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“Standing or Falling?” GPPC 2-28-16
Isaiah 55:1-9, 1 Corinthians 10:1-13

As many of you know, my wife and I live in the country, just outside of town. A few months ago, I walked over the bridge that spans Beaver Creek that runs below our house. And there at my feet lay several stamped and addressed personal letters. Some were lodged on the pavement near the bridge’s guard rails. Others had landed in the creek. Still others were in the grass beyond the pavement. I was kind of puzzled, ignored them for a day or two, and then finally picked up the ones within reach. I glanced at the name of the out-of-state addressee written on the envelopes, then put the letters in my mailbox for the postal carrier to pick up.

Now we don’t know why the letters were there. Did somebody get mad and decide to chuck them out the car window while driving? Or maybe somebody put the letters on the roof of the car at home, forgot they were there, drove away, and they flew off at the bridge. Or did they just blow out of the mail truck? We don’t know, do we? But they were somebody else’s mail. I just helped with the delivery.

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As others have pointed out, whenever we read letters in the New Testament, we're reading somebody else's mail. What we read was originally written for other people in different times, places, and situations. So we ask God to open the envelope and translate the letters for our new time, place, and situation.

We're going to think for just a minute or two about the Corinthian church. Oddly enough you have not begged for details about the Corinthians to share with friends over coffee. But if we glance at the Corinthian church and look at ourselves in the mirror at the same time, we trust God will forward a message of good news to our own hearts.

In antiquity the city of Corinth had been a somewhat wealthy port city of the Greeks. But as one Bible scholar says in 146 BC "the Roman army captured the city, destroyed its buildings, and either executed or enslaved its inhabitants. The site stood virtually abandoned until, on the initiative of Julius Caesar, the city was refounded as a Roman colony in 44 [BC], less than a hundred years before Paul's arrival on the scene."

(Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 3.) Paul established the church at Corinth and he spent a number of months there. His First Letter to the Corinthians

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was probably written about 54 or 55 A.D.—about twenty years after the death of Jesus and several years after Paul had left the church at Corinth.

Why did Paul write to the Corinthians? He wrote to them because he loved them and wanted them to flourish as a faithful community of followers of Christ. And he wrote to address a number of concerns. The Corinthian Christians had gotten the notion that somehow they were superior to other Christians, because they were especially spiritual. As one scholar puts it, “The Corinthians believed that they possessed divine *sophia* (Gk., ‘wisdom’) and therefore called themselves pneumatics, ‘spiritual persons.’ ... [and] the spiritual person no longer belongs to the sphere of the ‘flesh’ but to the heavenly realm.” (Elisabeth Shüssler Fiorenza, 1 Corinthians in *Harpers Bible Commentary*, 1169.)

So we can see where this belief leads, right? If I’m this super-spiritual person, then what I do with my *body* doesn’t matter, right? I don’t have to be responsible, monogamous, and loving with my sexuality. I can go hog-wild, right? And if I’m this extra-spiritual person, then my spiritual gifts are better than other people’s. And I have spiritual gifts other lowly Christians don’t have, such as speaking in

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tongues. And if I'm this extra-special spiritual person then I don't need to worry about whether my behavior is rude and selfish or not. I'm beyond all that earthly stuff. I'm really, really spiritual and "in the know." Yikes. Bad attitude.

But Paul started this church. And he loves these ornery, know-it-all Corinthian Christians. So this is what he says in tenth chapter of his letter to them.

"I don't want you to be *ignorant*, brothers and sisters..." Oh, snap! "I don't want you to be ignorant, brothers and sisters," he says. "Remember our ancestors, how they escaped from slavery to Egypt in the exodus? God took care of all of them—led them all, fed them all, gave drink to them all, accompanied and cared for them all. But God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness. Remember? This is an example for us."

Then Paul says, "Here's another example. Remember when Moses went up on the mountain to receive The Ten Commandments? Remember what happened? He took a little longer than expected, and the people got impatient. So Aaron, being the pitiful leader he was, was

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desperate to give the people what they *wanted* not what they *needed*. So he got them to give him their gold and he made a nice golden calf idol for them to worship. So they had a god that was tangible and manageable. And the people abandoned all sexual restraint and it was deadly. And the examples could go on,” says Paul. “So if you think you’re standing, if you think you’re so faithful, so wise, so spiritual, watch out that you do not fall.”

