

“Warnings”
1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9
Rev. David Hutchinson
Sunday, March 24, 2019

Have any of you ever had credit card debt?

I have.

And I can tell you - - it made me anxious.

I worried about it.

And when it was finally PAID OFF - - it was a huge relief.

SO...

Imagine if your credit card debt were paid - - - and you were FREED from it.

Maybe YOU - - CAN'T relate to this - - but many POOR people in this country CAN.

For example - - a Baptist minister once told this story:

Her son was engaged to be married - young - and had let credit cards get out of control.

He was in despair - - over whether he would ever - - get out of debt.

She wrote him a letter at Christmas time - - explaining the Scriptural concept of “Jubilee”

- - and she PAID his debt. / It was a chance to begin again - - but had to be used wisely -

because continuing the same PATTERNS of behavior - - would only result in return to bondage.

Her son's reaction - - to the gift - - was TEARS. / Relief. . .

AND - - a resolution to stay FREE of debt.

Two years later - - working hard - - but close to the edge - - when he found that because of a bank error he had BOUNCED three checks - - she considered offering her son another loan.

But HE was the one - - who said no.

He said - that by cutting spending - he had figured out a way to make it without help. /

He didn't want to go back into debt.

He had HEARD the WARNING - - the FIRST time!

The gift she gave him - - continued to have an impact - - - on his life choices.

Maybe - - when you hear the story - - you take it on a personal level - and you see the value of freedom from debt - - BUT you don't REALLY think - - that it has anything to do with our economy - - or the United States concept of freedom.

Freedom to spend - - and consume.

I don't want to argue about that - - or about the solution right now - - but I think there IS SOMETHING in our culture - - and our concept of FREEDOM - - that plays a part in why some people go into debt. / And credit card debt is only ONE example - - of the unhealthy things people do - - while thinking they are just exercising their - - freedom.

I think that there are other cracks - - in our picture of freedom.

Or at least cracks in the way freedom is exercised - - by some people - - sometimes.

Will you go that far with me?

So all of this leads to thinking about warnings.

Paul wrote about WARNINGS - - in the New Testament reading for this morning.

Basically what Paul said is - - it can be a really GOOD thing - - to LIMIT ourselves.

Having freedom - - is not necessarily a reason to always exercise it - - full tilt.

Most of us know this - - on some level already.

But KNOWING something - - is different from DOING something.

Limiting how we exercise our freedom - - can lead us closer to God - - according to Paul.

And Paul frames it as a warning - - based on looking at the past.

Paul describes the people of Israel following Moses, who was trying to help them follow God, and says that they BOTH had access to God - - AND - - made some mistakes in FOLLOWING God.

According to Paul - - the Israelites basically - - TESTED God's patience.

They took CHANCES - - with their relationship with God.

They lived in RISKY ways - - grumbling against God.

And according to Paul - - their story is a WARNING to the followers of Jesus in his day.

The experience of the Israelites CAN BE a warning - - if we LISTEN.

The followers in Paul's day had a good argument against the warning, however.

IT was - - they thought they were SMART!

They thought that because they had KNOWLEDGE - - they could DO anything.

They could take RISKS - - because they KNEW they were risks.

Hmmm...

Anyone see the RISK in that?

Well, specifically - - they argued that they could participate in all kinds of CULTURALLY acceptable things - - even if they weren't FAITHFUL things - - because they KNEW the FAITHFUL way - - and these other things were just - - kind of DABBING.

They had the freedom - - of the knowledge - - of good and bad...

So BEING a little bad - - was ok - - as long as they knew it was bad.

If this sounds like anything YOU have ever thought - - it's ok not to admit it.

At least not out loud - - here.

But think about it.

And maybe - - admit it to yourself.

Limiting our freedom is so different from what our culture teaches.

And so - - maybe the concept we have of freedom - -

- - - in our CULTURE - - is a bit broken - -

- - a bit CRACKED.

When I got to that point in my thinking about all this - - I was reminded - - of the
CRACK - - in the Liberty Bell. / The Liberty Bell - - or the “FREEDOM Bell”.

Located in Philadelphia.

An article by Dr. Donald Shriver reflects on this. / He wrote - - - “because they were
BIBLE readers - - the designers of this ONE-TON - sonorous object - - the bell - - CHISELED a
verse from Leviticus on its rim:

“Proclaim liberty throughout all the land - unto all the inhabitants thereof.”

