

## **The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss: Yertle the Turtle**

July 5, 2020

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

### **Matthew 7:24-27**

Yertle the Turtle is a fun little Dr. Seuss story. It's a story about a sweet, quiet, peaceful little pond full of turtles that is ruled over by a turtle named Yertle.

Yertle was a good ruler, for the most part, until one day when he starts to look around at his pond and decides that his pond is not big enough. He is king of everything that he can see, but from where he sits on his little rock in his pond, he actually can't see very far. So he decides that he needs to get up higher, so that he can see further, and rule bigger. Because life would be a whole lot better if he could just have a larger sphere of influence.

So he calls over nine turtles, and orders them to climb up onto each other's backs, so that he can sit on top of the whole pile, and see further and rule over an even larger kingdom. And he loved it! When he got up higher, he could see not only the pond, but also the land beyond the pond, and creatures that were not just turtles. A cow and a mule and a cat and even a blueberry bush and a house. All his. Because of how far he could see.

But now that Yertle had gotten a taste of greatness, he couldn't stop there. If this is how far he could see while sitting on top of nine turtles, how far would his reach go if he built this turtle tower even higher? Never mind the poor turtle on the bottom of the pile who, after a whole day of supporting nine turtles on top of him, was starting to get tired.

And the higher the turtle tower got, the less content Yertle was. The higher he went, and the further he saw, the more he realized he couldn't see. So up and up and up, and higher and higher and higher he ordered the tower, with the poor turtles underneath him struggling just to survive. And the higher he went, the angrier he got each time another turtle would dare to complain, would dare to offer him any kind of feedback.

And on and on it went, until the moon rose high in the sky and he decided he wanted to build this turtle tower so high that even the moon itself would fall under his dominion.

But at that moment, little Mack, the turtle that has been at the bottom of this heap the whole time, bearing the weight of Yertle's kingdom on his shoulders, burps. And when he burps, his weight shifts and the whole turtle tower comes crashing down, leaving Yertle de-throned and stuck in the mud while the rest of the turtles go about living their happy lives, content in their peaceful little pond.

There are so many different Bible stories that I could've picked to pair with this story. The tower of Babel comes to mind, when the people decide to build a tower all the way up to heaven, until God decides to thwart their effort because of the people's determination to do things their own way without relying on the strength of God. Or the story of the Egyptian Pharaoh in the book of Exodus, who builds his kingdom on the backs of the Israelite slaves, and the harder they work the stronger they get, and the stronger they get the more afraid Pharaoh gets, and so the harder he makes them work. Round and round and round in this vicious cycle.

But in the end, I landed on this short little parable in the sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel. This story about a wise man and a foolish man, who each went out to build a house. The wise man built his house on a rock. On a solid foundation. So that when the wind and the storms came, although they would beat up against the house, the house would stand strong. Because its foundation was strong.

But the foolish man, the foolish man wanted a beach house with a view. And so he went out and built his house on the sandy beach, never thinking, not even once, that maybe sand wouldn't be the strongest foundation. And when the storms came and the rain fell, and the tide came in, and the wind blew, the sand underneath his house started to shift, and move, and wash away into the sea. And without that rock-solid foundation underneath his house to support it, there was nothing for his house to stand on and so the house came crashing down.

Because a house simply cannot stand when its foundation is not there. Just like a turtle kingdom cannot stand when it is built on a foundation of greed and grandiosity and a bunch of other tired and exhausted turtles. When the foundation is unsteady, when we have built all of our hopes and dreams and our lives and our kingdoms on something that is shifty at best, and treacherous at worst, then the smallest thing. Like a rainstorm. Or turtle burp. Or a bad day. Or an unpleasant encounter. The smallest thing has the power to bring everything crashing down.

But when our foundation is secure – when we receive what we have as a gift from God; when we don't climb all over the backs of one another to try to get a leg up but instead care for those who are on the most vulnerable; when we practice gratitude instead of discontent; when we listen to the voices of the wise, instead of just listening to the loudest voices – then the little things like the turtle burps and the rainstorms and the bad days aren't going to send us crashing down. We will still have to weather them, and they may not always be pleasant, but the little things won't have the power to unearth us. And in fact, when our foundation is secure even the much bigger challenges in life, when they come, will be less of a threat to us. Because we are grounded in something far deeper than ourselves.

