

A Grinch-y Christmas
The Whos down in Who-ville”
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“It could be his head wasn't screwed on just right. It could be, perhaps, that his shoes were too tight. But I think that the most likely reason of all, May have been that his heart was two sizes too small.” We continue our Advent sermon series today called “A Grinch-y Christmas.” In our first sermon, we looked at the old green grump himself and came to a few conclusions. First, we speculated on what could have caused the Grinch to become the Grinch, and pondered if it was his isolation that led him to his grinchy ways. Being alone gets awfully lonely, and it also cuts us off from our source of love, nurture, and accountability. Without a community around him, the Grinch came to believe that hating Christmas and stealing it from the Whos was an acceptable thing to do.

We also recognized that some of his reasons for hating Christmas may have been legitimate. This season gives us many reasons to be grinchy, from the busyness and materialism to the incessant noise that drowns out the still, small voice of God attempting to break through the clutter. We all have a Grinch inside of us, and we have to be mindful of that as we navigate the potential pitfalls of the Christmas season. And, in the end, we said that there is always hope – even for the Grinch.

Today, we travel to the other end of the spectrum, from the hatred and resentment of the Grinch to the joy and celebration of the Whos. I find the Whos to be an interesting contrast to the Grinch. They come across just as joyful and celebratory as the Grinch is curmudgeonly and resentful. For every grimace from the Grinch, the Whos hang an ornament. Every time the Grinch frowns, the Whos serve up another helping of roast beast. How do you explain the difference between the two?

Community. The Grinch has isolated himself from the rest of the world, while the Whos live in community with each other. That, for me, is the foundational difference between the two. Now, you could argue that being in community with others is not always a source of joy, and you’d be right. Dr. Seuss chose not to tell us about the time the Whos got in an argument over what color lights to put on the Christmas tree, or about the two Whos who didn’t talk to each other for a while because they couldn’t agree on whether to serve turkey or ham for Christmas dinner. That’s probably why they settled on roast beast. And don’t get me started on President Harley Who and his stance on the immigrants from What-ville. Being in community is not always smiles and hand-holding and singing “Ya-Who-Lo-Ray.”

But there are positive, life-giving aspects about being in community that keep us from devolving into Grinches. One thing the Whos do as a community is they eat together. As the book says, “The Whos, young and old, would sit down to Feast. And they’d feast! And they’d feast! And they’d feast! Feast! Feast! Feast!” That proves that the Whos were Disciples of Christ! Whether it’s a potluck or a worship service, there’s no Disciples gathering where food isn’t present. We like to eat, not just because it provides physical nourishment, but because our spirits are nourished when we break bread together.

The other thing the Whos do as a community is that they sing together. “They’d stand hand-in-hand. And the Whos would start singing. They’d sing! And they’d sing! And they’d sing! Sing! Sing! Sing!” There’s something about lifting our voices together that connects us at a soul level. The prophet Isaiah wrote about God, “You have multiplied the nation, you have

increased its joy; the people rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest.” I believe a great source of the Whos’ joy comes from the fact they eat and sing together.

There’s something even deeper here, though, a wider chasm that divides the Grinch from the Whos. I don’t know what the Whos are like the rest of the year, but during the Christmas season they are extravagant in their celebration, which really honks off the Grinch. They do Christmas up big time. They indulge themselves. They’re not holding back in their festivities, their celebrations, or their singing. They let it all out, lifting their forks and voices high, to the point where even at the top of Mt. Crumpit, the Grinch can hear them singing their praise. Rather than trying to measure their joy, they fully immerse themselves in the food and the song and the spirit of the season.

On the other hand, the Grinch has chosen to cut himself off from that source of joy. Rather than join the Whos in their indulgences, he looks with disdain upon their celebrations, telling himself that it’s better to take away their joy rather than join in. There are parts of this season that are easy to hate, like the bills and the traffic and the noise, but in the Grinch’s attempt to remove those parts of the season by stealing them from the Whos, he has cut himself off from the moments of joy, or transcendence, of incarnation. It’s like refusing to come to the Christmas Eve candlelight service because you don’t want to search for a parking place.

