

100% Faithful

Dr. Seuss Book: Horton Hatches the Egg

July 23, 2017

1 Corinthians 15:58 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

⁵⁸Therefore, my beloved,^[4] be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

I have a confession to make. Horton really messed me up this week. I found myself pulled in several directions and even now I feel like I am all over the place. So, I ask you to bear with me and I pray that somehow you might be provoked to ponder some of the same questions I have pondered this week. Questions such as: When is being immovable a bad thing? What if you are sitting on a bad egg? What is worthy of such commitment? Is it possible to be 100% faithful? How can we be transformed and immovable at the same time? What is the work of the Lord? What can we learn from Horton about integrity? What is Paul trying to say to the Corinthians? Lots of questions....

So yesterday morning, I set out on foot from my condo with Horton and the Apostle Paul, to find an interesting place to drink a cup of coffee and write my sermon. Downtown Long Beach is an amazing amalgam of humanity. A couple of weeks ago there was a pirate convention and a corgi convention – I even saw a pirate walking a corgi. Last weekend, in a six-block area, there was a national beach volleyball competition, a skateboarding convention, a reggae concert, and a Jehovah's Witnesses convention. I discovered yesterday that the Jehovah's Witnesses are hosting conventions several weekends in a row. Men in suits and women in dresses dotted the sidewalks around the convention center. A couple engaged me in a conversation at a stoplight. I fessed up that I was a progressive Christian and believe everyone is a beloved child of God. They suggested that as a loving parent, God disciplines God's children – wouldn't I agree? They were concerned about what behavior I thought was acceptable and not acceptable. I told them that I was quite certain that injustice, racism, oppression, slavery, abuse, violence, and exploitation can never be condoned. I also told them I didn't interpret scripture literally. Very graciously they excused themselves and headed off to the convention.

The thing that made me chuckle was their nametags. Across the top of their name tags, printed in an extra-large font, was the theme of their gathering, "Don't Give Up!"

I found a place to get a cup of coffee and decided to look up their convention. Each day has a theme. Friday, "What can help Christians cultivate qualities necessary to endure difficulties?" Saturday, "How does almighty God supply us with endurance and comfort? Sunday, "Jesus said, 'The one who has endured to the end will be saved.' What can you do to heed his words?" From what I could tell, these very sincere people were gathering together to do exactly what the apostle Paul told us to do, "be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain." They are trying to be 100% faithful and they are not afraid to endure rejection, hardship, or humiliation for what they believe. Even though it is not Biblical, I think they might enjoy the story of Horton hatching the egg. They say what they mean and mean what they say. Even when that means they have to break fellowship with someone because of gross sin. That is Jehovah's Witnesses language, not mine.

A man from my previous church moved to Arizona and joined a Disciples congregation. Last week I ran into his pastor who updated me on my old friend. Don, not his real name, came to my church because he fell in love with a woman from Norwalk, Iowa, where I served as a pastor. Don was a widower. He attended his 50th high school reunion and ran into a woman that rode the bus with him in high school. Even though they were attracted to one another as teenagers, she was Catholic and he was Protestant, and a relationship was impossible. So, 50 years later they met again. By this time, she was a Jehovah's Witness and he a Methodist. They fell in love and decide to marry. When the Jehovah's Witnesses learned that she remarried – they disfellowshipped her for committing adultery, even though they knew she divorced her previous husband because he was abusive. It didn't matter, she was a divorced woman that remarried. She was out. And the people she served with for over twenty years were told not to associate with her. That's when they both joined the Disciples church.

They enjoyed several years of married life and then she passed away with cancer and Don made the difficult decision to move to Arizona to be with his daughter. Don became active in the church. So, when I ran into his pastor at General Assembly last week I was pleased to learn that Don played an important part in the congregation's decision to be open and affirming. He told those who were struggling with the decision that he knew first had the pain and devastation caused by the rejection of church folk and he wanted nothing to do with causing that kind of pain for anyone.

I thought of Don and the practice of disfellowshipping as I spoke to this couple. That is what they mean by discipline. Between scripture and a powerful council, what it means to be a faithful person is well-defined for Jehovah's Witnesses. They have their egg and they are sitting on it – no matter what.

It's hard to say what Dr. Seuss was thinking when he wrote *Horton Hatches the Egg*. Horton's steadfastness is to be commended. His tenacity in keeping his word is inspiring. His willingness to persevere hardships is heroic. We should all have this much integrity.

This past week I was tempted to send Eugene Peterson a copy of *Horton Hatches the Egg*. Eugene Peterson is the man who wrote the paraphrased version of the Bible called "The Message," among other Christian books. In an interview this past week, Peterson was pressed on the subject of same-sex marriage and asked if he would perform a same-sex ceremony. After providing a bit of rationale for his answer, he said, "Yes." Many cheered!

Immediately, his publisher descended upon him with wrathful fury and threats of pulling all his books. He received a backlash of condemnation from more than a few of his more conservative followers. The very next day he recanted. He went back on his word. Many cheered!

The Apostle Paul was concerned about the Corinthians straying from what he taught them – he was concerned about the people of Corinth being swayed by different teachings. I understand that. And yet to become spiritually mature we have to be willing to grow and be transformed. Our understanding of what it means to be Christian evolves if we remain open to the Spirit of the Living God.

When I go back and look at sermons I preached 20 years ago I can honestly say I meant what I said and said what I meant – but I couldn't preach those same sermons now. Being steadfast and immovable has to mean something more than latching on to specific beliefs. It has to do with

growing in your understanding of the nature of God and deepening your understanding of what Paul calls “the work of the Lord.” It looks different for each person. But we know it is rooted in love. We know the work of the Lord is about loving our neighbor and coming alongside those who are broken, lost, or beat down. We know the work of the Lord is about healing and wholeness. We know the work of the Lord is about justice and peace. We know the work of the Lord requires patience and endurance. We know the work of the Lord requires sacrifice. We know the work of the Lord calls us to see beyond our own concerns. Each week we gather around a table and we remember that the work of the Lord is to prepare a feast where all are welcome, all are equal, and everyone has enough.

I was listening to a book the other day about how the micro-processor has improved exponentially since 1971. To illustrate the author said that if a 1971 Volkswagon Beetle improved at the same rate it would today go 300,000 miles an hour, get 2,000,000 miles to the gallon, and cost \$.04. Technology is changing our world so fast it is impossible to adapt. Our systems and structures were built for stability when what we need now is agility.

But the work of the Lord remains – with all the changes in our world, greed remains, violence persists, hatred continues to bully, tyrants oppress, systems enslave, debt cripples.

The work remains and the challenge is to stay with it and not give up – the challenge is to believe that what we do to make this world better for all God’s children matters and keep doing it.

I honestly don’t know what to make of an elephant bird...but I do believe labors of love hatch miracles all the time.

Amen