

A Grinch-y Christmas

#3 – “Maybe Christmas Means A Little Bit More”

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It was quarter past dawn... All the Whos, still a-bed,
All the Whos, still asnooze When he packed up his sled,
Packed it up with their presents! The ribbons! The wrappings!
The tags! And the tinsel! The trimmings! The trappings!
Three thousand feet up! Up the side of Mt. Crumpit,
He rode with his load to the tiptop to dump it!
"PoohPooh to the Whos!" he was grinchishly humming.
"They're finding out now that no Christmas is coming!"
"They're just waking up! I know just what they'll do!"
"Their mouths will hang open a minute or two,
Then the Whos down in Whoville will all cry BooHoo!"

Well, we've finally made it to the end of the story! I don't know about you, but I', beginning to wonder if there is any hope for the Grinch. Is it possible for someone to be so Grinchy that they fall outside of redemption? Well, not according to the Bible. Even someone, as the song says, who is a nasty wasteful skunk, whose heart is full of unwashed socks and whose soul is full of gunk, is not out of reach of God's grace. So that means there's hope for that person in your family who's a real Grinch. And if you think, "Wait, Kory, I don't have a Grinch in my family," it's probably you!

Let's recap how we got from the Grinch hating Christmas to him carving the roast beast on Christmas morning. As we talked about in our first sermon, the Grinch was probably so Grinchy because he had isolated himself from a community, and when you're alone, you can begin to think not-OK things are actually OK, even something as evil as stealing Christmas. Without a community to love him and hold him accountable, he thought it was OK to hate people and try to steal their source of joy. And we learned we have to be careful because there's a Grinch in all of us.

On the other hand, we have the Whos, who thrive in community together and find fulfillment in their communal activities, like decorating for Christmas and sitting down at a table together to share a feast. Unlike the Grinch, the Whos don't hold grudges, even against the Grinch. For them, the meaning of Christmas isn't tied up in boxes and bows, the very things the Grinch wants to steal. I can't think of two more opposite characters: the green, grumpy Grinch and the happy Whos. So how do these two end up at the same holiday table together?

The Grinch executes his plans to steal Christmas from the Whos, hitching up his long-suffering dog Max and slaloming into Whoville. At his first stop, he steals the stockings, cleans out the fridge, and even stuffs the tree up the chimney. The only hiccup he encounters is little Cindy Lou Who, who got up to get a glass of water. But the sly Grinch lies to her about his intentions, sends her back to bed, and continues to carry out his scheme.

Once everything is stolen, he drives the sleigh to the top of Mt. Crumpit, where he awaits the Whos' reaction on Christmas morning. He just knows they will let at a collective "Boo Hoo!" at which point he'll push the sleigh over the edge of the mountain, destroying everything that made Christmas so joyful for the Whos. But what he hears isn't weeping and wailing and

gnashing of teeth. It's singing! The Whos gather on Christmas morning to put their joy into song, singing so loud that the sound carries to the top of Mt. Crumpit and into the Grinch's ears.

And then, the Grinch finds himself in a real pickle. This was NOT the plan. He wanted company for his misery, and instead he gets smiling, cheerful Whos and choruses of "Ya-Who-Lo-Rey." "And the Grinch, with his grinch-feet ice-cold in the snow, stood puzzling and puzzling: 'How could it be so? It came without ribbons! It came without tags! It came without packages, boxes, and bags!' And he puzzled three hours till his puzzler was sore. Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before! 'Maybe Christmas,' he thought, 'doesn't come from a store. Maybe Christmas...perhaps...means a little bit more!'"

That's quite a revelation for the Grinch, who to this point in the story seemed driven by his hatred of the Whos. He was willing to draw his conclusions about them based on his second-hand observations rather than first-hand experience. He assumed that, because they loved to indulge themselves in the traditions and trappings of the season, then they must derive all of their joy from those things. It's really easy to justify hating someone without actually knowing them. That's especially true when their skin is different, or their religion is different, or their values are different, or the way they celebrate Christmas is different. As long as you see them as different, as the Other, you can justify all kinds of Grinchy things.

