

Back to School: Horton Hatches the Egg

A Sermon by Rev. J. Harlen Rife

1 John 3:16:18
Matthew 21:23-32

September 27, 2026

Our first reading today comes from John's first epistle. John is giving some instructions to the early church about how they are to live their faith. He's concerned that their practice doesn't match their theology. They celebrate Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, but then they don't seem eager to share with their neighbors. How can you worship someone who gave their very life for others, and then hold back your earthly possessions from your neighbors? He admonishes them saying, "Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth." Your deeds should match your words.

It really is "Back-to-School," season here at the church. This is week two and so the sounds of children drifted down the hallway from PMO to my office. There was the sound of playing, singing, laughing, and a considerable amount of crying. They were in shock the first week and now the separation anxiety is really kicking in! Maybe it was the sound of children but, as I read through this scripture, my mind kept going to the beloved children's classic, *Horton Hatches an Egg*. John tells the disciples to live by their words, not unlike Horton.

It may have been a while since you read that one, so let me catch you up. A bird named Mayzie has grown tired of sitting on her egg. She asks Horton to take over for a while so she can go on vacation. Even though Horton is an elephant, and thus comically oversized for a nest in a tree, he agrees to help. Mayzie's vacation stretches on and on and it becomes clear she's not really interested in coming back. All the while, Horton sits the egg. He endures foul weather, the mockery of his friends, the threat of poachers, and finally the humiliation of becoming a circus attraction. He absolutely refuses to leave his post saying, "I meant what I said, and I said what I meant. An elephant's faithful one hundred percent." In the end, Mayzie returns for the egg as its hatching, only to find the baby bird is now part elephant!

John tells the early church to mean what they say and say what they mean. Dr. Seuss teaches the same thing. He adds a little twist at the end. Horton's diligence changes that baby bird. Sometimes it seems like keeping our word isn't all that important or is only important for our own morality. Seuss reminds us that it is the people who show up, day in and day out, doing what they said they would, who really change the world. They're the ones who leave a legacy. Like Horton, we want to say proudly, "I meant what I said, and I said what I meant. A Christian is faithful, one hundred percent."

Then we take that lesson to our gospel reading. It is an exchange between Jesus and the religious elites of his day, the scribes and the pharisees. They tried to trip him up by asking him upon whose authority he performs miracles. He deftly sidesteps the question asking where John the Baptist got his authority. The leaders realize any answer they give will cause problems, so they refuse to answer. So, Jesus refuses to answer their question. Then, he gives this parable about two sons.

A father asks his sons to work in his vineyard. One son agrees, but never actually shows up. The other son refuses but later changes his mind and goes to the vineyard. Jesus asks who really fulfilled the commandments. The people agree that the one who actually showed up is the faithful son. Then, in case you thought he'd changed the subject and was no longer talking about the scribes and pharisees, he ends by saying the prostitutes and the tax collectors will enter the kingdom before them. Jesus implies that these sinners rejected the law as written, but accepted the Messiah before them, whereas the scholars accepted the law as written, but failed to respond to God's presence among them. Or similarly, they accepted John, but ignored Jesus, the one John foretold, whereas the sinners ignored John but accepted Jesus.

I was all set to write my sermon. You should stand by your word. As Horton says, "say what you mean and mean what you say." Then, I realized, that is not at all what happens in Jesus' parable. Neither son stands by his word. The first son says he will go but doesn't. The second son says he won't but then does. They both break their word. However, Jesus has a clear favorite in mind. The son with the correct actions is more faithful than the son with the correct words. The one who is willing to change is holier than the one who, in the face of new information, holds doggedly to what he said in the past. That's an elephant of a different color entirely.

I appreciate this message from Jesus because it reminds us just how messy Christian ethics can be. Pastors tend to preach a lot of sermons encouraging you to do what is right and to not do what is wrong. I wonder how useful those sermons really are. I hope I don't have to tell a room full of committed Christians that lying is wrong or that they should stand by their promises. However, life is full of choices that don't offer such a clear binary of right and wrong. What do you do when there are no good options? What happens when adult life is a little more complicated than the pages of a Dr. Seuss book? What happens if, taking today's example, you must choose between sticking by your word and doing what you believe is right?

