

I. Advanced Organizer: Exploring faithfulness.

A. **Dr. Seuss. Story of Horton Hatches an Egg.**

1. In 1940, Theodore Seuss Geisel (aka Dr. Seuss) published a book about a flighty bird and a reliable elephant.
2. Horton the well-meaning elephant helps Mayzie the bird by sitting on her nest so she can have a quick break. But she doesn't come back. Horton persists through rain, sleet, and snow, through the ridicule of friends, through being sold to the circus, repeating again and again this refrain:
3. **"I meant what I said and I said What I meant. An Elephant's faithful 100%".**
4. Horton is a rare kind of elephant. That's the point of the story, isn't it? His commitment level to the egg is even more surprising than the idea of an elephant sitting on the nest of a tree itself. But why is this? What makes Horton's story so surprising? Is faithfulness that rare?

B. Definition. What do we mean by "faithfulness" anyway?

1. Dictionary definition: **strict or thorough in the performance of duty; true to one's words, promises, duties**
2. What it seems to boil down to: **keeping your promises.** Following through.

C. **Not a quality that is considered particularly sexy or interesting in our culture.** There's a reason it's the elephant that's the faithful one, while the sexy bird flies away.

1. Let's face it: **infidelity may be more common than long-term faithfulness.** Statistics are hard to nail down on this, because it's not something a lot of people brag about, but it's estimated that somewhere **between 30 and 60% of married individuals will be unfaithful to their spouse at some point.** When surveyed, **74% of men and 68% of women said they'd have an affair if they knew they wouldn't get caught.** Between 2 and 3 percent of all children are born as a result of infidelity. **Fictional elephants might be pretty faithful, but the average human adult - not so much.**

D. **Wrapping up a series on Cultivating positive characteristics in our life.** But does any of it matter...Self-awareness, soft-heartedness, generosity, sanity if there's no staying power? If it's just something we engage for a few weeks or months or even a couple of years but fade away as circumstances change? Seems like **any practices we undertake, and ultimately the entire endeavor of following Jesus only works if its grounded in something with staying power.** Grounded in faithfulness.

II. **Bible has a lot to say on Faithfulness.**

A. The way the story of the Bible goes, our whole connection with God, relationship, is founded in a series of weighty formal promises called **"Covenants"**.

1. **What's a covenant?** In the ancient world, covenants were a very formal, legal agreement. Similar to a contract. Binding. Could be between individuals or even nations. Often there were covenants between a powerful king and the people he ruled over; or the lesser Kings within his empire. This is the kind of Covenant that's found throughout the Bible. Covenants that solidify the relationship between the nation of Israel, the Jewish people, and their ruler: Yahweh. The story is that the Jewish people entered into a covenant with Yahweh. **They promised to live distinctively, to live according to his law:** the 10 commandments and such. He promised to protect them and prosper them if they did. **Covenants also include negative consequences if they're broken.**
2. **Faithfulness throughout the Bible is used to describe how the God of Israel (Yahweh) is the Covenant keeper.** He is completely faithful to his covenant.

- a) Deut. 7:9, **“Understand, therefore, that the Lord your God is indeed God. He is the faithful God who keeps his covenant for a thousand generations and lavishes his unfailing love on those who love him and obey his commands.”**
- b) Joshua 21:45, **“Not a single one of all the good promises the Lord had given to the family of Israel was left unfulfilled; everything he had spoken came true.”**

3. Contrast to fickle gods of Ancient World, human rulers.

B. This seems to carry forward into the New Testament

- 1. Jesus is the ultimate demonstration of God’s faithfulness. In Revelation, when Jesus is seen at the end of all time, it says his name is “Faithful” and “True”
- 2. What does Jesus have to say to his followers about what it means to be faithful as God as faithful? Gonna look at two different places where Jesus is teaching in the Gospel of Matthew to get a sense of it.

III. The first is found in the famous Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 5: 33-37

A. **“You have also heard that our ancestors were told, ‘You must not break your vows; you must carry out the vows you make to the Lord.’ 34 But I say, do not make any vows! Do not say, ‘By heaven!’ because heaven is God’s throne. 35 And do not say, ‘By the earth!’ because the earth is his footstool. And do not say, ‘By Jerusalem!’ for Jerusalem is the city of the great King. 36 Do not even say, ‘By my head!’ for you can’t turn one hair white or black. 37 Just say a simple, ‘Yes, I will,’ or ‘No, I won’t.’ Anything beyond this is from the evil one.**

B. At first glance, you might wonder what this has to do with cultivating faithfulness. It could even seem counter to the whole thing. I mean isn’t faithfulness basically keeping your promises and isn’t Jesus basically telling people not to take vows, or essentially not to make promises? Not exactly.

