

# The Park Road Pulpit

*Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church*

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***Perfect for the Job***

*Acts 6.1-6; 2 Corinthians 12.1-10*

Russ Dean, February 11, 2007

Deacon Ordination: A Homily



It doesn't matter whether it's your very first time, and you're standing on top of the "bunny slope," the grade of which will hardly let water run downhill, or whether you've just stepped to the edge of a double-black diamond, the tips of your skis hanging out over the 45-degree pitch, the chute below filled with bumps the size of a Volkswagen Beetle and rocks and cliffs. Looking down into such a run, you know you're in "one-fall-territory," but the feeling that first time is the same as the first time down that beginner hill. Standing there, all the common sense that the good Lord gave you causes you to ask: I'm supposed to ski? That?

For some reason, though, you go. Anyway! You slide forward on the bunny slope. You drop in from the edge of the chute. And the instant response is just as you expected:

God! What am I thinking!?

It happens to almost everyone who learns to snow ski. And to live. As soon as you're in, the fear kicks in, and intuitively you yearn for the safety of that place you just left. Despite all the instruction you may have received to the contrary, as soon as you are moving, you instinctively lean back toward the safety of the top. With each turn one hand stays behind, as if still hoping to hold on to some flat, steady, stable ground that is no more. What has been lost seems so much more promising that what is to be gained. But it is not to be. Once you're in, there is no turning back.

Learning to snow ski can teach us an awful lot about learning to live. Doing both right are often counter-intuitive. Here's how it is with snow skiing. See if this day, as we come to ordain deacons to serve among us, if you can make the life application.

Those who know how so swish down the mountain, even down the double-blacks, with the precision and finesse of an artist or a ballerina have learned the secret of skiing the fall line. You simply cannot fight it. No matter how hard you try, the hill is going to win. Every time. At some point, what goes up – is going to come down. It's just a matter of how much you want to enjoy the descent. And in skiing the only real way to go... is to let go! To give in to it. As soon as you instinctively lean back, toward the "safety" of the top, you are lost. That fearful retreat from your destination keeps you just off balance enough, your body weight just slightly behind the center of your feet to make that pair of fiberglass boards you just bolted to the bottom of your feet a lethal weapon! The only way to control a pair of snow skis, is to give your weight to the hill, and when you have done so, correctly, the skis turn themselves.

The steeper you get, the more you have to give yourself to the imperfections of the fall line. Eyes always alert, looking down, determining with split-second judgment the line you will run. Shoulders squared, and relaxed against the constant tug of gravity. Hands, setting you up for the turn, but always in front preparing for the next change. Whoever said "idle hands are the devil's workshop" knew something about skiing. The hands are the key to keeping the rest of the body in line.

When one fall can cost you your life, especially there, there is no looking back. It may be downhill all the way. The fear may take your breath away. But without a fall line, there would be no reason to go to the top of the mountain!

And if you live well, which is just to say if you really live at all... it is the fall line that gives life its meaning.

You can try to turn from your imperfections if you will. Keep reaching back for the steady stasis of some perfect “Eden” – which you really never knew to begin with. You can keep wishing for a place where you are sheltered from that downward pull. But if you find it... as soon as you have stopped fighting and giving in... fighting and giving in... fighting and giving in. You can know that you have stopped living, too.

Life is a mountain. We are born at the top. We must choose whether to give ourselves to the descending line of bumps and jumps or fight it the fall all the way down.<sup>1</sup>

On Wednesday night I hosted a confirmation class from Temple Israel. My friend, Rabbi Murray Ezring, and about a dozen of his students, sat with me in the Youth Building for a conversation about Christian faith. (We had wonderful dialogue, and though we have many differences, Rabbi Ezring and I agreed, to his students, that we have more in common, even across our faiths, than each of us has in common with the fundamentalists within our own faith traditions. Such is the potential that interfaith dialogue holds for us.) When we came to the discussion of sin, Rabbi Ezring asked his students to share with me his interpretation of the Genesis story of the Garden of Eden,

