

Celebrating Dr. Seuss
Rev. Amy Freedman
Channing Memorial Church
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What comes to mind when I say Dr. Seuss? Perhaps the colorful pages of his books enter your thoughts. Personally, I grew-up reading *Cat in the Hat*. It was so much fun following the outrageous adventures and strange characters that I had no idea that the pages were designed to promote literacy. I hope many of the kids here this morning take the same pleasure in the *I Can Read* series. Some of you may have shared Dr. Seuss books as parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles or teachers, reading aloud the tongue-twisting verse while being carried along by the rhythmic meter. Or maybe you know Dr. Seuss from the popular films that have dramatized his works. Most recently, *Horton Hears a Who* made it on to the big screen with great comic actors like Jim Carey and Carol Burnett. There is even a Broadway musical known as *Seussical* in which Rosie O'Donnell made an appearance. When the Christmas season rolls around *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas* has almost become as well-known as Dickens *A Christmas Carol*.

All this being said, why is Dr. Seuss worthy of a Sunday Service? Some of you might be wondering whether this is just kid's stuff. Worship, a time set apart to connect with that which is holy, the highest ideals and deepest longings of the human spirit, is a good time for us to honor the life and message of Dr. Seuss.

His books are designed to make learning fun. Some of them also carry powerful messages that remain timely and relevant. So much so that our Summer Program for kids was based on these stories. Each Sunday, children gathered in the Parish Hall to explore the theme of a book and engage in some related activities. The teacher of our Summer Program is someone who grew-up in this church herself and her parents Pam and Tom remain active members. Dorian Goff generously gave of her time and taught with great caring, humor and skill. Dorian, will you please come forward so we can express our appreciation?

Before we enact some stories for you, I would like to share some interesting facts about the man who became known as Dr. Seuss. He was born Theodor Giesel in Springfield, Massachusetts. I understand that there is now a Memorial Sculpture Garden in his home town. I look forward to taking my daughter Liza some day to see the bronze statues. There you can see a sculpture of the artist himself working at a drawing table with the Cat in the Hat looking over his shoulder. There are other favorite characters like Horton the Elephant, the Grinch and his dog Max, Thing One and Two, Gertrude McFuzz, the lovable Thidwick the Moose, and the Lorax (who we will hear from later in this service).

From a young age, Theodor loved to draw. As a young boy, as he was making a picture, he would turn the paper over to look at his creation from the other side. He figured that if the image looked good backwards then it worked. It turns out that this is a practice of artists. It is a way of really observing your drawing to see if the composition

is right. However, his childhood teacher had no patience for this method. Noticing him looking through the paper, she snapped, “Theodor, real artists do NOT look at their drawings backwards!” From that moment as a young boy, he decided never to take an art class again.

Lucky for us, he did not stop drawing. However, he never considered himself an artist. He said “I try to draw a kangaroo and it comes out looking like a Grinch!” His father served as the parks commissioner in charge of the Forest Park Zoo. So, Theodor spent a lot of time visiting animals and you can see his love of creatures great and small in all his books. He also credited his mother for his approach to language. It seems that she was always keeping Theodor and his sister entertained with infectious rhyming.

He used many different pseudonyms over the years but the one that stuck Dr. Seuss was a tip of his hat to his parents. His father had hoped his son would become a college professor. After graduating from Dartmouth College, Ted attended Oxford pursuing a degree in literature. He found that he had no interest in the academic profession and dropped out without his doctorate. Seuss was his mother’s maiden name.

It is hard to imagine him doing anything other than children’s books after all he published over sixty of them over the course of his lifetime but first, he was a commercial artist, creating advertisements for Standard Oil and Bug Spray among other things.

What I find most fascinating are the political cartoonist he created for a liberal New York newspaper called PM. Some of these cartoons can be found online and his characteristic style is immediately recognizable. Only the subject matter is overtly political. As someone who had lived and travelled extensively in Europe, he recognized Hitler’s mounting power. Through his cartoons, he urged Americans against isolationism.

For example, one picture has the caption, “We Always Were Suckers for Ridiculous Hats”. The drawing shows a salesman with people lined up in front of a counter that reads “Get Your Ostrich Bonnet Here—Relieves Hitler Headache—“Forget the Terrible News You’ve Read. Your Mind’s at Ease in an Ostrich Head!” Lindy Ostrich Service Inc. (Probably a jab at Hitler supporter Charles Lindberg) Then on the other side of the counter are men wearing big ostrich heads strapped onto their shoulders with their smiling faces blissfully in buried in the sand.

Theodor Giesel was born in 1904 so he was not called on to fight. However, he believed so strongly in the cause of World War II he enlisted and served in the Animation Dept. of the Armed Forces. He was in the motion picture unit with none other than Colonel Frank Capra. They created a series of bi-weekly training cartoons for the Army featuring a character called Private Snafu (the unofficial acronym for “Situation Normal, All [Fouled] Up”. Those of you who serve in the Navy would be interested to know that they were planning a second series for the Navy featuring Private Snafu’s brother, “Seaman Trafu, Things are Really [Fouled] Up” but end of the war marked the end of the series.

However, peace time did not bring an end to his efforts to improve society. Once he broke into the children's book market, his first book was rejected over twenty times, Dr. Seuss brought a strong message against bullies, hypocrites, intolerance, and greed. *The Sneetches* deals with Anti-Semitism and racial discrimination. *Yertle the Turtle* is anti-fascist. With the main character building his throne on the backs of the other turtles and being overthrown by a plain turtle named Mack who simply cannot take it anymore. Dr. Seuss encourages us all to speak out. He reminds us that the smallest among us even the littlest Who down in Whoville has the power to overthrow tyrants for as Horton says, "A person's a person no matter how small."

You might be surprised to discover as I was that Dr. Seuss never had children himself. When asked why he responded, "You keep having kids, I'll keep writing books for them." He was a private person who seldom made public appearances. When he did he said that crowds of children made him nervous. As you can imagine, he also grew weary of folks serving him green eggs and ham.

This morning, our very own Seuss Players are going to enact several Seuss stories. We hope to inspire you to read his colorful books yourself or enjoy them with others. The words and meter of the Seuss verses can help us appreciate the wonder and fun of language—truly it is amazing that these sounds help us paint a scene and communicate our understanding. I hope that you will also look for the messages in these books. Do you ever refuse to budge like the Zax? Do you speak for the trees like the Lorax? Have we yet learned the lesson of the Once-ler? I am afraid that intolerance, greed, and war are alive and well in our world. May we each use our unique gifts like Dr. Seuss to open our minds, see life from a fresh perspective so that in response to the flaws of society we find ways to inspire play, fairness, and joy.