

“Holding Firm”

Introduction: I was speaking with a friend a few days ago about her upcoming sabbatical. Beginning next month, she is going to take seven months away from her job as a physical therapist to hike the Appalachian Trail. The trail, as you might know, runs for over 2,000 miles, from Georgia to Maine. Among other things, she said that she is looking forward to walking when the weather is good, and also when the weather is not so good. And that is because this journey for her is not only physical but spiritual, that when life throws bad weather at you, you need to know how to “keep walking.”

The author of Hebrews, it seems to me, is seeking to make much the same point. Our life of faith is a journey and like any journey, there will be times when the going is smooth and sunny, and times when it will be rough and stormy. Some of his readers, it seems, were close to becoming weary and losing heart (12:3), drifting in their faith (2:1), and falling away (6:1-12). In these rough times he exhorts his readers to keep moving forward, “holding firm” to the walk with Jesus they’ve begun.

Last week we heard him encourage his readers through words of affirmation, focused on who God is and who God has made to be (which we’ll listen to once again in vv. 1-6). Then we’ll hear our author add words of warning in the remainder of the chapter, words that center of the deceitfulness of sin which can lead to a hardening of our hearts. Ultimately, we want to ask: How might the community of God’s people, as well as the season of Lent, be helpful to us, especially during those times and seasons of our lives when the “weather” is not so good? [READ]

I. The Carrot and the Stick

A. As just a quick reminder of what we considered last week: 3:1-6 describes Jesus as apostle and high priest – as the bridge who connects God to us and us to God. Jesus, he also explains, is not only superior to the prophets and to the angels, but also to Moses, the most revered figure in all of Judaism. Amazingly, this Jesus has made us holy in God’s sight, calls us brothers and sisters, and has invited us to be a part of the family business (William Barry), ruling responsibly over all that he has made. It is an incredibly affirming vision to behold!

B. Then, beginning with v. 7, our author shifts gears from affirmation to warning, from the carrot to the stick, we might say. The next verses serve as one of a half dozen warning passages we find in this letter, and we want to think about how they work. The warning issued here concerns sin’s deceitfulness: “But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called “Today,” so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (v. 13). Certainly, we can say that sin is “bad.” But this description sharpens the point – sin is deceitful. Why is that?

II. The Deceitfulness of Sin

A. Sin is deceitful because it skews our perspective. The example our writer puts before his readers is that of their Israelite ancestors, as described in the second half of Psalm 95, which he quotes in full (vv. 7-11). It describes that time after their dramatic rescue from slavery in Egypt when God was leading his people toward the land of promise. It was to be for them a place of rest – peace, well-being, safety, intimacy with Him. To get there they had to travel through the wilderness, not an easy place, to be sure, but God was leading them all the same. Along the way, as the going

got rough, they began to want to go back, to return to Egypt. They had evidently forgotten all that God had done for them, from the plagues he visited upon the Egyptians, to their dramatic rescue from Pharaoh's onrushing army, to the provision of water and manna in the desert, to guiding them with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. God became so worn out by their grumbling and complaining that he eventually simply let them wander. They went round and round and never made it out. The lure of what they thought was back in Egypt – the deceitfulness of sin – skewed their perspective and led their hearts away from God, preventing a generation of Israelites from enjoying the rest God was holding out for them.

B. The lure of sin is that it promises to satisfy, whether it's "shopping till you drop" and filling your life with stuff: or taking what's not yours, from a package of gum at the corner store, to your neighbor's spouse, to your co-worker's idea; to building yourself up by criticizing another; to seeking revenge rather than offering forgiveness. Often it starts small and may seem insignificant, but sin has a way of taking root, growing, and becoming habitual. James describes the progression in this way: "...but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death" (Jas. 1:14-15). Ultimately, sin inevitably lets us down, destroying relationships, with God, one another, and the world, along the way.

III. Fighting Sin

A. So, how do we fight the deceitfulness of sin? How can we persevere through challenging times, holding our original conviction firm to the very end (v. 14)? In many ways, the solution is right here, sitting all around you: "But encourage one another..."