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<sup>1</sup> Someone emailed the following comments regarding the metaphor I used in the sermon: “In the past few years, I’ve been thinking of my life in terms of climbing UP a mountain carrying a huge backpack! What a weight! Oh, how I’ve moaned and groaned about the wonder (because my choices do reflect a wondrous opportunity), and burden (and how tired I get sometimes) because of my life choices. I’ve recognized how this thinking was in itself a burden and influenced my energy level, but I was unable to find a metaphor to adequately describe how I really want to approach my life right now. Thank you for giving it to me in yesterday’s sermon. I certainly have to recognize the fear (in my case, it’s specifically related to my lack of energy and refueling time), but you know what? If I go down instead of up the mountain, I can pick up some momentum and energy on the ride down. I can laugh as the wind whips my face and even as it brings tears to my eyes, but what a ride! I’ll just do it!”

and the so-called “fall of humanity.” In the Jewish tradition the stories of scripture are open to “midrash,” that is, they are to be the starting point for a conversation. Scripture is neither to be treated as a simple historical record nor a moralistic parable with one single “right” point to be learned. With that understanding, scripture as the starting point of a conversation with God, Murray is well within his tradition to hold, despite the competing message on the surface of that story, that what we call the “fall” – and the subsequent banishment from the “perfection” of Eden – is actually a gift from God. The fall, and the imperfections that result from it, are God’s gift. For if we just stayed at the top of the mountain, to shift metaphors, we could never know the thrill of getting to the bottom!<sup>2</sup>

So it happens every time we call a new class of deacons. Someone says, “I don’t feel worthy of such an honor.” I understand this, but when you think of it, this is really a silly statement – as if those who called you were, themselves, perfect!

Dwayne Baxley, Greg Blum, Tracey Bradey, Jan Burleson, Jonathan Eidson, Joel Freuler, Cam Helt, Dave Silden, and Terry Wicker, the church who called you to serve among us as deacons is not a perfect church calling you to do an imperfect job. On the contrary, because we are a bunch of imperfect people, we think you are actually, Perfect

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<sup>2</sup> I love the Jewish tradition of openness to the many levels of meaning in the stories. I believe there is truth in our traditional Christian reading: the fall means a loss of the good, and that loss separates us in some ways from God. But I also believe Murray’s reading is important and truthful. The serpent’s temptation was enticing, “*You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil*” (Genesis 3.5). Our growth as children bears this out. We are better off when we have matured enough to know (as God knows) that the world is not a perfect place. We must be aware of the good and the evil around us. Surely, in a paradoxical way, this does make us more like God, i.e., more mature, more alert, more aware – even as it separates us from God through our “fallen” nature. Thus, our so-called “fallen” nature (again the paradox: is it really “fallen” if it is also what makes us more like God?), which I am trying to represent with my skiing metaphor of a “fall line,” actually holds the greatest potential in our lives for mature relationship with God. We’re no longer “children” in a “perfect Eden.” We are grown ups, with the knowledge of good and evil, and equipped as we have been created, with strengths and weaknesses – yet Paul claims that it is especially in our weaknesses that we can know God, for in our weaknesses (on the fall line) God’s power is made perfect.

for the Job, to which you have been called!<sup>3</sup> We have called you to serve among us because we are on this joyful downhill ride together, and we believe that as you give yourselves in service, God will work not just even in, but especially in, your imperfections, your weaknesses. Be you. Be true. Claim your strengths. Accept your imperfections. Give yourself to God and others, and hear God's words of Grace:

*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*

Deacons, new and old. Members of this community of faith. It's all downhill from here. Let's jump in. And never look back.

May it be so!

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<sup>3</sup> We included this quotation from Richard Rohr in one of the meditations in our bulletin: "In a Navajo rug there is always an imperfection woven into the corner. And interestingly enough it's where "the Spirit moves in and out of the rug." The pattern is perfect and then there's one part of it that clearly looks like a mistake. The Semitic mind, the Eastern mind (which, by the way, Jesus would have been much closer to) understands perfection in precisely that way. Perfection is not the elimination of imperfection. That's our Western either/or, need-to-control thinking. Perfection, rather, is the ability to incorporate imperfection! There's no other way to live: You either incorporate imperfection, or you fall into denial. That's how the Spirit moves in or out of our lives."