

The Park Road Pulpit  
*Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church*  
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***When Disciples Fall***  
*Jeremiah 20.1-2, 7-9 and 2 Timothy 4.6-22*  
Russ Dean, June 29, 2008



As we read the closing words in Paul's letter to his mentor and friend, young Timothy, we hear the word of a different Paul than in other New Testament texts. This is not the sound of the sometimes abrasive, perhaps even brash Apostle, not the confident word of the world's greatest Christian apologist, but the word of a very human Paul, left alone in the final moments of his life. Paul is writing from prison, and these are perhaps the last words we have from his pen.<sup>1</sup> We can still hear his confidence, *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith...* (4.8). And he is still in charge to some degree, *Get Mark and bring him... I have sent Tychicus to Ephesus...* (4.11,12). But the end is near and that prison cell is no doubt damp and cold: *Bring my cloak...* he says (4.13). We hear him in his raw humanity – grateful, alert, still-enthusiastic for the gospel he has now spread around his world, but alone and knowing the gnawing pain of a forced solitude. Knowing Paul as we do from his enthusiastic writings, though, I wonder if even in those moments if the hardest loss of all was not the desertion of a once-faithful friend?

*Come to me soon*, he encourages Timothy, *for Demas... has deserted me* (4.10). The word which Paul uses to talk about the abandonment of this friend and former colleague, is the same that Jesus cried from the cross: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* (Matthew 27.46 is a quotation from Psalm 22.)

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<sup>1</sup> Though there is considerable scholarly dispute over the authorship of the pastoral epistles (they may be written pseudonymously, i.e., in Paul's name but by a disciple of his), the highly personal nature of this passage makes many scholars believe these words are actually from Paul – even if they have been inserted into a largely pseudonymously written letter. See *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume XI, 2 Timothy.

I count only three of these experiences in my tenure as your pastor, but I will tell you that each one still bears its own hurt. There have been three times that active visitors or participating members have left the Church – not because they've relocated to a new city, thus requiring an obvious transfer of membership – and each time, occasioned by its own, unique circumstance, I could empathize with Paul, who felt “*forsaken*” by the loss.

What do we do when friends forsake us? What is the response of the Church When Disciples Fall?

The first and most obvious lesson from Paul's experience is the importance of friendship to begin with. Even from the mouth of the exuberant Paul we hear the wound which abandonment brings. Paul had made his mark on the world, but not alone. In every new Church, all along the way, Paul had called forth *partners* in the journey – and these faithful friends were not only necessary for the success of his ministry, as they carried on the work in one place while Paul ventured forward, but they were important to Paul, personally. He frequently calls by name these colleagues, and we can hear the heartbreak through his words as he recounts at his impending death at least one mark of failure.

Because of the historic success of Paul's calling (you and I would not be Christian today if not for his daring missionary enterprise), it may be tempting for us to think of Paul as not having experienced failures along the way. But this is not so. You may recall that once when Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea, after offering a defense of his ministry to the regional authority, he appealed directly to King Agrippa, who was a descendant of King Herod. After a typically charismatic apology for Christian faith, the King James records Agrippa's rejection: *Almost though persuadeth me to become a Christian...* (Acts 26.28). Almost!

In his two letters to the disciple, Timothy, Paul lists the apostasy of six one-time disciples: *By rejecting conscience, Paul tells Timothy, certain persons have suffered shipwreck in the faith; among them are **Hymenaeus and Alexander...*** (1 Timothy 1.20). At another point he says, *You are aware that all who are in Asia have turned away from me, including **Phygelus and Hermogenes...*** (2 Timothy 1.15). In a final word he counsels against the slanderous words of the back-slidden: *and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are **Hymenaeus and Philetus...*** (2 Timothy 2.17). And in today's text we learn of the desertion of Demas.

These failures – the successes that fall short (those “almosts” of ministry), and the disciples who fall away are notable for Paul. We hear it in his voice now as he reflects back over his life. And all of the Christian life, not just ministry, is about building partnerships, establishing relationships, creating a web of friendships and associations in which faith can grow. As someone has said it, “There are no lone-ranger Christians.” We need one another.

In a humorous style, typical of the late Carlisle Marney, we learn this truth again. Once when he was a visiting preacher at the First Baptist Church of Greenville, SC, he had spoken about death – and the Christian belief that death will not swallow up all of life, that there is something “more.” Dr. David Matthews, the then pastor of First Baptist, and the late L.D. Johnson, were taking Marney to his motel for the night. L.D. Johnson said playfully to Marney, “If I didn't know better, I'd think you believe in the resurrection,” to which Marney replied, “Well, I do... when I'm around the right people!”

Christian faith requires company. So, like Paul, when someone walks away, we feel that pain with every footfall. You have known this in your own life. In your own family. In your own Church. But then what? What do we actually do when friends forsake us? What is the response of the Church When Disciples Fall?

To my knowledge, I've never heard a sermon on Demas before – but because I know preachers pretty well, my guess is that the take-away for many sermons on this little known character is to be found in Paul's characterization of Demas as "*in love with this present world*"(4.10). Oh, can't you just hear the pulpit pounding now!? Poor, old Demas, who loved the world... who loved his wine... who loved his women... who loved his song... more than he loved Jesus... Poor, old Demas – and he's getting his judgment now! Can't you hear it? It's a sermon that practically writes itself!