It’s a tough love message, isn’t it? And the temptations that Israel, as well as the Corinthian church faced, are the same temptations we face, aren’t they?

Israel and the Corinthian church had received gift upon gift from God, but instead of becoming grateful and obedient to God, as one scholar puts it, the people became “indulgent, self-willed, [and] overconfident.” (Carl R. Holladay in *Preaching the New Common Lectionary, Year C, Lent, Holy Week, Easter*, 48.) And we face those same temptations, don’t we?

God has given us everything we have, blessings most of the world can scarcely dream of. But we sometimes focus too much on the tangible gods we can manage—money, status, popularity, national security at any

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cost, sports, entertainment, family. And we're reluctant to gather in worship to say thank you to God, to sing God's praise, to listen for God's voice, especially if we might hear an occasional word that challenges our views and makes us uncomfortable with the claims of the gospel.

Likewise God has given us spiritual practices so we might grow in faith and spiritual gifts that we might serve with gladness. But we're quick to become arrogant about our own faithfulness and swift to imagine our particular gifts are superior to others. Spirituality without commitment to God's justice and mercy is a mystical narcotic. Justice and mercy without spirituality quickly becomes a shrill and self-righteous drill sergeant. We need balance.

And God has provided us these bodies, beautiful and wonderful that they are, able to give and receive pleasure and to deepen relationships with love. But we are seduced by superficial, loveless, and tawdry sexuality that hurts others and hurts ourselves.

We're not better than Israel and the Corinthian church, are we? We are brothers and sisters who've received the same gifts, faced the same

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temptations, and fallen in just the same way. We're not so special. As Paul says, "No testing has overtaken you that's not common to everybody." "If you think you're standing, if you think you're doing so well, watch out that you don't fall."

Tough love. Is there any good news in this? Absolutely.

Paul says, "God is faithful, and will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it."

Now this is one of the more misused passages in the Bible. Somebody will be going through a terrible time—sickness, loss, grief. And some well-meaning Christian will chirp, "The Bible says the Lord won't give you more than you can handle." Well, Christians who say that just need to be smacked, in a loving way, of course. (Kidding!)

Here Paul is not talking about the terrible things that happen to all of us from time to time. He is talking about temptation. He says, "Everybody gets tempted. Your temptation is not the exception to the rule. But God is faithful and will give you a way out, so you'll be able to endure it."

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“A way out.” What is this “way out” that Paul mentions? He does not say here, does he? But he teaches about this “way out” all the time. We know what it is, don’t we?

It’s nothing fancy. Nothing dazzling. Nothing magical. It’s simply to try to be faithful to God every day, to try to be a follower of Jesus day by day. How? As one Christian put it, “If you want to change your life, change your daily routine.” (Chuck Goetschel) Start setting aside a time for daily prayer and reading Scripture and exercising. Get in a group of people who are reading and studying Scripture together in Sunday School or another place. Become part of a group that helps us deal with whatever struggle we’re facing. Get a counselor or a 12 step program as needed. Take part in weekly worship to remember that you and I are not the center of the universe; God is. Serve God with integrity in the daily work we do or the retirement we live. Get outside ourselves by learning deeply about the plight of others and then finding at least one ministry to serve them. Invest ourselves, our love, time, abilities, and money in a church that will love back. “If you want to change your life, change your daily routine.” That’s a way out, isn’t it? And there is more.

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Many years ago, in another congregation I served, a dear friend, an older woman in the church, took a bad fall. I went to see her in the hospital. And as so often happens, she was a little embarrassed about her fall. If only she had picked her feet up higher or looked where she was going--that sort of thing. She acknowledged she was getting older. But then she said something I've never forgotten. She said, "You know, it's not a matter of 'if' you fall; it's a matter of 'when' you fall."

"It's not a matter of 'if' you fall; it's a matter of 'when' you fall." So we read other people's mail, and we're challenged to live life more faithfully, and thus more fully. We're called to turn away from the things that hurt us and others, the attitudes and behaviors that are death dealing. And we're invited to embrace the things that are life giving—a daily journey of trying to be faithful and loving to the God we know in Christ. That's what we do.

And when we fall, as we will, we fall into the arms of a congregation that knows us, comforts us, challenges us, corrects us, and accepts us with love. Because finally we fall into the arms of God who is

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strong enough and faithful enough to catch us all for eternity. Amen.

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