

Suppose the Grinch Stole Pentecost Instead (Pandemic Version)

Acts 2:1-21 and Numbers 11:24-30

Many notorious heists have captured the public's imagination over the years. The Brinks Job, The Great Train Robbery, and The Gardner Museum Art Heist, to name a few. But none of these were as daring or as infamous as Dr. Seuss' story of How the Grinch Stole Christmas. As you might recall, the Grinch's motive for stealing Christmas was not greed; and his objective was not to get rich. It was that his heart was two sizes too small. He just could not tolerate another December in Whoville filled with all the annoying decorating and singing and gift-giving that drove him crazy. The Grinch imagined that he could get rid of Christmas by plundering Whoville of its presents and Christmas trees and holiday feasts.

As with most great robberies, the success of the Grinch's Christmas caper hinged on an ingenious plan and cunning deception. The Grinch made himself a Santa suit and a sleigh and tied antlers on his dog's head to break and enter the homes of Whoville on Christmas Eve. And despite almost having his cover blown by Little Cindy Lou Who, who was no more than two, the Grinch's scheme went off like clockwork.

As we all know, though, his plot ultimately failed. In the end, the Grinch discovered that Christmas couldn't be stolen because Christmas is more than gifts and lights and feasts of roast beast. And the one thing he couldn't rob the Whos of was the very thing he most despised them for — their Spirit.

Having read the book, seen the movie and watched the TV special over and over, I have reached an informed opinion that the Grinch's big mistake was overthinking the problem. To borrow from Dr. Seuss' style of stating things: If squelching the Who's Spirit was the Grinch's true aim, then stealing Pentecost – not Christmas – was the name of the game.

How, you may ask, would stealing Pentecost get rid of Christmas? The answer to that question goes back to the events of that very first Pentecost in Jerusalem so long ago. Pentecost is commonly considered to be the day the Church was born. It says in the first chapter of Acts, before the day of Pentecost, that the disciples were in Jerusalem worshipping and devoting themselves to prayer. They were, in other words, sort of... a church. But they were a church in a "holding pattern." They weren't going anywhere, yet. And it's likely that they never would have – if Pentecost never happened. You get the sense that the character of their community was shaped by caution and fear of taking risks. They weren't bothering anybody, and so nobody was bothering with them.

One of the last times the disciples saw Jesus, he told them that after he was gone he was counting on them to continue to do the things he had been doing. In fact, he told them that they would actually do GREATER things than he had done. He said they would be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Which must have sounded

pretty incredible to them because they had seen Jesus do some amazing things. Things they knew they weren't capable of doing without him. You might say that the disciples' hearts were two sizes too small to hold the courage necessary to fulfill Jesus' expectations of them. They knew it. And Jesus knew it. So he told them to wait until God sent them the Holy Spirit, who would give them the power to do what Jesus was relying on them to do.

On the day of the Jewish Festival of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit showed up in Jerusalem. It filled the room where believers were meeting with a sound like a rushing wind and with so much energy that it was as if the very air around them crackled and burst into flames. What changed with Pentecost, was that this wallflower church literally threw caution to the winds, flung open its doors, and made the world sit up and take notice. These not-very-well-educated Galileans amazed everyone by suddenly being able to speak in all of the languages spoken by the visitors from every corner of the known world who were in the city that day.

Verse 4 of the second chapter of Acts says, "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages" —and here's the most important part —"AS THE SPIRIT GAVE THEM ABILITY." The Holy Spirit gave them the ability, the wisdom, the courage and whatever else they didn't have — but that they needed — to be the Church Jesus called them to be. Dr. Seuss might have said that the disciples' hearts grew three sizes that day.

So, suppose the Grinch stole Pentecost. Suppose he could have prevented the Holy Spirit from turning a band of underqualified-for-the-job disciples into a church that would carry the Gospel to the ends of the earth and down through the ages. They would have never had the ability to witness to the world about Jesus. The Gospel would have flickered and died with them, instead of catching fire. They would never have come close to doing the things Jesus did, let alone do greater things than he had done.

If there had not been Pentecost there would have been no Church to preach and live the Good News about grace and forgiveness, about peace and justice, about faith and hope and love. There would have been none of the stuff that only happens through an inspiration, vision, courage, perseverance and sacrifice that most of us don't come by without God's help. By the way, there would have been no Christmas. The Grinch would have accomplished what he set out to do.

There were Grinchy folks around on that first Pentecost. Scoffers who tried to dismiss what was happening by sneering and calling the disciples a bunch of disgraceful drunks. But Peter and the disciples were past the point now of letting fear hold them back.

The Apostle Paul would one day warn the believers in ancient Rome that there were two ways they could think of themselves. They could see themselves as led by a spirit of fear that kept them enslaved by their human limitations. Or they could be led by the Spirit of God, who would reveal to them all the potential that was theirs as children of God.

Being the church is not for the faint-hearted. And, friends, this is more than a children's story. The Grinch is real. And he is here. He isn't recognizable by his green fur, Santa suit and faux antler eared dog. He lurks invisible and lordly in his microscopic realm. But the effects of his presence are all too real. Overwhelmed hospitals. Closed businesses. Cancelled graduations, baseball seasons and vacations—to name just a few. This Grinch transforms our communities into literal Whoville's where friends and neighbors pass each other on the street in face-masked anonymity. This Grinch goes by the name of COVID-19.

As I stand here preaching in an empty sanctuary for a Pentecost service where the "birthday of the Church" will only be celebrated in cyberspace, it might very well seem like this Grinch has succeeded where the Dr. Seuss version failed. So, it's important to remember what Pentecost tells us. Which is that we are not only the Church when we are gathered together in a building. We are the Church when we are out in the streets demonstrating to the world who Jesus is.

In the reading from the Book of Numbers, Moses leads a group of elders to the sacred tent where God was worshipped. Then and there God poured out the Holy Spirit upon them and they began to prophesy. But two elders by the names of Eldad and Medad, had chosen not to go to the holy tent. Instead, they stayed back in the camp. It was there, in the camp, where the common people worked and ate and slept, that God's Spirit was poured out on Eldad and Medad and when it was, they began to prophesy. When news reached Moses about what was taking place outside the holy tabernacle, he said, "Would that all God's people were prophets."

People of God, we are all meant to be prophets of the Living God. Not only in church but in our communities and the world. Many people are anxious to return to their familiar and comforting church buildings, so that they can get back to being the Church again. But while what we do in our buildings is holy and important, there is more to the Church than that.

Before that first Christian Pentecost, the believers were safely sheltered under one roof; but the Holy Spirit drove them out of the building and into the streets and before you could say "Cindy-Lou Who" they were changing the world. Suddenly it became clear to them and to everyone else that Jesus wasn't exaggerating when he promised that the Holy Spirit would enable them to do even greater things than he himself did.

If being the Church is only something that happens under steeples and behind stained-glass windows, then the Grinch has won. Because even when we finally do return to worshipping together again, the world outside our doors, will also go back to seeing the Church as a quaint but irrelevant anachronism.

And that is how the Grinch wins.

But if we don't let ourselves forget the lessons that this pandemic forced upon us—the lessons about how the Church can evolve and adapt faster than the most virulent virus—then we may find that we are living through something like a new awakening of what it means to be disciples of Jesus.

So, let us never be held captive to the spirit of fear that keeps us from believing ourselves to be the beloved children of God who are called and equipped to turn the world upside down. In the end, even the Grinch knew better than that.

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