C. To understand what Jesus is talking about, you need to understand the practice in Jesus’ day of taking vows and oaths. Now here, Jesus seems to come out against taking oaths pretty strongly, but that’s in the context of quite a bit of oath taking happening throughout the Bible and throughout the entire Ancient world. In fact the law of the Old Testament even tells God’s people that they’re supposed to swear their oaths on God alone.

- 1. Deut. 6:13, **“You must fear the Lord your God and serve him. When you take an oath, you must use only his name.”**
- 2. Deut. 10:20, **“You must fear the Lord your God and worship him and cling to him. Your oaths must be in his name alone.”**
- 3. Making vows and taking oaths is something we see throughout the scope of the Bible. Even Jesus himself is sworn in during his trial and doesn’t explicitly correct the practice there. So what’s this about?

D. This passage is found in the midst of a list of things that Jesus is critiquing about the way the religious people of his day have been misrepresenting God’s law and dancing around it to fulfill the letter but miss the spirit. And **Jesus is trying to provoke his listeners**; to wake them up. To shock them into understanding and change. He does so with some direct hyperbole.

- 1. “You’ve been told not to **murder**”, but **I say if you curse someone**, if you call them a fool or an idiot (or other choice words), dismiss them in your heart, that’s just as bad. Watch your back you deserve just as much to be hauled into court and locked away or worse.
- 2. “You’ve been told not to commit **adultery**”, but I say if you look at a woman and think, **“yeah, I’d tap that.”** Look at her lustfully, you might as well have slept with her. You’re just as guilty and worthy of punishment.
- 3. It would be better to **pull out your eye**, to scoop it out of your face or **cut your hand off** if either of them causes you to do these things. That’s better than the judgement you deserve

for the evil in your heart. He says all of these shocking things. And then he talks about oaths.

4. I don't think Jesus was actually advocating everyone who finds themselves sexually tempted to cut off their hands and gouge out their eyes. None of his followers would have eyes or hands if that was the case. But **he is trying to make a point about how serious the inner stuff is to God**. That God doesn't just care about how you make everything look on the outside. In another place, Jesus causes the religious people of scrubbing the outside of the cup, the part everyone sees, but leaving the more hidden part, the inside of the cup dirty. Jesus calls that out as hypocrisy; it drives him crazy. And I think he sees the same maddening kind of butt-covering make it all look good while not dealing with the inner problems stuff happening here, when he talks to them about promises.

E. **Vows in the ancient world were always sworn on something.** As we saw in the Jewish law, observant Jews were instructed to swear on God. **What did it mean to swear on something? Means essentially two things.**

1. You are calling upon something else to be a **witness to your honesty**; a source to verify that what you are saying is true
2. You are calling on the one you vow to to **hold you accountable**. The implication is that if you break the promise, judgement can and should be exacted by the one holding the vow. You call that person to be your judge.
  - a) Traditionally when we've sworn someone in for **testimony**, we've done this. "I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God." or "As God as my witness..."
3. **Religious Jews knew it was bad to swear something to Yahweh if you didn't fully intend to keep it.** If it wasn't 100% true. Because you were essentially putting God in the place of judge and witness for something that isn't on the up and up. And this would go against the 3rd commandment.
  - a) Ex. 20:7 **"You must not misuse the name of the Lord your God. The Lord will not let you go unpunished if you misuse his name.**

F. But by the time Jesus came around, **a new set of practices had developed**. I won't take the name of Yahweh in vain, I won't swear an oath to him, but if I swear to some part of creation, what's gonna happen...? Is the mountain actually gonna fall on me if I break my word? And so they had started making oaths on created things instead of God. It was a slippery way to wiggle around the law. Essentially, **what they were doing with their vows is essentially what kids do when they say something false while they cross their fingers behind their backs**. They think it gives them an out.

G. Jesus is **calling them on their BS**. He's saying ultimately, you don't get to call on creation as your witness, cause everything in creation belongs to God, not you. So why don't you just be honest?

H. **Lesson one: Faithfulness calls for a commitment to straightforward truth.**

1. At the heart, this isn't saying don't ever take vows. It's saying **keep your word**, whether you vow to it or not. You shouldn't need to vow to God to speak truthfully. Don't let the vow be what secures your word; **let your personal commitment to faithfulness be that**. Say "yes, I will" or "no, I won't" and keep your word. **Let your yes be yes and your no, no.**

IV. Another lesson from Jesus on faithfulness comes later in Matthew 25

A. **Jesus tells a story about a master and three servants.**

1. The master who has to go away on a long trip. Leaves three of his servants with different amounts of his money to care for, "according to their abilities." One gets five bags of silver,

one two, and one one. The first two guys invest the money and it ends up yielding a return. The third guy is afraid of losing any of it, so he just buries it in the ground.

