

## “Horton's Motto”

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Hello, and welcome. My name is Chris Moore. My ancestors are from the Land of Ireland and the Land of England. But I acknowledge the sacredness of the land upon which I now live and stand. And I acknowledge its sacredness to the nations which came before me; The Mississaugas of the New Credit, the Seneca, the Petun, and the Huron-Wendat. I am also a member of this congregation, and a Unitarian Seminarian attending Waterloo Lutheran Seminary. I have been studying for, not one but, two degrees. These are a Masters in Divinity and an M.A. in Spiritual Care and Psychotherapy.

If you weren't aware already, the title of our sermon this morning comes from a children's story, *Horton Hears a Who*, by Dr. Seuss.

The story was made into a full length animated film several years ago by Disney. On a spontaneous whim one evening I saw this movie. Our first choice that night had sold out. And if you need an excuse to be a kid again, you have my permission to engage your inner child and check out either the book or the movie.

The story is about an elephant named Horton. Now Horton the Elephant truly is a gentle giant. Elephants are this planet's largest land mammal. Yet, by and large (pun intended), elephants are usually easy-going creatures. Horton is no exception. In spite of his enormous and potentially intimidating size, he is on very friendly terms with all the other creatures of the jungle. This is due in large part to his own accepting attitude towards others. In spite of his enormous strength, and huge size, Horton had one simple motto; “A person is a person – no matter how small”.

One day, Horton, with his enormously big elephant ears, hears the cry of a very tiny voice. This wee tiny voice comes from atop a speck of dust floating on the wind. Horton asks the voice of this almost microscopic creature, “What... what are you??” The tiny little creature responds, “I am not a what, Sir. I am a Who.” Not only is he a Who, he is one of many Who's living in the town of Who-ville located atop a speck of dust, atop a petal of a clover.

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I won't spoil the book or the movie by revealing the whole thing. But I will say that Horton is delighted with his new-found friends. For him, a person is a person no matter how small.

I chose to share this with you because I suspect many of us have had similar experiences of hearing a Who; or of suddenly coming to the realization that a person is a person no matter how small. Peter's rather touching story from his own family is one such example. I too have heard a Who. And we will be talking about that shortly. But has anyone here ever heard a Horton?? Well I have.

A few weeks ago, I was taking a short break from writing papers. I began checking news articles on my laptop. I came across one regarding the Hubble space telescope. The Hubble telescope was launched in 1990 from the back of a space shuttle. Interestingly, the Nasa website describes it as being the weight of two African elephants. It is about the shape and size of a streetcar. Hubble is a satellite telescope orbiting the earth. Its job is to record images from space that could not be seen from earth. Because it is located above the light pollution, above weather systems, above even our atmosphere, Hubble sees objects in our universe many billions of light years away.

Of course, I knew most of this already. I did not know that Hubble was circling the earth about 240 kilometres away. I had thought it to be travelling through space, away from the earth, rather than circling around it.

The main thrust of the article seemed of little interest. There was also something unsettling about the article so I quickly moved on. Now, as I said in my introduction, I am studying spiritually integrated psychotherapy. One of the things that I have learned is those things that are a little unsettling, that we would rather not deal with, those are the very things that we need to stop and look at.

So, I went back to the article. The article concerned the distortion of light from distant galaxies from the gravitational pull of intervening galaxies. This distortion caused by galaxies between us and those being photographed causes them to be magnified. (See Space.com at: <https://www.space.com/37425-hubble-fireworks-early-stars-photo.html>). What caught my attention though, was the distance and number of galaxies being talked about – hundreds of galaxies six billion light years away. Can you imagine? There are literally hundreds of galaxies six billion light years away. And that is just a fraction of our universe. I was blown away, completely overwhelmed, almost shocked by the enormity of what I was looking at.

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But, not only were there galaxies 6 billion light years away, the gravity of these galaxies was used as a telescopic amplifier to see still more galaxies. These other galaxies were 11 billion light years away. Now, that very fact means these galaxies are 11 billion years old!!

Have you ever seen a picture of anyone or anything that is 11 billion years old? And my son looks at me and thinks *I'm* old! The sheer scale of the universe makes our whole planet as small as or smaller than Horton's Who-ville.

Now, I have long considered myself a pantheist, one who believes that Goddess is the universe itself. But this divine revelation, if you will, shook my faith too its core. How could Goddess or Universe possibly even know that we existed? Let alone be listening to anybody's prayers, including my own? Even if the Universe was alive. Talking to it would be like me having a conversation with an atom in a molecule in the cell of the skin on the tip of my baby toe. And how likely is that??