Illustration: Back in 1904, the great escape artist, Houdini, was challenged to a contest by a London newspaper. The paper dared him to escape from a very complex form of handcuffs which had six locks on each cuff and nine tumblers on each lock. Houdini took on the challenge in front of an audience of thousands. He was cuffed securely and then he ducked down into a box to struggle out of sight of the crowd. After 20 minutes he popped up out of the box to the roar of the crowd, but the cuffs were still in place. He went back in the box and appeared again 15 minutes later. The crowd cheered again but the cuffs were still on. Houdini stretched his legs and disappeared once more. Twenty minutes later and out he popped. This time he took a pocketknife and slashed his coat to ribbons. Having removed this heavy garment, he went back in the box with the crowd cheering him on. Now, only ten minutes later, Houdini came out, this time holding the cuffs, open, in his hands. Later, a reporter asked him why he kept popping up out of the box when he was not yet free of the cuffs. Houdini smiled and replied: "I needed to hear the encouragement of the crowd."

How much we need another's applause! How much we need to be affirmed that we're on the right track, or that we've come off of it and need to get back on it! When we struggle or grow discouraged as we live the Christian life, we need to know that we are not alone, that we don't have to struggle in the darkness of solitude but have the light of Christian community to help us keep walking.

B. How can we encourage one another? A couple of big picture ways. First, we can look back to vv. 1-6 and encourage one another to remember who God is and all that he has done for us. See also Psalm 95:1-7. These words provide a strong reminder that God is sufficient, that he is worthy of our trust, that there is no reason for us to go wandering after promises which will prove

deceitful in the end, but to hold firmly to his promises. Through worshipping together, through participating in a small group, through meeting with another Jesus follower to share and pray over what is going on in your life, sin's deceitfulness can be fought, together. And if you find yourself in a sunny and smooth part of your journey and are tempted to believe you don't need the encouragement of any kind of community, I would ask you, first of all, to give God thanks and praise! But then to consider: who it is that could use encouragement *from* you? Community, of course, works both ways: *for* you and also *from* you.

C. We need encouragement in another way as well. And this way is highlighted in the season of Lent which we've just begun. That is, if sin threatens to harden our hearts, leading us down the slippery path of disobedience and unbelief, then there is some ongoing heart work we need to be about, heart work that is often emphasized during this season, heart work which we can ask another to encourage us to pursue by holding us accountable to do so.

As we entered the season of Lent through our Ash Wednesday worship, I read the following observation of the reason for the season by Wheaton College professor Esau McCaulley:

Lent is a season of repentance . . . a turning toward God with intention and reflection on the past. We hope that as Christians we mature and grow and become more and more like Christ. But the church in its wisdom . . . presumes that life is long and zeal fades. . . So, it has included within its life a season in which all of us can recapture our love for God and his kingdom and cast off those things that so easily entangle us. [*Lent*, p. 6]

This casting off sin, so that we might run with perseverance the race marked out for us (Heb. 12:1), involves taking on the practice of spiritual habits or disciplines. Such practices, often a focus of Lent, are not done in order to earn God's favor in some way, but to make space for the Holy Spirit to work in us and transform our hearts, helping us to identify sin patterns and leading us to recognize more of the life that is truly life. Such disciplines come in two "flavors." There are disciplines of abstinence, such as solitude, silence, fasting, frugality, sacrifice, and chastity. In these disciplines we abstain to some degree and for some time from the satisfaction of what we generally regard as normal, to learn that God still provides for us. The disciplines of abstinence, generally, seek to deal with sins of commission. And, there are disciplines of engagement, like worship, prayer, study, giving, service, and confession. These are activities we take on to counteract sins of omission. Both, working together, help to identify what might be becoming deceitful or idolatrous in our lives, hardening, if we're not attentive, our hearts.

Which, from those brief lists, gets your attention? Might you pick one from each, let someone know you are intending to practice such during this season, and ask them to hold you accountable for doing so, maybe even listening to your experience as the weeks go along?

How important is the encouragement we need to receive and that we can give? So important, our writer says, that we need to do so daily. There's a sense of urgency, a sense of warning here that is intended for our good, intended to help keep us on the path. Today is all we have. No one knows what tomorrow will bring. We don't want to miss what God is holding out for us. So, take advantage of today. Encourage one another, so that we might keep walking, even when the weather is not so good! It's a large part of what Christian community, of the privilege we have of being brothers and sisters of Jesus, is all about.