

Life Together: Care a Whole Awful Lot

For several weeks at coffee hour, there was a thing happening with the kids. So I'm going to clue you in to it, ok? After they ate, they would go out onto the playground and would start singing songs and even acting out scenes from the movie *The Lorax* based on the Dr. Seuss book. Now Julian, my five year old, loved this because we are big fans of the Lorax. We watch the movie fairly frequently. We jam to the soundtrack in the car. So I have to know, any other *Lorax* fans here?

So for those of you who haven't seen it, let me give you a brief summary. In *The Lorax*, we learn the story of a character known as the Once-ler and his story started out like a true American dream story. He's un-loved by his family, who constantly remind him that he'll never amount to anything. But even so, the Once-ler has a big dream. He dreams that he can invent something the world needs—a Thneed. So he leaves home in pursuit of that dream. When he sees the forest of Truffela trees, the Once-ler realizes that he might be able to make his dream come true. He begins to make his Thneeds from the leaves of the Truffela trees. But as he cuts down his first tree, the Lorax appears.

The Lorax is the character who speaks for and advocates for the trees and he gets the Once-ler to agree to simply harvest the leaves rather than cutting down entire trees. But it turns out that the thneeds are far more popular than he could have imagined. When demand for the Once-ler's products necessitate that he speed up production, he broke his promise to the Lorax and instead of just harvesting the leaves, the Once-ler began to chop down the trees. His formerly eco-friendly business would soon lead to the destruction of all the Truffela trees along with the depletion of clean air. The Once-ler's greed and pursuit of wealth, fame, and success, regardless of the environmental consequences, ultimately left the Once-ler sad and alone...until Ted comes to see him.

Ted came to see the Once-ler because he wanted to impress a girl, Audrey (voiced by Taylor Swift by the way) who wants a real tree. In their artificial world there were no more real trees just like there was no more clean air. The villain of the movie, O'Hare, sells bottled air just like we buy bottled water. (One of the great lines of the movie is, "Our research shows that people will buy anything if you put it in a plastic bottle.") So Ted ventures outside of town to find the Once-ler because he had heard that the Once-ler could tell him where he to find a real tree for Audrey and, eventually, after putting up with the Once-ler's orneriness and listening to his very, very long story about how there are no more trees, Ted realizes that he was not just listening to a story. He was listening to a confession. The Once-ler was deeply sorry that his greed and his desire to prove to his family that he was successful led him down a path that destroyed the world around him. But the Once-ler, after all those years, hung on to the smallest of hopes—the last Truffula seed. Finally, after confessing his sin to Ted, the Once-ler gives him the last seed, asking Ted to plant it right in the middle of town.

Ted reacts like I imagine most of us would. "Nobody cares about trees. And it's just one tiny seed. In a world where the water and air is polluted and the trees are all gone, what good could planting one little seed do."

The Once-ler responds: “Then make them care. Plant the seed in the middle of town where everyone can see. Change the way things are. I know it may seem small and insignificant, but it’s not about what it is. It’s about what it can become. Because unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing’s going to get better. It’s not.”

We live in a world with big problems. Sticking to the theme of *The Lorax*, we are living in a time where climate change threatens life as we know. We are horrified by the images and stories of war in Israel and Gaza, in Ukraine, and in so many other war torn places. Daily, we hear about the refugee crisis in our own state. And I could go on and on. And when we are confronted by such big challenges, it’s so tempting to think that we have to find big solutions and, if we can’t, well, what’s the point in even trying.

But remember what Emerson shared with us this morning. A bike ride across the country is a huge accomplishment – nearly 4000 miles. I was struck by two things in particular in his story. The first was that while in the midst of the ride, it felt endless, when it was over, it seemed to have gone by too fast. The only way to complete a 4000 mile bike ride is to simply focus on the present, to keep pedaling. Because 4000 miles is overwhelming, but when you take it day by day, minute by minute, mile by mile, before you knew it, you had finished what would have sounded impossible and it seemed to have gone by too quickly.

The second thing that really stood out to me is the acts of kindness you received along the way. And my guess is that the people who performed those acts of kindness didn’t think they were anything significant. Seemingly small acts of kindness don’t make the news like the big problems do. And yet, my guess is that if we look back on the most important moments of our lives, most of those moments were not when somebody did something really big for us, but were rather acts of kindness that showed up just when we needed it.

Friends, today we are finishing our Life Together sermon series where we’ve focused on what it means to be a part of a community. We talked about sharing of our financial resources and giving of our time and service. Our pledge campaign is about having funds to fulfill our budget but it’s also about all of us doing our part to ensure the health of this community. We end that series today with Paul’s great chapter on what it means to be the Body of Christ.

“The body does not consist of one member but many,” Paul says. And each part of the body has different roles but each role is important. Friends, we don’t have to serve in the same way, we don’t have to give the same amount of money. Rather, what we are all invited to do is to serve in whatever way we can, to give however much we can and to trust that when we all do that, our community, the Body of Christ, flourishes. No gift, no act of service is too small or insignificant.

Hear again the words of Paul, “On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable.” And hear the words of the Once-ler, “I know it may seem small and insignificant, but it’s not about what it is. It’s about what it can become.” The work of this church happens because a lot of us give of ourselves and do things that, taken by themselves, may feel small, but together make everything happen. It takes all of us to do the work that God has for us.

And a significant part of the joy of doing the work of church together is that a central part of that work is loving and caring for each other. As Paul talks about the Body of Christ and the different roles each member plays in the life of the church, he makes a seamless transition to what I think is one of the great descriptive phrases of what it means to be the Church, “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.”

Being a part of a church community is like being a part of a family. We all have responsibility to give of ourselves and serve for the greater good. But also, we are a part of a community that cares about us. I’ve heard so many stories, and I’ve experienced it myself, the love and care of this community when people go through hard or difficult times. I’ve seen the joy of this community in celebrating the accomplishments of someone else. We give together. We serve together. But maybe most importantly, we care about each other. That’s who we are and that’s who we are called to be.

Friends, really what this whole Life Together series is all about is essentially the message of the Lorax. Being a part of a community, doing the work of the church, making the world a better place – all of it happens only because people like us choose to care. That’s what the pledge campaign really is about – it’s a way to show with our gifts, our acts of service, and our participating in the community that we care – we care about this church and we care about each other. So as we get ready to bring our pledges forward, let me give Dr. Seus the last word – “it takes all of us to care a whole awful lot.”

Thanks so much to all of you for all the ways you care. Amen.