And Jesus would have us speak a word about those who love the "finer things in life" and who give no value to the eternal things. Some who are in love with the world live as the farmer in Jesus' parable – who lived for today, with no thought of tomorrow (Luke 12).<sup>2</sup> They also pull down today's barns with visions of building ever bigger and better ones, only to find as the farmer did, that there is no tomorrow. Jesus said, "*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth... but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*" (Matthew 6.19-21).

Maybe Demas was such a disciple – who turned his back on the things of tomorrow to lay hold of the things of today, alone. If so... he missed it. God forgive old Demas.

But you know me. Always willing to see things a little differently... and to offer a little more grace than some will allow. And, I'm wondering about old Demas. Why he left... Where

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<sup>2</sup> I say "some" quite intentionally because I do not believe "loving the world" has to be opposed to loving the kingdom of God – in fact, I believe that loving God will lead one to love the created world, just as God loves it. This love will have moral and ethical implications for our relationship with the environment and with our fellow human beings.

he really went... And if it matters – if it really matters in terms of what we will do, and how the Church will respond. Now, you may not have realized it, but this sermon gets down close to home for lots of folks sitting in these pews. For some of you had to leave your spouse at home, again, to get here. And some are without your children. And that absence sometimes makes the faithful wonder who failed. And what I'm wondering is if we need to call any of it failure?

Despite the days I do not want to be here (and they do occasionally come!), I love the Church. Probably as much as anyone who has ever lived, I could serve as a poster child for what Church supposed to be. So I can say without hesitation that I wish everyone – every single person – had my experience. Of the Church as appropriate authority. Of the Church as beloved community. Of the Church as the body of Christ on earth. I wish everyone had that experience.

But everyone doesn't.

And sometimes the Church is to blame.

In a spiritual exercise with our deacons this past year, each deacon lit a candle and shared a name or an event or a group for whom he or she was praying. My candle was for the people, all the people who have left the Church – because of the Church. You know, folks, there are a lot of reasons people leave the Church. And some of them are good reasons. But no one should ever leave the Church because of the Church. It is one of our greatest failings.

People leave sometimes for a season, and sometimes for a lifetime. And they do so for a host of spiritual and social and intellectual reasons. Michael Gallagher, a Jesuit Priest opens his daring but insightful book *Help My Unbelief*, with these words: “It was a Thursday evening at Mass that I entered into my atheism in a deeper way than ever before...” These are startling words, to be sure, but as you read, you realize that perhaps more people than not endure moments of real doubt... perhaps more people than not live through periods of belief – and

disbelief. Gallagher shares his story to tell how he lived to stay in the Church, to remain faithful, despite his doubting.

Last year Doubleday publishing house released a book of Mother Teresa's letters called *Come Be My Light*. This book is a collection of letters to her spiritual advisors, written over the course of her entire ministry, in which this icon of Christian service and spirituality shares an ongoing, life-long battle with spiritual darkness and intellectual doubt. Yet Teresa remained faithful.

The prophet Jeremiah, beaten and abused, shares his honesty. He wants to get out. Can you hear it? "If I could leave... I would leave." Sometimes, the reasons we stay are as surprising and inexplicable as they reasons others walk away. *If I say, "I will not... speak any more in his name," then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot (20.9). I cannot hold it in... I cannot turn away.*

For reasons that perhaps none of them could explain, Michael Gallagher and Mother Teresa and Jeremiah could not leave. For reasons unknown to us, reasons which perhaps he could not explain... Demas could not stay.

In his poem, Faith Quandary<sup>3</sup>, Allan Roy Andrews finds company not with the biblical legends, but in the betraying Judas, because when Andrews really looked into his own eyes, and

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<sup>3</sup> Peter repented and received / keys to the kingdom; / Thomas believed when offered / the test of wounded flesh; / But Judas stands abandoned, left holding the accusing sop.

He threw a silver bribe / at the feet of murderers, / and they laughed at him. / I hear even disciples / laughing at Iscariot as well / (and he about to hand himself).

Don't bedazzle me / with manifest theory / or predestiny doubletalk. / A disciple has fallen; / a believer turned traitor; / a lamb is lost and never found.

I know of cowardice / in discipleship. I'm craven / when it comes to following. / I like to think Jesus / had forgiven Judas / when he hanged himself.

into his own heart, he saw his own cowardice and fear, his own betrayal and mutiny. And in that honesty he heard a promise of forgiveness. The Church needs the courage to be so honest.

So what do we do When Disciples Fall, and when friends and family members leave? First we learn to recognize that leaving Church may not mean leaving faith. That leaving spirituality as you know it, or as we know it, may not mean abandoning God. And then... we keep on being the Church. We do all that we can to remain true to family and friends – while keeping our own faith. And the Church keeps on being the Church: appropriate authority; beloved community; the body of Christ. We keep on being the Church, to be here for those who return. And we keep on being the Church, even for those who do not.

And we pray, always, for Demas. For Demas is one of us.

May it be so!