One irony - in this inscription - is that the bell - - authorized by the legislature of
Pennsylvania - - was cast in LONDON - - - - not Philadelphia.

Almost immediately on being tested - - the bell suffered a CRACK.

Then - - in 1776 - - the tolling of the bell announced the FREEDOM from - - the bell’s
country of origin - - when the Declaration of Independence was signed.

60 years later - - it suffered another crack - -

while tolling at the funeral of chief Justice John Marshall.

Cracked - and cracked again - is the American version of liberty.”

So wrote Dr. Shriver over 15 years ago.

And so - - on reading this

I wondered about HOW our vision of freedom might be cracked.

And I think that a big crack - - is in forgetting - - steadfastness.

The stuff that our Bible texts say - - leads to freedom.

The gospel reading for this morning DOES offer some hope, however.

In Luke - - Jesus tells the story of a FIG tree - - that serves as a warning.

The hope in the parable is - - there IS time to respond - - to warnings.

There is still a future...

Dig around the base of the tree - - and give it a little more time.

As we think about that - - I will turn to our painting for this morning.

During these weeks of Lent we are looking at FOUR paintings by Norman Rockwell called the "Four Freedoms". / The one for today is "Freedom of Speech"

Painted in the 1940s these paintings provided a kind of VISION or DREAM for American society - - that emerged out of WW2.

I think that this vision from the past - - can inform us today.

These paintings - - and thinking about the end of WW2 - - can function like the history of the Israelites did - - for Paul.

Perhaps it is even a kind of warning.

Each painting was accompanied by an essay in the Saturday Evening Post.

The essay on freedom of Speech is a warning to us, if we listen.

Two travelers meet in a bar in the evening and debate the merits of a society founded on freedom of speech.

"In these countries people create their own governments. They make them what they please, and so the people really ARE the governments. They let anybody stand up and say what he thinks. If they believe he's said something sensible, they vote to do what he suggests. / If they think he's foolish - - - they vote no."

Then one of the speakers counters with this thought: “On the other hand - - many people can be talked into anything, even if it is terrible for themselves.”

And so with these words from the essay - - we return to this question:

What is the connection - - between what we SAY - - and what we DO.

Is it possible to SAY you’re a Christian - - and not BE one?

Is it possible to SAY one thing - - and DO another?

I think that because it IS - - that’s why God calls us to do things - - that DON’T come naturally to us - at first.

Like limiting ourselves.

Or like listening.

Or like not only SPEEKING what is RIGHT - - but also DOING it.

On Monday night’s we have been reading from a book by a man named Bob Goff.

It’s called, “Love Does”

The premise of the book is - - Love is more than a WORD.

It’s about what you DO with your life.

It’s not exactly a warning - - more of an encouragement.

But maybe WARNINGS - - ARE - - ENCOURAGEMENTS of a kind.

It is in that spirit that conclude with this story...

This is a story by James Thurber - - called - - “The Two Turkeys”.

Once upon a time there were two turkeys. / An OLD turkey - and a YOUNG turkey. /

The old turkey had been the “cock of the walk” for years. / The young turkey wanted to take his place. /

“I’ll knock that old buzzard COLD - - one of these days!”

So said - the young turkey - - to his friends.

“Sure you will, Joe, sure you will”, said his friends.

And - they just nibbled at the CORN that Joe had found - that he was treating them to.

Then - - the friends - - went and told the old turkey what the young turkey had said. /

“Why - - I’ll have his GIZZARD !”, said the old turkey.

And he set out some CORN - for HIS visitors.

“Sure you will, Doc, sure you will”, said the visitors.

One day - - the young turkey walked over to where - - the old turkey was telling tales - of his prowess in battle. /

“I’ll bat your teeth to a crop”, said the young turkey.

“Yea - you and who else ?” said the old turkey.

And so - they began - the circle. / The cycle. / Circling around each other.

Sparring for an opening. /

Just then - - the farmer - - - - who owned - the turkeys - - SWEPT up the young turkey - and carried him off - and wrung his neck.

There’s a bigger enemy out there - than us turkeys.

THAT’S why - - we need this “love your enemies” stuff.

That’s why we need all this talk about forgiveness - - AND repentance.

That’s why - - limiting ourselves - - for the sake of the future is important.

Making sacrifices for faith.

Listening to life’s warnings.

And then - - not just listening - - but DO-ing.