

Keeping Faith  
Psalm 89:1 – 4, 21 – 37; Ephesians 4:1 – 3, 14 – 25, 5:1 – 2  
Sunday, August 25, 2019

One of the stories that I always used to read to our kids is *Horton Hatches the Egg* by Dr. Seuss. It's the story of this lazy bird named Mayzie, who gets tired of sitting on her egg. She wants to go on vacation, but she can't leave her egg; she needs someone to sit on it for her. An elephant named Horton walks by, and she convinces *him* to sit on her egg, in her nest, up in a tree. She begs and pleads and *promises* that she'll be right back.

So Horton reluctantly agrees, and he climbs up in the tree and sits on her egg. He sits on it for *months* and *months*, through rainstorms in the summer and blizzards in winter. He sits on it even though the other animals come and make fun of him, laughing at the sight of an elephant in a tree. He keeps sitting on it even though he's lonely and he just wants to go play. He keeps sitting on it even when hunters come up and are about to shoot him. But then the hunters decide that an elephant sitting in a tree is so amazing that they dig up the tree (with Horton still in it), put it in a wagon, and haul it away to the circus. Horton travels over mountains and oceans; he goes all over the country with this circus, and he never leaves the egg. He keeps sitting on it, waiting for that bird to come back, because he had made her a promise. And there's this line that he keeps saying over and over again throughout the story, "I meant what I said, and I said what I meant...an elephant's faithful – one hundred percent!"

Eventually, the bird *does* come back, right as the egg is hatching. And, of course, now that all the work is done, she wants her egg back. But right as Horton is getting off of the egg, it cracks open and out comes a half-elephant, half-bird that looks just like Horton. All the people at the circus are amazed by it, and they let Horton and his baby elephant-bird go back home, and everyone is happy (except the lazy bird). But I want to come back to that line that Horton

repeats over and over throughout the story – “I meant what I said, and I said what I meant...an elephant’s faithful – one hundred percent!” *An elephant’s faithful...* So does that mean that Horton believes in God? Horton has given his life to Jesus Christ and lives in ways that trust him? Because that’s how we typically think of *faith* and what it means to be *faithful* – faith is about *believing in God* and *living in ways* that show our *trust* in God.

But Horton shows us *another* way to understand faithfulness. Paul says to the Galatians that when you are living your life by the Spirit of God – desiring the things of the *Spirit* as opposed to the things of the *flesh* or of this *world* – then your life will show forth certain characteristics: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, and generosity. We have been talking about these all summer. And this week Paul adds to that list *faithfulness*. If you live by the Spirit, you will live in ways that show *faithfulness*.

The word Paul uses here for *faithfulness* is the Greek word *pisti*, which gets translated several different ways. It can mean *belief* or *faith* or *trust*, like we typically understand it. And that kind of faith is *important*. We’re not *dismissing* that understanding. It’s just that we talk about *that* understanding of faith all the time – believing and trusting in God. So what I wanted to do today is look at *another* way of understanding faithfulness; one that means something closer to *fidelity*. One definition explains faithfulness as, “the character of one who can be relied on.” Someone who is faithful is someone that other people can *count on* and *depend on*. A faithful friend. A faithful spouse. Theologian Charlie Cousar talks about it as, “reliability in a world where one may often be the victim of another’s *unreliability*.”<sup>1</sup> In a world that is unreliable, we are called to be *reliable*.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Cousar, *Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Galatians)*, pg. 140.

So faithfulness has something to do with *reliability* – *keeping your word* and *sticking with people*. That’s the kind of faithfulness that we see in Horton the elephant, right? He meant what he said, and he said what he meant. You can count on him. He *keeps his word*, and he *sticks with that egg* no matter what. So what does it look like for us to bear *that* kind of faithfulness?

