

“OH, THE PLACES YOU’LL GO!”

(Ephesians 3:8-13)

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[PROPS NEEDED: (#1) Dr. Seuss’ book “Oh, the Places You’ll Go!”; (#2) Photo Slideshow of Graduates]

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 5-25-08]

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1. Read Text: Ephesians 3:8-13 and Pray.
2. [READ PAGES 1-11 from Oh, the Places You’ll Go!...]  
*“Congratulations! Today is your day. You’re off to Great Places! You’re off and away!  
You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes.  
You can steer yourself any direction you choose.  
You’re on your own. And you know what you know.  
And YOU are the [one] who’ll decide where to go.  
You’ll look up and down streets. Look ‘em over with care.  
About some you will say ‘I don’t choose to go there.’  
With your head full of brains and your shoes full of feet,  
you’re too smart to go down any not-so-good street. ...  
...Out there things can happen and frequently do to people as brainy and footsy as you.  
And when things start to happen, don’t worry. Don’t stew. Just go right along.  
YOU’LL start happening too. OH! THE PLACES YOU’LL GO!...”*<sup>1</sup>
3. Of course, these words were written in 1990 by a man named Theodor Giesel (better known to most of us as “Dr. Seuss”) in a book called Oh, the Places You’ll Go!<sup>2</sup>  
  
A—And since this the last book he wrote before his death in 1991, we might consider it to be Dr. Seuss’ parting “words of wisdom” not merely for graduates, but also for any of us who’re at a crossroads of life, or going through a major life transition.  
  
B—Interestingly enough, most scholars agree that the Bible scripture we read earlier from Ephesians 3 was written by the apostle Paul also towards the end of *his* life, as well,... making today’s scripture reading sort of *Paul’s* parting “words of wisdom.”  
  
4. So what I’d like to do today is to use both Dr. Seuss’s book and Paul’s words to call attention to at least three “LIFE LESSONS FOR GRADUATES” – and really for *any and all* of us who call ourselves by the name “Christian.”<sup>3</sup>

--II--

5. The first lesson I think we find in both these writings is to “Never Forget WHO You Are and WHERE You’re Going!” In other words, always remember your *identity* and *calling*.

A–Think about Dr. Seuss’ title itself: “Oh, the Places You’ll GO!” Now, both Paul’s letter and Dr. Seuss’ book are not only talking about physical “places” we can “go” in the *future* (like college, jobs, retirement, or even “heaven”, etc.), but more importantly about spiritual attitudes and directions our lives can take here and now, in the *present*.

B–Put another way, these readings call forth the questions “WHO are we? And FOR WHAT are we here?” In other words, “What’s our *Identity*, & To What are we *Called* as believers?”

1–At the beginning of his book, Dr. Suess reminds us that “*You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. [So] You can steer yourself any direction you choose*”<sup>4</sup> – the implication being that we aren’t stupid... that most of us already know *who* we are, and that all that’s left to do is “*steer*” ourselves in a direction consistent with that identity.

2–Listen to how Saint Paul puts this in Verses 8-10:

[NRSV:] “[*God’s*] grace was given... to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things.”

[MSG:] “When it came to presenting the Message to people who had no background in God’s way... God saw to it that I was equipped.... So here I am, preaching and writing about... the inexhaustible riches and generosity of Christ. My task is to bring out in the open and make plain what God... has been doing in secret and behind the scenes all along.”

6. Do you hear what both Dr. Seuss and Paul are saying? ...that you and I have a purpose in God (a “reason for being”) that helps us know WHO we are and WHOSE we are.

A–And Paul says that that identity gives rise to a “calling” for each and every Christian to share God’s grace with others *for the purpose of bringing the whole world to God.*<sup>5</sup>

B–Now, that means that when we head off to college, or the workplace, or retirement, or go through any significant life transition, we’re STILL called to be *ambassadors for Jesus*, just as we are *now* – to reflect Him and reflect His ways and in all we do and say to others in our *new* environment, so that they might come to know Him, as well.

C–So graduates, as you enter the world, never forget *WHO* you are (a Christian), *WHOSE* you are (a child of God), and *TO WHAT* you’re called (to be Jesus to others).

7. A second lesson I think we find in both readings that comes out of the first one is the admonition for us to always “**Choose Right Paths.**” That is: ...we’re called to make personal choices that honor God and reflect our character and identity as Christians.

A–In Verse 10, Paul says that... [NRSV:] “Through the church [not the institution but the people] the wisdom of God... [is being] ...made known to rulers and authorities....”

[MSG:] “Through Christians like yourselves gathered in churches, this extraordinary plan of God is becoming known and talked about....”

1–In other words, other people are coming to faith in God because *Christians* (i.e., “the church”) are modeling God’s grace through their personal choices / behaviors.

2–How does Dr. Seuss put it? ...

*“You’ll look up and down streets. Look ‘em over with care. About some you will say ‘I don’t choose to go there.’ With your head full of brains and your shoes full of feet, you’re too smart to go down any not-so-good street.”* <sup>6</sup>

B–So, for you graduates (and all of us, too) these words from both Paul and Dr. Seuss mean, for example, that will be *some* parties, *some* places, *some* lines of conversation, *some* videos and websites, etc. that you as a Christian need to stay clear of,...

1–... because they’re either inconsistent with your identity and calling as a believer, or they’re a place, situation, or conversation that does NOT bring honor to God.