Now, this little parable is short and simple and easy to tell, and the point is a very basic one. But that doesn't mean it's easy to live into. Laying a solid foundation can be incredibly difficult work. And sometimes in life, we are met with storms that rattle us,

even down *to* our foundation. Even *when* we have done the hard work of placing ourselves on solid grounding. Some of life's storms are just plain treacherous.

This weekend we are celebrating Independence Day, where we remember and celebrate that July 4<sup>th</sup> in the year 1776 when the Declaration of Independence was officially adopted. This was just one year into the American Revolution – a war that would go on for another *seven years* after this date. In fact, we weren't even *winning* the war at this point. It had only really just begun as a sort-of unified effort, just barely a step up from a bunch of local militia going out and trying to take matters into their own hands. Up until this point, the Continental Congress had been pretty divided between the conservatives who preferred to stay under British rule, and the radicals who wanted to assert their independence and start fresh. Even back then, the people were not all of one mind. But after a few major battles in the war the support for independence began to grow. And the fight for independence would go on for a long time. Writing, and later signing, the Declaration of Independence did not just automatically make independence happen. It was something we had to declare, and then work for, fight for, be willing to lose our lives for. And many people died as a result. And then, after the war was finally over the *real* work began – the work of creating a whole new country from scratch. Establishing a government. Writing a Constitution and a Bill of Rights. Ordering our life together. Instituting checks and balances within the government so that Yertle the Turtle couldn't just go climbing up to the moon. Establishing a Rule of Law, so that our passion for freedom doesn't just devolve into anarchy when we don't get our way.

Laying the groundwork. Laying the framework. Laying the foundation for a country that could withstand the storms and the rains and the floods of life without just getting swept away with the shifting sands. And the founders of our country did great work, diligent work, hard work, meticulous work. But even with all of that work, today, we are seeing that foundation being tested. And with people fighting against people; politics being as mean-spirited and divided as they have ever been; even the simplest things in life becoming highly-politicized. And then, throw a pandemic into the mix which causes all of our patience to run thin, and then add to that our independent spirit which in many ways is a huge gift but it also sometimes causes us to work directly against our own self-interest, and the question arises: With all of these storms swirling around us, are we built on a rock that is strong enough to hold us?

And when I ask this question, I don't mean, is our form of government strong enough to hold us. Or is our history as a country strong enough to hold us. Because the answer to both of those is no. They were created by people. Wise people, but people nonetheless.

When the storms of life rage around us there is only one foundation on which we can truly stand firm. Only one foundation is strong enough to withstand the *full* weight of all of our struggles, and all of our brokenness, and all of our sinfulness, and all of our willful disobedience. Only one foundation gives us enough grounding to protect us against the most painful and frustrating and heartbreaking storms that life throws our way.

And that foundation is Jesus.

“Where were you when I created the foundations of the earth,” God booms out to Job when Job has had enough of this life. When Job has fallen as far as a person can fall, God reminds him that even when we have done everything right and even still, life gets in the way and knocks us down, we still have a God who keeps the earth spinning on its axis and who comforts us in our despair. God continues to lay our foundations and give us a strong footing to root down into when we have lost our way.

Or in Psalm 11 the Psalmist writes “When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous one do?” Or another translation reads “what is the Righteous One doing?” When we have been rattled to our core and it feels like everything is upside-down and nothing makes sense anymore and we are fighting against ourselves and we have hundreds of Yertle the Turtles all trying to climb over one another to get to the top, and we are walking through life confused and shaken, what is the Righteous One doing? What is God doing?

Then the Psalmist goes on to answer that very question.

God hasn’t gone anywhere. God is still here, active and involved in our lives. Grieving over us when we choose selfishness over kindness; disciplining us and letting us sit with the consequences of our actions when we try too hard to climb too high without regard for others. And God is here to comfort us when we feel like little Mack the turtle holding the weight of the world on our shoulders and feeling like we are going to crumble under the pressure. God is here as the one, true, solid foundation that we can root down into. The *only* foundation that will never shake, will never shift, will never fail to hold us. And as our foundation, God also teaches us how to grow, how to live, how to exist in this crazy world, by calling us to places of humility and love rather than grandiosity and power.

So my friends, as we continue to walk our way through these crazy and uncertain times, may we root down deeply into life with God, our sure foundation, that when the storms of life rage all around us we may find ourselves held, and protected, and living on solid ground. And as we root down and continue to build our lives on the God who holds us, may we find our hearts transformed to reflect the image of our God of grace and power.