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In our reading from Ephesians, Paul calls on the Ephesians to “lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called,” and then he goes through the rest of the chapter talking about what that looks like. He talks about “speaking the truth in love.” A lot of times we understand this phrase to be about telling people hard, uncomfortable truths in loving ways so that it’s easier to hear. Like if I have to have a conversation with you about something you’ve done wrong or some problem you’re having, instead of just berating you and throwing it in your face, I’m supposed to talk with you about it in a way that is patient and kind and hopeful and loving. That’s how we often read this verse, when we place the emphasis on *love* – speaking the truth in *love*.

But it can *also* just be about telling the *truth*. Speaking the *truth* to our neighbors is an act of *love*. And Paul says in verse 25, “Putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors.” We are called to speak in such a way that people *believe* us – not in ways that are sarcastic or that exaggerate or embellish or spin the truth – so that people know they can trust us and depend on us. When people know that you are a Christian, you should speak in such a way that there is not a doubt in their mind as to whether you are telling them the truth and they can trust you. Paul says in verse 21 that “truth is in Jesus,” so as followers of Jesus, it should also be in *us*. We mean what we say, and we say what we mean.

Now, when Paul talks about “speaking the truth in love,” he’s not just talking about our *words*. That word he uses for *speaking* is not the Greek word that is typically used throughout the New Testament for the verb *speaking*. This word actually means *speaking and doing*. Paul is talking about backing up our words with our actions. Saying something to someone and then *doing* what you said you would do. If you tell someone you’re going to be somewhere at a certain time, you’re *there*, no matter what it might cost you. If you tell someone you’re going to pray for them, then you actually need to pray for them. If you promise someone something, then you make every possible effort to *keep* your promise. This is about speaking the truth and keeping your word, so that other people can trust you. Because you are a reflection of Jesus Christ to the world, and if they can’t trust *you*, then what does that say about the Lord you serve?

The reason we *do* this, the reason that we are called to put away falsehood and speak the truth in love, is because, Paul says, “we are members of one another.” We are all children of God, created in the image of God, so we are *bound* to each other. We *belong* to each other. We are *family*. We are *connected* to every person around us in Christ. And *because* of that, Paul says, we must make “every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace.” We are connected to each other, and we must speak and act in ways that *keep* us connected; that *stick with each other*. And being faithful means that we stick with each other *even when it’s hard*. Even when you see this other person making mistakes or choices you wouldn’t make or going down a path that you know is wrong. Being *faithful* means that we don’t give up on them; they know we are there for them and that they can count on us.

In all of this, Paul says, we are to be *imitators of God*. And what is God like? God *keeps God’s word* and God *sticks with people*. God is *faithful*.

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We see this in the Psalm that we read earlier. It talks about God's *steadfast love* that is *established forever*. God's love is set in stone. It is rock solid. It is not going anywhere. It says, "your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens." And the example it gives is how God did this with King David. It says, "I have set a crown on him and anointed him; my hand shall always remain with him. My faithfulness and steadfast love shall be with him. Forever I will keep my steadfast love for him, and my covenant with him will stand firm."

Now, King David wasn't perfect. He committed adultery. He had someone murdered. He made plenty of bad decisions. But even when David messed up, God stuck with him. God did not stop loving him. And God says, "If his children (whether that's talking about his biological children or just the people of Israel) forsake my law and do not walk according to my ordinances, if they violate my statutes and do not keep my commandments, then I may have to correct them, but I *will not remove my steadfast love* or be false to my faithfulness. Once and for all I have sworn by my holiness; I will not lie to David." God has made a promise, and God will *keep* that promise and *stick with* David and the people of Israel.

And *we* are called to *imitate God*. To be *faithful* as *God* is faithful. To speak the truth, to keep our word, and to stick with each other. Our faithfulness to each other is supposed to be a reflection of God's faithfulness to us. God is *reliable*, so *we* should be reliable. God is *trustworthy*, so *we* should be trustworthy. God does not lie, so *we* should not lie. God keeps promises, so *we* should keep *our* word. God does not give up on us, so *we* should not give up on each other.

In all that we do, we should speak the truth and back those words up with our actions. We should make every effort to maintain the bond between us. The way that we speak and act bears witness to the world of the faithfulness of God. If we can mean what we say and say what we meant, then we will be faithful the way God is...100%.