2–Dr. Seuss reminds us that the freedom to choose these “right paths” belong to us.<sup>7</sup> He says, *“You’re on your own. And you know what you know. And YOU are the [one] who’ll decide where to go.”* <sup>8</sup>

C–Friends, today I encourage us all (but especially our graduates) to *choose right paths* in your life’s journey... to *choose GOD’S way(s)!*

8. The third and final lesson I want to talk about that’s mentioned by both Dr. Seuss and Saint Paul is this: **“Don’t Give Up When Life Gets Tough.”** In other words, *persevere* and *be persistent* through life’s difficulties and struggles.

A–Both of these authors tell us that life isn’t always an easy road... that we’ll have bumps patches of difficulty and trouble along the way that may *seem* overwhelming at times, but that we shouldn’t allow them to get us down, but instead to persevere *through* them.

B–Through several pages of his book, Dr. Seuss says it this way...

*“Wherever you fly, you’ll be best of the best.  
Wherever you go, you will top all the rest.  
Except when you don’t. Because, sometimes, you won’t.  
I’m sorry to say so but sadly, it’s true  
That Bang-ups and Hang-ups can happen to you. . . .  
You will come to a place where the streets are not marked.  
Some windows are lighted. But mostly they’re darked. . . .  
I’m afraid that some times you’ll play lonely games too.  
Games you can’t win ‘cause you’ll play against you.  
And when you’re alone, there’s a very good chance  
You’ll meet things that scare you right out of your pants.  
There are some, down the road between hither and yon,  
That can scare you so much you won’t want to go on.*

*But you will go on though the weather be foul.  
 On you will go though your enemies prowl.  
 On you will go though the Hakken-Kraks howl.  
 Onwards up many a frightening creek,  
 Though your arms may get sore and your sneakers may leak  
 On and on you will hike. And I know you'll hike far  
 And face up to your problems, whatever they are.  
 And will you succeed? Yes! You will, indeed! (98 and 3/4 percent guaranteed.)  
 KID, YOU'LL MOVE MOUNTAINS!"* <sup>9</sup>

C–In fewer words, listen to how the apostle Paul expresses this in Verse 13, when he says,...  
 [NRSV:] “*Pray therefore that you may not lose heart over... sufferings....*”  
 [MSG:] “*Don’t let... present trouble... get you down!*” <sup>10</sup>

1–Now, elsewhere in the Bible, Jesus himself says “*In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world!*” (John 16:33, NIV).

2–And in yet another place, the apostle Paul writes these words: “*Let’s not allow ourselves to get fatigued doing good. At the right time we will harvest a good crop if we don’t give up or quit*” (Galatians 6:9, MSG).

D–You see, whether it’s Dr. Seuss or St. Paul, the advice is the same... not only for graduates, but for any of us who face difficulties: ... “*Don’t Give Up When Life Gets Tough!*”

–III–

9. Now, there’s certainly more life lessons that these two authors can teach our graduates (and us), but these are three good ones to start with: (#1) *Never forget WHO you are and WHERE you’re going*; (#2) *Choose Right Paths*; and (#3) *Don’t Give Up When Life Gets Tough*.

A–If we’ll do these, we’ll go far because, as Paul says in [*the NRSV version of*] Verse 12, it’s part of God’s “*eternal purpose*” and plan for our life.

B–Dr. Seuss concludes in this way: “*So, be your name Buxbaum or Bixby or Bray  
 Or Mordecai Ali Van Allen O’Shea,  
 You’re off to Great Places! Today is your day!  
 Your mountain is waiting. So... get on your way!*” <sup>11</sup>

10. Today as we move into a time of recognition, I want to close the message by inviting us to watch a short slide show of the lives of some of graduates who shared their photos with us...  
**[WATCH PHOTO SLIDESHOW of Graduate life highlights...]**

11. **[RECOGNITION OF and GIFTS FOR GRADUATES** (They share “Where they’re graduating from and what their future plans are). Concluding **PRAYER FOR GRADUATES.**]

12. **[CLOSING HYMN / SONG]**

### ENDNOTES:

1. Dr. Seuss, Oh, the Places You'll Go! (New York: Random House, 1990), pp. 1-11.
2. No one knows for sure exactly to whom he was writing, but obviously it was someone who was at a major crossroads of life – a new job, a new home, retirement, or perhaps the most obvious one of all, a graduation of some sort (like we're celebrating today).
3. These lessons were inspired generally by Chapter 2 ("*Oh, The Places Christians Will Go!*") in Robert L. Short, The Parables of Dr. Seuss (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), pp. 11-19.
4. Seuss, p. 2.
5. In the words of our own United Methodist Church's mission statement, we Christians are called to "*Make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.*"
6. Seuss, p. 4.
7. Back in the 1970s, comedian Flip Wilson used to say "*The devil made me do it!*" But the truth is that while the devil can *help* us do things, he can never *make* us! No, we were created to have freedom of *choice* as a gift from God. It's true that He reminds us that the *best* choices always involve following His ways and His will, but in the end the choice is always *OURS* to make.
8. Seuss, p. 2.
9. Seuss, pp. 15-17, 20, 33, 35-39, 42. It's worthy noting that even Dr. Seuss' secular reference to the "mountains" the "Kid" he is writing to will "move" has its roots in a religious phrase spoken by Jesus himself in Matthew 17:20.
10. It is true that the "*sufferings/troubles*" referred to in the full wording of this verse are actually being endured by Paul (i.e., being in a Roman prison) *on behalf of* the Christians in Ephesus (and therefore do not belong to the Ephesians, strictly speaking). However, in my sharing of this text I have nevertheless chosen to render these "*sufferings/troubles*" also (or even primarily) as belonging *directly* to the Ephesians themselves, since it is clear from the situational context that Paul is trying to encourage these Christians to remember that all forms of suffering (whether directly by one, or on behalf of someone else) are meant to be viewed and understood as being for our betterment and to bring ultimate glory to God.
11. Seuss, p. 44.