

“DON’T BE SUCH A YERTLE”

Matthew 5:1-12; Matthew 7:24-27

June 13, 2010

Have you ever met one of those people who never seem to be satisfied with what they have? They ask for more, and receive it, and still want more. One of our daughter’s favorite nighttime books is *Bear Wants More*, the story of a bear who wakes up from a long winter’s nap and begins eating everything in sight. With the turn of each page, the bear is provided with a new food, only to find out that it’s not enough – he wants more. Finally, the bear returns to his den, where some of his friends have been preparing a party for him, complete with his favorite foods. But because he has eaten and eaten and eaten, he no longer fits inside the door to his den. His friends have to pry him out of the opening before they can take the party (and the feast) outside. Only after the bear eats everything in sight does he fall fast asleep, content in his fullness.



A similar message is heard in our Dr. Seuss story for this week, *Yertle the Turtle*. Yertle somehow gets the idea that he is the king of everything that he can see. The problem, though, is that he can’t see very far. His “throne,” a flat stone in the pond, was too low. So King Yertle came up with an idea:

He sat on a rock and could see all the pond,
But Yertle could not see the places beyond...
So he ordered nine turtles to swim to his stone,
And using these turtles, he built a new throne.

The turtles were ordered to stack themselves up, one upon the other. Yertle, of course, got to climb to the tippy top. From there he could see almost a mile. And because he considered himself king of all that he could see, his kingdom was greatly expanded.

“All mine!” Yertle cried. “Oh, the things I now rule!
I’m king of a cow! And I’m king of a mule!
I’m king of a house! And, what’s more, beyond that,
I’m king of a blueberry bush and a cat!
I’m Yertle the Turtle! Oh, marvelous me!
For I am the ruler of all that I see!”

And he should have been happy...right? But his happiness was short-lived. Before long, his turtle stack began to rebel. The turtle on the bottom, a turtle named Mack, complained about the pains caused by being the turtle on the bottom of the stack.

Yertle would have none of this complaining. “Silence!” He barked out. And then he barked out another order:

“My throne shall be higher!” his royal voice thundered,
 “So pile up more turtles! I want ‘bout two hundred!”

Higher and higher the pile grew, each one, of course, stepping on the back of poor Mack on its way up. When Yertle reached the top of this new stack and sat on his new throne, he found that he could see for 40 miles.

“Hooray!” shouted Yertle. “I’m king of the trees!
 I’m king of the birds! And I’m king of the bees!
 I’m king of the butterflies! King of the air!
 Ah, me! What a throne! What a wonderful chair!
 I’m Yertle the Turtle! Oh, marvelous me!
 For I am the ruler of all that I see!”

Yertle was feeling pretty good about himself, but down below the groaning and complaining continued. Poor Mack thought the shell on his back might crack. And Yertle’s contentment was pretty short lived. From his perch up high, he spotted the moon and was angry that something was higher than he was. He ordered more turtles saying,

“I’ll stack ‘em to heaven!
 I need ‘bout five thousand, six hundred and seven!”

But before the stack could grow any taller, Mack decided that he had had enough. He got a more than just a little bit angry. And he did something – something ordinary and seemingly tiny – he burped. And that burp caused the entire stack of turtles to shake. And that shaking became intense enough that it toppled Yertle off of his throne and into the pond.

Yertle the Turtle, who was once the ruler of all that he could see, was now simply known as the “King of the Mud,” for mud is now all that he can see.

And the turtles, of course ... all the turtles are free
 As turtles and, maybe, all creatures should be.

The story of King Yertle just might remind us of the foolish man who built his house upon the sand instead of the rock. Yertle had a Humpty-Dumpty-like fall because he failed to build his throne on a solid foundation. Have you ever seen a turtle’s shell? It’s round...which means anything set on top of it is wobbly...and it wouldn’t take much to topple anything off of its back.

Also lacking for Yertle was the proper motivation for building a bigger and higher throne. Yertle was driven by greed and selfishness, by the desire for more and more. He wanted to get higher and higher so that he could see more and more and, in his mind anyway, possess more and more. And despite a few passing moments where he felt really great, he ultimately – and in fairly short order – came down with a crash.

Every day we make choices about where and upon what will we build our lives. We make choices about how our foundations will look and how solid we want them to be. We can build on values such as greed and selfishness. We can be apathetic by ignoring the human suffering and need that surrounds us. Or we can build on the values and principles set forth in Scripture by the Lord of our lives.

In Matthew 7:24-27, Jesus seeks to teach us about building on a solid foundation. He says that those who seek out his words and listen to them and live by them are like the wise builder who put his house on a rock foundation. When the rains fell and the winds blew, and the floodwaters rose, that house stood firm. However those who ignore Jesus' words and instead follow their own ideas of what is right and wrong are building their houses – and indeed their very lives – on sand. And if you've ever walked across a beach you know that the sand is pretty shaky ground. Even the mildest of storms can leave us Yertle-like – thrown to the ground, flattened, and covered with mud.

The story of the wise and foolish builders is part of a larger story – actually a sermon – perhaps the most important sermon ever preached: Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. This sermon includes the Beatitudes, which we heard in the first scripture reading this morning. The Beatitudes give us the rocks, if you will, the firm foundation on which we can and should build our lives.

Blessed are the poor in spirit
 Blessed are those who mourn
 Blessed are the meek
 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness
 Blessed are the merciful
 Blessed are the pure in heart
 Blessed are the peacemakers
 Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake
 Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil
 against you falsely on my account

Blessed are all of these things...because God will bless them and turn them into something positive, something powerful, something perfect. But we need to do our part – we need to take on the attitudes expressed in the first part of each line. Each of these attitudes could be summarized in a single word – humility. We need to live in humility with a faith that reminds us that, in the end, God will make all things new – God will make all things right.

All of this means that we recognize the proper order of things – God is God and we are not. While God created humans and gave them dominion “over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth,” God did not make humanity ruler of all that they could see. God did not make us King – God is King. Our job is to love the King with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, and love our neighbor as ourself.

Jesus said at the end of the Beatitudes, “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

Yertle the Turtle’s light didn’t shine very much. In fact, his light shone only on himself. He cared about the other turtles only to the extent that they could help him and serve him, and as a result, he landed in the mud.

Don’t be such a Yertle! Hear this story and the words of Scripture and be reminded to build our houses and our very lives on the rock. On that rock – Jesus Christ – we have a firm foundation. In his words we find the principles to live by. We build on this foundation by living in humility, recognizing that we are all children of the great King of the universe. We build by being caring instead of selfish, by pursuing justice instead of power. We build by letting the light of love for others shine far and wide. Don’t be such a Yertle! Be the light of the world! AMEN.