

## Sermon for the Day of Pentecost

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Did y'all ever read Dr. Seuss's story about the Star-bellied Sneetches? I realize even bringing up Dr. Seuss these days can put some folks on edge, but I will say, this book is a standard case of Physician, heal thyself. Or in this case, Dr, go back and read what you just said. I've been wanting to preach about Sneetches for some time. I even considered just reading the story, complete with illustrations and voices, and then just letting y'all make the connections. But my preacher's hubris got the best of me, so here we are. Buckle up, folks, 'cause you're about to hear a sermon inspired by a children's book. For those of you who aren't familiar, the story of the Sneetches is one of great political import. The scene opens: "The star-belly sneetches had bellies with stars. The plain-belly sneetches had none upon thars." Well you can see just how the trouble can get started here, can't ya. (You should know, by the way, that I considered writing this whole thing in a Seussian rhyme-scheme. For your sanity and mine, though, rest easy. It's prose from here on out.)

So, these Sneetches on their beaches get their britches all twisted when someone decides it must be cooler to have a star than not. The plain-belly sneetches get left out of the fun, resentment grows, and then a capitalist shows up with a fancy machine that stamps stars on plain-belly sneetches so they can join the party. But then the luster of having a star wears off for the original star-bellies, and the capitalist offers to remove the original stars. Before you know it, sneetches are getting stars put on and pulled off at break-neck speed, the capitalist is raking in cash, and by the end of the thing, no one knows who started with a plain-belly or a star-belly anymore. The sneetches learn their lesson, and they all live happily ever after. The end. Amen. Can y'all see where I'm headed with this?

Today is Pentecost, and while we're celebrating, we're not celebrating quite as big as we'd like. I'd love to be throwing a huge party with Gospel music and a preacher that hollers and the biggest coffee hour extravaganza we've seen since the last time we had a celebration! But we're sort of living in the world of Romans, waiting with hope for something yet unseen, waiting with patience, or if you're like me sometimes waiting without patience. We're getting there, folks. We get to have coffee hour today! But we all know we aren't there yet. And because we're tired of waiting, some of us are getting punchy. I am. I'll own it! And because we're getting punchy, we can't help but look around and compare notes. I know some star-belly churches are going full bore and have been for a while. Good for them. We're not there yet. We're getting there, but hold onto that patience of Paul with hope for the time that will absolutely come! You know, while I am excited about getting all back together, I gotta admit, those darn-bellied sneetches keep bouncing around in my head. See, one of the most important aspects of our theology is that we all come to this place regardless of our identity, regardless of our worthiness, regardless of the state of our faith, we all come to this place as we are. We come here as doctors or farmers or professors or white collar or blue collar or no collar. We come here with money in the bank or with an empty belly. We come here with a D by our name or an R or an I or a star or whatever else gets plugged in on CSPAN. We come here with ties around our necks or shoelaces untied, and we come to this place, and we join as a single, united body, united in our difference as people and our commonality as followers of Christ, and we come to this place and we hold those things as one. We set those things aside for ourselves and we hold them for each other. We set those things aside and then we set our eyes on God. And when we receive communion we receive that body as one body. And when we drink that wine we drink it as a people united by one blood. We come to this place with all our star-bellies and plain-bellies and whatever-bellies and we remember what matters.

But.

These days, we have all sorts of reasons to see difference within these walls, and not just to see difference but to let that difference define us. We all know the past few years have deepened political divides,

and racial tension is thick. There are those who think we need to reckon with our racial history and there are those who think we shouldn't. There are those who support LGBTQ+ rights, and there are those who are antagonistic to those folks. There are those who want more people to have a voice and more people to have the opportunity to share that voice. And there are those who don't. Even then, even when our divides seemed to fall along the lines of who should be considered human enough to participate fully in our shared social spaces, even then we could gather at this altar and pray alongside one another. But now, now when life is at its hardest and the implications of our actions hit very close to home, now is when our theology gets tested. Because now, our star-bellies and our plain-bellies have some consequences. And folks, these things are gonna matter, and they are gonna define who we are as a church much faster than we may realize. You've heard the CDC talk about masks, and you've seen the governor invite more people to indoor gatherings. We're hearing those things, too. The bishop has some new guidelines we're gonna put into effect next week. But when we do, get ready.

Way back when this pandemic started, the clergy of this diocese had a zoom call with someone from the CDC, and they told us, "We're not as worried about communion as you think. We're more worried about Passing the Peace. More than anything, we're worried about people coming to the same place. The most dangerous thing churches do is gather." I want to repeat that last bit, 'cause I've been holding onto it for a year: "The most dangerous thing churches do is gather." Now, I know the CDC meant, like, in terms of the pandemic and spreading the disease, that we should be more worried about coming together than what happened after we did. I get that. But as a preacher, I can't resist a line like that. Y'all. As the church, the most dangerous thing we do is gather. Why? Our theology says it's because of who we bring together as equals before God, and if we do it here, we damn sure better do it out there. That's dangerous for the ways of our world. That's the most dangerous thing we do. We gather. Because when we gather, we change the world. *How* we gather changes the world. But right now, as the CDC lifts mandates and the governor scooches numbers around, when we gather, we're gathering with a shiftiness to our eyes we haven't had before. We are delighted to get back in this building, but we're still a little nervous. What if someone sneezes? Well, y'all, it's pollen season. Someone's gonna sneeze. But what if someone doesn't wear a mask? Or what if the little bottle in my pew runs out of hand sanitizer? Or what if everyone is vaccinated? Or what if we just think everyone is vaccinated? What if someone can't get the vaccine? Or won't? Or wants to but hasn't yet and just decides to come visit us some day? When we start taking communion again, what if someone isn't ready to eat in public? Or what if taking communion becomes a sort of badge of bravery? When we can pass the peace again, what if someone isn't ready to shake your hand? Or what if they try to give you a hug instead? What if the folks that worship on Zoom feel they're getting second-best? Or the folks in-person feel they're better Christians?

I saw a bracelet the other day in the old WWJD style, only it just says "vaccinated." I'll be honest, I got one. I got a bracelet the other day that just says "vaccinated." Because I can imagine some situations where it might be helpful to be able to let folks know without having to whip out the little card in my wallet. But then it hit me how easy it would be to just buy one and say I was vaccinated even if I wasn't. Like Americans traveling abroad with a Canadian flag on their backpack. It's star-belly sneetches. All those things are. I mean, yes, I know that the pandemic is real, and I trust that the precautions we take will get this over with sooner because they actually work. I'm not saying none of this matters. What I'm saying is, when we do the most dangerous thing we do, when we gather, remember those sneetches. Remember how easy it is to take a marker of difference and make it a marker of meaning. Remember how easy it is to let church slip into becoming just another club of like-minded, same-bellied folks.

On Pentecost, the church explodes into being with Apostles speaking across all sorts of difference, preaching the grace of the gospel to anyone in earshot, and they did it in every language there. Paul says we're in this not just with all of humanity and all of its difference, but with all of creation, groaning, he says, groaning

until now, created in its entirety by God, says the psalm, all of this rolled into one disparate and sacred unity. Star-bellies and plain-bellies. I heard it put beautifully another way: I'd rather be excluded for who I include than included for who I exclude.

As we come back together, bit by bit, as we creep back towards worship the way we're accustomed to, I need your help, all of you. I need your help to make sure we continue to include. Be careful, be safe, of course, but invite difference in. Remember why it is folks, that the most dangerous thing we do is gather. Remember that when we gather, we change the world, and remember that how we gather changes the world, if we keep our eyes set on God.