

A FALLING HABIT

A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Song of Solomon 2:8-17
1 Corinthians 10:1-13

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Fallen, we've all done it. As a child, we may have fallen out of bed, down the steps, while riding our bikes or on the playground at school. As an adult we may have fallen on a wet floor, an icy parking lot, by misjudging a step, losing our balance, or by tripping over something. Over the past four and a half years as your pastor, I've known several church members to take rather significant falls. Some of those falls resulted in bruises, perhaps a few cuts and some soreness. Other falls resulted in more serious injuries like broken bones, concussions, and internal bleeding. Falls happen, and the one who experiences a fall is often puzzled over how quickly and unexpectedly it all happened.

Yes, we've all miss-stepped and taken tumbles in our lives, but perhaps you've noticed that some people tend to fall more often than others. We might call them accident prone or "clutzy." We might say they are easily distracted or have a wandering mind. Of course, for some it's an age or health related balance issue that contributes to falling tendencies. Studies have shown that the specific way some people walk actually makes them more susceptible to falling.

In our Epistle lesson today the Apostle Paul also refers to our human tendency of falling, although he specifically has spiritual spills and not physical ones in mind. "So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall," (1 Cor. 10:13) he said. Paul draws upon the history of the Israelites in the desert to remind his readers that not paying attention to their commitments to God and to the manner in which they live can result in a fall. Paul points out that those ancient Israelites were offered spiritual sustenance and yet many ignored it. They chose to focus on God's care for them as the reason they didn't need to worry about their typical daily choices and behavior. But as a result, many of those Israelites did not live to enter into the blessing of the Promised Land, and Paul wants something different for the church in Corinth. He wants the faithful to realize that their poor choices and bad behavior are not okay simply because they profess faith in Jesus Christ. To "watch out for falling" is to acknowledge that daily behavior needs to match testimony.

This is hardly an unexpected biblical message, but when Paul uses standing and falling as a metaphor for moral and spiritual faithfulness and sinning, I don't think he's so much focusing on our deliberate, conscious turning away from the Lord, but on what is most often our almost unconscious turning away. After all, most people don't typically wake up in the morning and say, "I've decided I'm going to fall down today." Falls by definition are mostly unplanned and unexpected. A slight variance of the ground and a slight miscalculation on our part can increase the risk of a fall. Therefore, even though we shouldn't ignore the big things, the big obstacles, the big dangers that we all face, it is equally if not more important to pay attention to the small everyday obstacles. It's those small things that so often trip us up and cause us to stumble day after day, week after week, year after year.

If you think about it, for most of us the big Ten Commandment sins like murder, stealing, adultery, idol worship are so obvious that it's much less likely for us to commit them. We know we are wrong when we head down those paths. Yes, we may choose to head down them anyways, but there is little doubt as to the direction

we are heading. It's the smaller sins, the less obvious ones, the easier ones to ignore or justify, that most often trip us up.

William Temple, the Archbishop of Canterbury back in the 1940's said it this way. As an undergraduate, he went to hear a well-known American evangelist preach about God's forgiveness of sins. The preacher used the text, "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool." (Isaiah 1:18) Temple said, "Though I went to the meeting in a serious, enquiring spirit, I found myself quite unmoved, for alas, my sins were not scarlet, they were gray – all gray. They were not dramatic acts of rebellion and violent self-affirmation, but the colorless, tired sins of omission, inertia and timidity."

Those gray sins are most often the daily sins in which we regularly engage almost without thought. After all, we know what scarlet sins look like, and those sins are mostly committed by other people, the ones in the news. A minister by the name of Martin used William Temple's reflections as the opening for a book about what he considered "small sins." The book was titled Little Foxes that Spoil the Vines. In the book, Rev. Martin does not discuss the major transgressions that are associated with violating God's Ten Commandments. Instead, his chapters include such topics as careless listening, discourtesy, flippancy, ingratitude, lack of follow-through, and by-standing. Did the title of that book sound familiar to you? It comes from the Song of Solomon passage that was read earlier. "Catch us the foxes, the little foxes that ruin the vineyards – for our vineyards are in blossom." (Song of Solomon 2:15)

That verse appears right in the midst of a love poem (2:8-17) where a young woman is talking about the man she loves. She rejoices in the young man's qualities and shares how wonderful his love makes her feel. But then, all of a sudden, she drops in this comment about "the little foxes that ruin vineyards." You see, while she is comparing their relationship to a beautiful vineyard in blossom, she is also acknowledging the possibility of little things entering their relationship and diminish it. She acknowledges those little foxes that sneak in and nibble at the grape clusters until the whole vineyard is wrecked. The little foxes of thoughtlessness, selfishness, taking one another for granted, being critical, controlling, and not listening add up over time and can be very destructive.

It's true that major health concerns like cancer and heart disease seem so much more serious than that of falling, and yet, we know that even little falls can lead to serious injuries. My family is living with this reality right now. Mom's major, cancer-related surgery back last October resulted in several weeks of recovery, but it's actually the unexpected fall in the familiar surroundings of her home at the beginning of February that has resulted in an even lengthier and more difficult recovery. Many of you also know from experience how little slip-ups and falls can have a huge impact on one's life.

So, Paul tells us to remain upright, and to be careful not to fall. He speaks about the common reality and danger of spiritual stumbles. In his letter to the first century church in Corinth, Paul also reminds the faithful just a few verses later in the same chapter about the importance of unity in Christ and unity as the Body of Christ in the midst of our falling habit. Even though falling is a common occurrence, it's never good so it's best to do our falling in as safe a place as possible. Because you and I are likely to be tripped up by little foxes, it's always better to be among those who aren't going to step around us, but who will help us get back up on our feet and even help us clean up afterwards.

A woman by the name of Ginny Grush of Farmington Hills, Michigan, wrote a letter to the editor telling of her experience of being in a crowded church in Bolivia

where she had been a Peace Corps volunteer. At one point in the service, she was so overcome by the heat, incense and candle smoke that she fainted and fell. When she came to, she realized that she was being passed along over the heads of the worshipers to the door where she could get some fresh air. Once outside, several church members fussed over her.

That's actually a good visual for how the church is called to care for one another following a fall. Rather than overlooking the damage or ignoring those who fall, we are to unite and help people get upright again. Unfortunately, sometimes when people take a spiritual or moral tumble, the first thing they do is separate themselves from the church. Perhaps, they think others are going to judge them. Maybe they think it would appear hypocritical to come. Maybe they are embarrassed or ashamed. Sometimes there is good reason to feel any and all of these ways, but cutting oneself off from what Christ intended to be a source of help and encouragement is never the best solution. The church that is truly the body of Christ is not only a place where we are challenged to acknowledge our sin and repent, it is most importantly a community of encouragement, support and transformation.

The reality of our human nature, the truth of our everyday choices reveal our susceptibility to falling. Yes, we are susceptible to those "scarlet" sins, but we are especially susceptible to those "gray" sins that are no less sin. It's those grayish sins, those little ones, those ones that don't seem so bad and are easy to ignore that trip us up day after day. Therefore, they are the ones that tend to have the most significant impact on our daily spiritual health.

Paul encourages us to take seriously all those little falls that add up and can ultimately have a profound impact on our lives and our souls. So during these days of Lent, be alert and honest and reflective of the daily tumbles in your life, and the impact those sinful tumbles have on your relationship with Jesus Christ and your ability to fulfill God's purpose for your life. As we acknowledge and admit these personal tumbles of ours, let us also as individual members of Christ's church commit ourselves to catching and lifting up one another. Amen.