I tried to think of a time in my life when I faced that kind of choice. The incident that sprang to my mind emerged from the church's recent debate on same-gender weddings. I was going through the ordination process at the time which involves rounds of paperwork and interviews. At my commissioning interview, my clergy colleagues asked me if I could abide by the rules laid out in the church's 2016 discipline, which included the ban on same-gender weddings and the ordination of queer clergy. In the interviews, I said I could. I didn't agree with those policies, but I could abide by them. I felt I could do more good for their cause operating within the system than in conflict with it.

Then, I went to General Conference. If you remember, we had a special session of general conference – the governing body of the entire United Methodist Church – to discuss this matter. I went as an observer with my seminary class including several folks in the LGBTQIA+ community who had waited their whole lives for the church they love to recognize and celebrate who they are. The conference that was intended to find a compromise solution failed in that effort. The traditionalist group successfully upheld the church's ban and went farther, strengthening the penalties for clergy who step out

of line. My friends were heartbroken and I found my attitude changing towards following these rules changing.

After I returned, members of the LGBTQIA+ advocacy group, the Reconciling Ministries Network, began circulating a pledge. Clergy who signed indicated that, if asked in the normal course of their ministry, they would celebrate a same-gender wedding. They wouldn't go looking for one as a deliberate protest, but if a couple in their parish asked, they would not refuse. Now, only weeks before I had promised that I would follow the church's rules on weddings, but now someone is asking for the opposite promise. What should I do?

Some of you may have a different opinion on human sexuality than I do. I understand that. The point of this story is not to say you have to agree with me on that. The point is the ethical question about words and deeds. What if you promise to do something, but then you feel moved by the spirit to do something else. We shouldn't abandon our word lightly, but we also shouldn't stubbornly defend the times in our lives when we've been wrong. What if, like the two sons, you promise not to work in the vineyard, but then realize you should? What if, like the pharisees, you promise to defend God's law, but suddenly God is standing in front of you doing something different? What would you do when your word and your conscience conflict? In my heart I had come to believe that our LGBTQIA+ siblings had waited long enough. I signed.

There was also a sense of urgency. While the board had recommended me for commissioning, that decision would now come before the entire clergy session for a vote of approval. I felt I should be honest about what I believed and give my colleagues the chance to vote, "no," if they so chose. As the day approached, I got a call from some folks in the cabinet. The traditionalist group in the church was aware of my name on that pledge, and one other, and they were debating pushing for a no vote on our candidacy. I wound up sitting next to the leader of the Wesleyan Covenant Association, the traditionalist counterpart to RMN, at the session and we had a talk. He said they were aware, and some were upset, but they felt it was not a fight worth having. He said he wanted to change my mind, and a public spectacle wouldn't help with that. I haven't changed my mind on the issue, but I still have respect for that man.

This is the important thing. It didn't feel great. I didn't like undermining promises I had made only weeks before. It felt like a lapse in character. At the same time, if I had abandoned my friends and failed to raise my voice on their behalf, I would have felt like a coward. These are the parts of life when our Christian ethics are the most difficult and most important. Again, we spend a lot of time in church talking about doing the right thing and not doing the wrong thing. Life has a way of throwing us into places where the choices are not so black and white. Sometimes we find ourselves choosing between two options that both make us uncomfortable. A lot of times we face a judgment call.

Sometimes life is more complicated than a children's book. In our parable today, Jesus taught that doing the right thing is more important than saying the right thing. Jesus taught that it's okay to change, when doing so helps you better love God and neighbor. I believed that was what I did in signing, but that was just my judgment call.

I'll never know for certain. In these cases we use our best discernment – consulting scriptures, conferencing with our fellow Christians, praying and seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Often we get it right. Sometimes we get it wrong. In a lot of cases, we never know if we were right or wrong or a mix of both. That's also why we seek God's grace. I often joke that the pastor's prayer is, "God I hope this is the right thing, but if it's not, forgive me and show me the way!" I have to believe that God will have grace for us when, to the best of our ability, we take a moral leap.

If at all possible, be a Horton. Say what you mean and mean what you say. Stand by your words and fulfill your promises. In the rare instances those two conflict, do the right thing even if you have to climb down and be humbled. Above all, when you aren't sure what to do, or when you don't like any of the options, listen for the Holy Spirit, take a leap of faith, and trust to grace. **Amen.**