As I said to a friend and member of this congregation not long after, it is no wonder that some atheists look at the religious as if they were mad. From the standpoint of human logic, a relationship with Deity or Universe simply doesn't make any sense. It is just too big.

I have invested a considerable amount of thought and reflection on this. And it is, in part, the motivation behind my remarks this morning.

But I did not come here to share my thoughts on whether or not it was possible for the Universe to be some sort of cosmic Horton with elephant-like ears.

Many, if not all religions have grappled with the vast gulf between humanity and Divine Reality. Principally, this is done by establishing various intermediaries.

But I find all this is based on the same overarching assumption. That an enormously and vastly superior being would naturally have as much concern for us as we would for an ant.

It is no wonder than that many who are rigidly religious and fundamentalist would rather believe that our universe was a scant six thousand years old. And that it was relatively much smaller than science tells us. It is a tendency in all of us to ignore what challenges our deepest convictions. But where other religions champion unshakable faith, ours celebrates doubt.

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Ultimately, I concluded that the existence or non-existence of any cosmic Hortons was not the most compelling or important issue to discuss this morning. What was of significance was this near universal assumption that it was okay, and simply to be expected, that the so-called vastly Superior being would treat the “inferior” without concern or respect.

This is an important concern of mine and has been for twenty-five years, when I first began working with the developmentally challenged. A group that is often made “small” by others. Their wit and wisdom often surprise me. But it should not take any of that for me or anyone else to recognize their inherent worth and dignity.

It is not his size that makes Horton a metaphor for the Divine. It is his motto. A person is a person no matter how small. We hear constantly about fundamental equality. However, there are always those who, consciously or unconsciously, do not strike us as our equals. But others should not have to be our equals to be worthy of our respect or our positive regard. I have my own story about hearing a Who.

Her name is Star. Star is a Green Cheek Conure. That's a sub-species of the parrot family. Her little feathered frame of a body is only slightly larger than my fist. Like most parrots Star has some limited speech ability. Parrots are known to mimic frequently heard words and phrases at random. But Star also responds to comments and questions with her limited vocabulary with remarkable appropriateness. If you ask her who the prettiest bird is ever. She won't hesitate to tell you “Mummy-bird”. She is referring to my partner Jennifer. If you inquire about the food she has in her bowl, she'll literally say it's “Yummy!” If you ask her if she would like some popcorn, she will fluff her feathers, partially flap her wings and start chirping excitedly. Admittedly, she has yet to actually say the word yes. But I think you get the point.

But the most touching moment came years ago when my nine-year-old son came over clearly dejected and visibly saddened. His own pet budgie, named Suzie, had died at his mother's house early that same morning. He had come to stay with my partner and me for the remainder of the week, after school. To express solidarity with him in his time of grief, we asked if he would like us to pause and say a few words and offer a moment of silence. He eagerly agreed to this arrangement. After a brief discussion about how this should be done, my son asked if Star could join us. Star perched on my partner Jennifer's arm as I said a few words. Then I introduced a moment of silence. Right on cue, that little Green Cheek stretched out her neck as far as she could and bowed low until her beak was planted firmly on her feathered breast. I remembered thinking that I had just experienced or seen, not a what, but a Who.

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We live in a world in which animals are raised in often appalling conditions only to be slaughtered for food. They can be used in high risk medical or scientific experiments. They are considered as possessions, as property. After all, everyone understands, they aren't really persons. They are not even human.

Sadly, many who are biologically human are likewise denied their status as persons for being subhuman. People of colour, Muslims, indigenous people, and members of LGBTQI community. Or just about anyone who is not like us. The world is full of those we would make small.

Maybe it's their lack of education, or their lack of employment, or a home. Maybe it's because of a perceived disability, physical or mental. Perhaps it's because of mental illness. In the Wiccan religion, it is said that the law of the Goddess is love unto all beings. I like this because there are no restrictions here on what beings are being talked about. It is love unto all beings. Equality is not a precondition. Equality is not a prerequisite for acting ethically towards others.

May our humanity, and our own inner divinity, be measured by how we regard and treat others tagged with the label of inferior beings or as non-persons. And may we stretch ourselves to widen the circle to include every living creature in the phrase "Inherent worth and dignity of ALL".

Because a person *is a person* – no matter how small.