2. Jesus then describes how the master reacts when the first two servants show the master what they've done with what they've been given.
3. Mat 25: 21 **"The master was full of praise. 'Well done, my good and faithful servant. You have been faithful in handling this small amount, so now I will give you many more responsibilities. Let's celebrate together!'"**
4. But things don't go so well for the guy who just buried the money to keep it safe. The master is not pleased, even though nothing was lost. There was also nothing new gained.
  - a) **'You wicked and lazy servant!... why didn't you deposit my money in the bank? At least I could have gotten some interest on it.'**  
**28 "Then he ordered, 'Take the money from this servant, and give it to the one with the ten bags of silver. 29 To those who use well what they are given, even more will be given, and they will have an abundance. But from those who do nothing, even what little they have will be taken away.**
5. **Lesson two: Faithfulness starts with the small stuff. (In fact, faithfulness with the small is pre-requisite for more.)**
6. It's easy for us to think the little things are irrelevant. (Does it matter if I tell my kid I'm gonna get them ice cream and then I never do? Does it matter if I tell my wife I was at the store instead of at the bar?) But Jesus makes it clear that faithfulness on any level matters, the big things and the small things.
7. This particular story is about **how we invest what we've been given**. All of us have gifts, capabilities, and so on. And the implication here is that we also are given opportunities to use them in service of our master. If we're trying to follow Jesus, then the implication is that he is the one giving us tasks to do to serve his work in the world around us.
  - a) On the one hand, **you could say that the third guy who buried his money in the ground was just trying to play it safe**. He didn't want to risk that the money wouldn't yield a return; would be lost instead. But it seems that the **master wasn't as interested in him keeping the money safe, as he was in putting it to use**, even if that meant a certain level of risk. **Faithfulness to Jesus actually means trying stuff**. Serving. Showing up for people. Not just hanging out on the sidelines keeping your hands clean, but never really getting in the game. **God seems interested in the people who are willing to get dirty**, and to try to do it with integrity, even with the small stuff. That's part of what faithfulness means.
  - b) **Long before I could work as a pastor, I worked as a barista**. It wasn't a job that in and of itself gave me joy. It wasn't something that fed my spirit. Especially after I felt more clear about my long-term invitation to walk towards ministry and starting a place like Haven, serving people coffee at times felt frustrating. But it was where God had me - to support my family. To get health benefits. To build relationships with my fellow baristas and my regulars. I payed for them. I got to know them. **I tried to do it with integrity and commitment to the thing God had in front of me**. That was step in my own journey of growing in faithfulness.

#### **V. Lesson Three: Ultimately, faithfulness looks like the cross.**

- A. Let's face it: if sitting on the egg had been a totally pleasant experience for Horton, we wouldn't have had much of a story. **Faithfulness isn't just about saying yes for as long as it feels good and is convenient**. It's about staying in even when it's costly. It's about giving of yourself on behalf of what you've said yes to. **Jesus came to earth with a "yes" to the Father in mind**. There was a purpose to all of it: his young life as a Jewish craftsman, his

years of teaching, praying for the sick, and serving all kind of people in need, and eventually his trial and crucifixion. Jesus wasn't thrilled with how the whole thing went, if the cross wasn't death in every way it would have had no power to take on our own suffering. **But though it cost him everything, Jesus was willing. He was faithful.**

- B. There's a reason faithfulness has the same root as "faith". We tend to think of faith as being belief, assurance, hope against hope, some sort of feeling that it's all going to be ok. But **the Greek doesn't see a distinction between faith and faithfulness. They are the same word.** It's the translator's job to figure out based on the context which is the right word in English, "faith" or "faithfulness". But the reality is, they're the same meaning.
- C. Was Jesus just full of happy positive belief that it was all gonna be ok when he prayed in **Gethsemane**, "Take this cup away from me"? Was he just full of happy positive belief when he cried out **on the cross**, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Or is it possible that **his actions in spite of his emotion were the true demonstration of his faith and his faithfulness?**
- D. And could this be **what he's calling us to as well?** Not to some emotion, or just some sort of mental assent to a set of propositions about Jesus...that that would be "faith in him"...but **rather a faithfulness unto him?** A faithfulness to keep walking this crazy journey toward where he seem to be leading, even when it's costly? Even when it's lonely? Even when our emotions aren't there?
- E. Paul said this about the faithfulness of Jesus and the example it gives us. Philippians 2:5-8, Message Version:  
**"Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion."**  
**9-11 Because of that obedience, God lifted him high and honored him far beyond anyone or anything, ever, so that all created beings in heaven and on earth—even those long ago dead and buried—will bow in worship before this Jesus Christ, and call out in praise that he is the Master of all, to the glorious honor of God the Father.**
- F. Obedience to the Father, faithfulness to God cost Jesus the human everything. But it also brought its rewards. God honored Jesus' faithfulness. "He lifted him high and honored him far beyond anyone or anything, ever..."
  - 1. Horton hatches the egg - it's an elephant bird. Horton's the one who reaps the blessing of his faithfulness. (image)
  - 2. God promises to honor the faithfulness of his followers just as he honored the faithfulness of Jesus. He promises to say "Well done, good and faithful servant. Let's celebrate together." I want to hear that.