That's why I think the Grinch's change doesn't start at the top of Mt. Crumpit when he hears the singing. I think the seeds of change are planted in him by little Cindy Lou Who, who was no more than two. As far as we know, up until that point the Grinch had not had any contact with the Whos, only fueling his resentment of them from what he observed from a safe distance. But Cindy Lou Who puts a face on the group the Grinch hates so much, and I believe that's the moment his heart broke out of its crusty mold and started to grow. How can you hate someone named Cindy Lou Who? Even though he still lies to her and continues with his Christmas-stealing plot, something had changed. The Grinch had met someone – maybe the first someone EVER – who believed in him, believed he was capable of good in spite of the overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

So at the top of Mt. Crumpit, when the Grinch hears the Whos' singing, when he remembers his encounter with Cindy Lou Who, something inside him snaps. "How could it be so?" he asks himself. And then he stands there for three hours – three hours! – puzzling over this revelation. Up to this point, the Grinch had always experienced Christmas from the outside, seeing the external decorations and shopping and busyness. But for the first time, he experiences the meaning of Christmas on the inside, and his heart, which used to be two sizes too small, grows three sizes bigger! The true meaning of Christmas expands our capacity for joy.

Then, the Grinch does something amazing. He turns around, whizzing with his load through the bright morning light back to Whoville. But his about-face isn't only physical. The Greek word for "repent" – metanoia – literally means "to turn around." After three hours of puzzling, the Grinch realizes he has been wrong, and he turns around from his hateful ways to undo what he has done.

The Grinch makes a choice. He chooses to stop hating. That's not an easy choice. It took the poor guy three hours of standing in the ice-cold snow to come to this decision. The choices we make based on faith are rarely easy choices. Joseph faced that choice when the angel told him that his fiancé was pregnant. Mary faced that choice when the angel told her she was going to be the deliverer for the son of God. The shepherds and magi faced this choice when they were presented with this incredulous news. We face that choice each year when we are told that Christ is going to be born again, in our world and in our hearts. For so long, we've heard this story from

the outside. What would happen if this year we heard it from the inside, if we let the joy of this season take hold within us? It might mean that we would have to stop hating, or change our priorities, or re-examine our thinking on social or political issues. Sometimes it's easier to stay Grinchy, to keep those different from us at arm's length. But if we are willing to turn around, amazing things can happen.

Of course, the Grinch's transformation isn't completely up to him. True repentance takes effort on the part of both the wrongdoer and the wronged. The Grinch's turn-around would have been short-lived if, when he rode into town, the Whos stopping singing and said, "There he is! Lock him up!" In order for the Grinch's repentance to be complete, the Whos have to welcome him into their community, the very community that he had just so egregiously wronged!

A woman once told Abraham Lincoln that if he wanted to win the war, he needed to pursue revenge, not reconciliation, to destroy his enemies. He responded, "Am I not destroying my enemies when I make them my friends?" If someone stole your car in the morning, would you have them over to dinner that evening? That's basically what the Whos do. And they don't stick him in the corner of the dining room and feed him scraps. They put him front and center at the table, giving him the place of honor. Even for the Grinch, there's a place at the table.

I believe it all started when someone believed in the Grinch. It only took one person, a little child at that, to start the Grinch's transformation. I'm sure there are people in our lives who have wronged us, stolen from us, damaged our relationships. And maybe we've given up on them. I know I've done that in the past with some of my loved ones. But sometimes it only takes one person who believes we are good to change us. We've all had our Cindy Lou Whos, the people in our lives who believed the best about us, even when we were at our worst. Thank God for them! Is there someone you know who needs a Cindy Lou Who, who just needs someone to believe there is good in them? I believe our prisons and homeless shelters are filled with people who are people, not faceless statistics or lost causes, people who just need someone to believe there is good in them. If there is hope for the Grinch, there is hope for us all. Restoration starts when we are willing to welcome into our lives those whom others have cast off.

Dr. Seuss often received letters from fans and books. One such letter came from David and Bob Grinch of Ridgefield, NJ. They were asking if he would consider changing the Grinch's name. It seems their friends were teasing them because of their last name. Dr. Seuss wrote them back, saying: "I disagree with your friends who harass you. Can't they understand that the Grinch in my story is the hero of Christmas? Sure, he starts out as a villain, but it's not how you start out that counts. It's what you are at the finish."

Thank God we are not judged for how we started our journey of faith, for the mistakes we've made along the way, for the times our hearts were too small or our forgiveness too stingy or our table too exclusionary. If that were the case, would there be hope for any of us? But on this Christmas Sunday we remember that there was a child born in a manger, ushered in amidst the muck and mire of this world, to bring us the message of good news. And this child believes in us, believes the best about us, even when we are at our worst. And because of that, we always have the choice to turn around. There is always room for our hearts to grow bigger. This year, may we see the best in others, just as we hope that God sees the best in us. You never know when someone you thought was a nasty wasteful skunk will be the person next to you at the table. After all, isn't that love and grace and acceptance the true meaning of the season? Once Christmas gets inside of us, we'll never be the same. Thanks be to God. Merry Christmas!