

Jesus leaves us to wonder: who are the people at the bottom we are called to set free? To decide for ourselves what sort of world do we want to live in, and what are we willing to do to make it so.

Let us pray.