VI. Cultivating It. What are some practical things we can do?

**A. Look for the things in your life worth saying yes to. Name with God what those things are.**

- 1. Faithfulness implies challenge. There will be competing things to say yes to, but you can't choose everything. Rob Bell, "You need to say yes before you can say no." What's worth saying yes to? "Good is the enemy of the great." What is your great that you need to say yes to, which will necessarily mean nos down the line, even to things that are good.

2. One of the scariest parts of getting married is knowing that you're closing off the possibilities. But it's also an invitation to a new kind of freedom and security. The freedom to not live into all the hypothetical lives, but to live into *this* life. Jason and I both felt like it might be too costly - I wanted to be a rock star and go on tour; he wanted to put himself through college. Ultimately saying yes to each other might mean letting go of some of those dreams, and it did. But it meant welcoming and birthing dreams we never imagined then. 15 years in, no regrets.

## **B. Consider ways of formally declaring your yes.**

1. In Jesus' culture, **vows were a regular part of doing business, everyday life, and they were being abused.** We live in a different world - one that tries to minimize liability at every turn. **"Cover your ass" is more the operating premise of the day** rather than be upfront, straightforward, and truthful. We have hold-harmless agreements we click through without a moment's pause every time we get a new app. **Perhaps in our current culture, actually taking some ownership of things through vows, through oaths, or some sort of formal declaration of intent would be a helpful practice** so we don't get in the habit of just wiggling around things; actually committing to things we feel called to say yes to.
2. **Why marriage vows are meaningful.** Acknowledging the covenant we're making with our spouse and with God.
3. The New Testament and the church have long encouraged **baptism**, that includes some sort of statement of faith in Jesus.
4. **Membership in Haven** - a chance for you to name that for this season, you believe Haven is something God has brought in your life and is inviting you to be intentional in playing a role, saying Yes to it.
5. **Committing to intentional groups** of support can be helpful. It's good to have organic things, but sometimes we need to actually name what we're committing to for ourselves.

## **C. Get Help.**

1. **From trusted friends** who can hold you accountable.
  - a) Friends and prayer partners who have helped me stay true to the things I feel called to when it got scary. People who do that for me still.
  - b) Through the years, I've seen friend's marriages fall apart with infidelity. **Usually starts with relational withdrawal from accountability.** Pull back from prayer groups. Pull back from places people can hear what's really going on, support them, pray for them, encourage them to get help when needed. Become more aloof. Try to do it alone.
  - c) Word for faithfulness in OT is related to **Hebrew word for firmness, steadiness.** First appears in the story when Moses has to hold up his arms with a staff for people to win the battle to enter the promised land. He gets tired, **and he needs people to come around him and prop his arms up.** It's hard to be faithful on our own. It's easy to let things droop. I don't think we were meant to do it alone. We need folks around us to move towards Jesus with faithfulness together. Lean on them.
2. **From the Holy Spirit.**
  - a) Paul talks about Jesus' commitment to helping us. We aren't expected to do this on our own strength. Jesus gives us his Holy Spirit to help:
  - b) Galatians 5: 22-25  
**But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!**  
**24 Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of**

**their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there. 25 Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives.**

**VII. Closing Story:**

- A. Mark Hatfield was a Republican Senator from Oregon that served in the Senate for 30 years. At some point he toured Calcutta with **Mother Teresa** and visiting the so-called "House of Dying," where sick children are cared for in their last days, and the dispensary, where the poor line up by the hundreds to receive medical attention. Watching Mother Teresa minister to these people, feeding and nursing those left by others to die, Hatfield was overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of the suffering she and her co-workers face daily. **"How can you bear the load without being crushed by it?"** he asked. Mother Teresa replied, **"My dear Senator, I am not called to be successful, I am called to be faithful."**