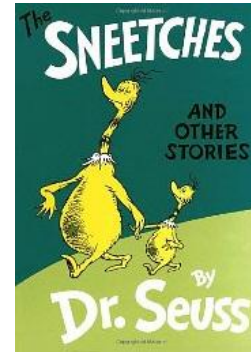


## “WE ARE FAMILY”

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Some people will do anything to fit in. Call it peer pressure, call it envy, call it just plain want...whatever it takes to be a part of the “in” crowd, they’ll do it.

On the other hand, there are some people who will do whatever it takes to exclude others. Call it exclusivism or any one of a number of other ‘ism’s’, whatever it takes to remain separated from others who appear to be “different” than them, they’ll do it.



And with that, we are introduced to the lesson from Dr. Seuss’ *The Sneetches*. In this story, there are two groups of people – Sneetches with stars upon their bellies, and Sneetches without stars. Apart from that minor cosmetic difference, the Sneetches were the same. They looked the same, they acted the same, they enjoyed the same activities. They were, except for a small amount of color in the shape of a star, the same.

But as Sneetches were known to do (and, truth be told, we humans often do the same), they made a big deal out of that small difference. The Star-Bellied Sneetches used that mark as a sign that they were, somehow, the chosen people. They made it known through their actions and their words that they were better. And they felt so strongly that the Plain-Bellied Sneetches were not allowed into any of their activities or festivities.

The Plain-Bellied Sneetches tried in earnest to fit in...sometimes even trying to squeeze their way into Star-Bellied activities...to no avail. They were growing wearier and wearier of this ill-treatment when an answer to all of their problems arrived in the form of one Sylvester McMonkey McBean. Mr. McBean, it seems, was both an inventor and a shrewd businessman. He had invented a machine that, for the small price of \$3 each, would place stars upon the bellies of Sneetches that have none upon thars.

Well, this handy-dandy machine turned the frowns of Plain-Bellied Sneetches upside-down. Now everyone was the same – everyone was equal...right? Not really. As Sneetches were known to do (and, truth be told, we humans often do the same), the original Star-Bellied kind got upset. They liked being king of the hill and looking down upon the other Sneetches. And so our hero (or at least the one who seems to be the hero), Sylvester McMonkey McBean, brings in a new invention (and a new way of making a fast buck). This machine (for the low-low price of just \$10 each) would remove the stars from the bellies of the original Star-Bellied Sneetches, and once again there would be a difference...and this time it was the Sneetches *without* stars who thought they were the best.

This went on the entire day – in and out of machines, stars on and stars off – until nobody could remember who was who and what was what. And with that, McBean drove off

with all of the Sneetches money, leaving them to figure out that, in the end, it didn't matter if you had a star or not – *all* Sneetches were equal.

Our world has a lot to learn from the Sneetches. It seems as though we spend far more time dwelling on our differences than we do our similarities. We do it with ages, we do it with races, we do it with sexes, and we even do it with churches.

When I served in Lino Lakes, on three different occasions we held an interfaith forum. There were pastors from the Catholic, Lutheran, Evangelical Free, Baptist, and United Methodist churches present to talk about their denomination and to answer questions from the audience. Each of us shared our tradition's basic theology, including information about the sacraments and how pastors are appointed to churches. In each of those three years, whether our audience was a group of Confirmation students and their parents, or mainly adults, the concluding affirmation was the same: there are far more similarities between our churches than there are differences. And the differences, it seems, were not so much about God or the Bible, but about those "rules" or structures of the church that had been created by humans along the way.

The church of Jesus Christ has an opportunity to model unity for the world, but unfortunately its followers sometimes are a part of the problem. This is nothing new. In the third chapter of Paul's letter to the Galatians, the apostle is writing to churches in Asia Minor. In these churches were those who came from a Jewish background as well as those who came from a Gentile background. Was one group better than the other? Listen to what Paul says in response to that question:

“Just as Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness, so, you see, those who believe are the descendents of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you.’ For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed.”

The answer is no. One group is not better than another. It doesn't matter if you have a star upon your belly or not. Paul says it a bit differently later in the third chapter of Galatians:

“As many of you were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

All are one in Christ Jesus...all are brothers and sisters...all are part of the same family.

I have always enjoyed watching baseball, and even as a 16-year-old kid I followed the game pretty closely. The World Series winning team that year was the Pittsburgh Pirates, led by such greats as Dave Parker and Willie Stargell. Do you remember the theme song they adopted for their season? It was Sister Sledge's "We Are Family."

Indeed, in Jesus Christ, the church ought to be one big family. There are no Star-Bellied or Plain-Bellied Christians. The church is comprised of people of different ethnic backgrounds, different economic classes, different age groups, different political views, and sometimes even different theological understandings. Our challenge – really our *opportunity* – is to use these differences to enrich the church instead of allowing them to divide us.

In the church, another unfortunate division we sometimes make is between longtime members and newcomers. It's easy for some longtime members to think that the newcomers have to somehow “prove” themselves before they are accepted into the leadership or even fellowship life of the church.

Many times the games that we play, even in the church, are a bit more subtle, yet nonetheless are attempts to put “stars upon thars.” John Wesley spoke of the catholic (that's small ‘c’ catholic, meaning universal) spirit: “If your heart is with my heart, give me your hand.” It is that same universal spirit that the church and all its members would be wise to take on so that we might accept one another as God accepts us.

For some time in my early ministry, I was uncomfortable with someone walking up to me and calling me “brother.” I thought it was a term reserved for the more conservative or evangelical crowd. But the more I've come to the understanding that we are all one in Christ Jesus, the more I've embraced the title. Besides, it was Philip Otterbein, who in 1767 embraced the Mennonite preacher Martin Boehm with the words, “We are brethren,” thus leading the two of them to create a movement which would come to be known as the United Brethren Church – an earlier branch of the Evangelical United Brethren Church – which later merged with the Methodist Church to become the United Methodist Church.

The traditional custom of calling others “brothers” and “sisters” is a healthy one. *We are* family. We all have different gifts, and we all need each other, just as each part of the body depends on the other parts in order for the whole to function at its best.

So often, as we learned in Lino Lakes, the things that divide us are trivial things...kind of like stars upon our bellies. James writes, “My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? James is ‘calling out’ those who judge others based on one thing or another. He says that the distinctions we make between people or between one group of people and another are evil thoughts, and warns against it.

Instead, let us celebrate those things that unite us:

*Creation:* We are all created by God. We are both alike and different from one another, but God called the whole of creation good.

*Calling:* There is purpose in life for each and every one of us. Just as the prophets in the Old Testament were called, we too are called for a purpose.

*Christ:* We share in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. God loves us despite our failings. This is by far the most important basis for our unity.

Proclaiming and celebrating unity in the church means learning from our differences instead of allowing them to divide us. It means encouraging others and not boasting about our own accomplishments. It means courting a spirit of gratitude instead of pride. It means that we cannot separate love for God from love for one another.

The story of the Sneetches has a happy ending. Only after they have spent their last dollar trying to better themselves artificially do they finally realize that there is something far more important than money. They realized that a Sneetch was a Sneetch, whether Star-Bellied or not.

No kind of Christian is the best Christian in the church. There are no Star-Bellied Christians. We are one in Christ Jesus. We are family. AMEN.