One year, a church member dropped off some M&M cookies by the office for us to share. It was a wonderful gift, and she told us that a lot of love went into those cookies. After she left, I stood there agonizing over whether to eat one or not. I was saying to myself, “Gosh, I don’t know. It’s only a few hours until dinner, and I didn’t go to the gym yesterday, or the month before that, but I did have a salad for lunch. But I also had two donuts for breakfast. OK, three. I probably shouldn’t.” The red and green M&Ms were staring up at me, symbolizing my inner turmoil: “Stop!” “Go!” “Stop!” “Go!” And then I realized what I was doing. These cookies were a gift, made with love, and I was rationalizing why I shouldn’t accept this gift. The more we try to cut ourselves off from the potential sources of joy, the more we feed the Grinch inside of us.

The Whos didn’t let that stop them at Christmas. Their joy almost bounces off the page as we see them decorating their houses, playing with their toys, and serving the Christmas feast. They truly embody the spirit of the season as they indulge themselves in the trimming, the wrapping, the eating. Ironically, these are the very things the Grinch hates them for and the very things we sometimes criticize about this season. We see people go overboard with their Christmas lights, putting them up way too early and leaving them up way too late. We see people go overboard in their shopping zeal or their extravagant parties or their yard inflatables. We ask, “Have they forgotten the reason for the season?” as if Christmas is an either/or holiday. Either you fully buy into the commercialism or you reverentially worship at the manger, but you can’t do both.

Why not? The Whos indulge themselves in all the holiday trappings, and yet when those things are taken from them, they don’t sulk. They sing. They sing because they know the meaning of Christmas is not tied up in those things. How would we respond? Would Christmas still be Christmas for us if we decided not to decorate, or were forced to cut back on how much we could spend, or shared a simple meal rather than a Who-like feast? I think the Whos provide us an important self-check here. If all the things we’ve come to expect around Christmas time were gone – the Christmas carols, the Christmas cookies, the Christmas parties, the exchanging of Christmas gifts – would it still be Christmas for us?

It sure was for the Whos, who proclaimed their Christmas joy in spite of the Grinch’s actions. I don’t think we can go so far as to say their love of Jesus led them to this. But I think

we can say that they were able to hold hands and sing on Christmas morning because there were hands to hold and other people with whom to sing.

Let me revisit something we learned about the Whos. In the book, when Dr. Seuss tells us how the Whos loved to feast on Who pudding and Who roast-beast, we see this wonderful picture of a long, curvy table decorated with candelabras and ribbons, while out of the kitchen the servers are bringing platters of dishes that contain scrumptious Who casseroles and Who jello molds. The chairs at the table are filled with Whos who all have these big grins on their faces as they anticipate what they are about to receive. There are tall Whos and short Whos, young Whos and old Whos, male Whos and female Whos.

It looks like at a Who feast, there's room for everyone at the table. No one is excluded from participating in the meal; everyone has a place. There's something to be said for a community where there's room for everyone, where everyone feels welcome and valued, where everyone is invited to take and eat the meal that is offered. If you know the story, you know that in the end, there's even room at the Whos' table for the Grinch. But we'll save that for the next sermon.

I think we're a lot like the Whos. We come in all shapes and sizes, we come from different backgrounds, we bring with us to this place different emotions and feelings, and we bring with us different levels of Grinchiness. And yet, we are called to be in community with each other. There is room for all of us at this table. Isn't that good news of great joy? You are invited here to feast, to indulge yourself in the lavish gift that is offered here, to soak up the grace and love that is poured out each and every Sunday. And then, you are called to go from this place, making your joy audible, proclaiming it so loud that the folks on the top of Mt. Crumpit can hear it! The message we are called to sing is not, "Ya-Who-Lo-Rey," but "Jesus Christ is born!" There are Grinches out there – and maybe even a Grinch in here (point to heart) - who will try to steal our joy this Christmas season. But they can only do that if we let them. Let's choose to be Whos this year. In times of plenty and in times of want, in times of celebration and in times of frustration, in times of grinchiness and in times of great joy, let us proclaim with our mouths and our words and our actions the good news we are to receive yet again this Christmas. Jesus Christ is born and that means there's room at the table for everyone. Even the Grinches among us.