

July 8, 2018

Church Planting
Stand Firm
Acts 25:6-12

Opening words: American Christian author and preacher, A. W. Tozer (1897-1963) once wrote, *"I remind you that there are churches so completely out of the hands of God that if the Holy Spirit withdrew from them, they wouldn't find it out for many months."* That quote makes me ask you this series of questions. How long do you think it would take for us to discover the Holy Spirit had withdrawn from Western Reserve? Would the Holy Spirit's exit happen in an instant? Would the Holy Spirit's exit be a slow erosion? How many would never notice the Holy Spirit was gone? Do you think the Holy Spirit left Western Reserve years ago? Do you think the Holy Spirit was ever here? Do you think the Holy Spirit is with us today? The Holy Spirit is important, because without the Holy Spirit we have no future.

By now you should know my task. During the summer months, I am preaching through the Book of Acts. I began in 2013, and I hope to finish this year. I have called this entire series, *Church Planting*. The reason I have made this major time commitment to this New Testament book is, I am trying to reconnect with the Holy Spirit. Let me be blunt. We need a revival. Never forget it. Acts is the testimony of the Holy Spirit. This is sermon number fifty-nine in the series. Our scripture reading for today is Acts 25:6-12. I have called this message *Stand Firm*.

Acts 25:6-12 ⁶ After spending eight or ten days with them, Festus went down to Caesarea. The next day he convened the court and ordered that Paul be brought before him. ⁷ When Paul came in, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him. They brought many serious charges against him, but they could not prove them. ⁸ Then Paul made his defense: "I have done nothing wrong against the Jewish law or against the temple or against Caesar."
⁹ Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, said to Paul, "Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and stand trial before me there on these charges?"
¹⁰ Paul answered: "I am now standing before Caesar's court, where I ought to be tried. I have not done any wrong to the Jews, as you yourself know very well. ¹¹ If, however, I am guilty of doing anything deserving death, I do not refuse to die. But if the charges brought against me by these Jews are not true, no one has the right to hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar!"
¹² After Festus had conferred with his council, he declared: "You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go!"

Albanian-born Mother Teresa (1910-1997) won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979 for her missionary work in India. She once said, *"We are not called to be successful. We are*

called to be faithful.” How can any Christian disagree with that quote? If you agree with that quote, say, **“Amen!”**

We find ourselves today in the twenty-fifth chapter of Acts. Do you remember the storyline? This section of Acts began in the twenty-second chapter. Paul had returned to Jerusalem with a love offering to help the needy in the Golden City. It should have been a happy reunion, but it wasn't. The new Jewish-Christians were against him because he had demoted the Old Testament law. The Jewish community was against him because he was promoting the resurrection of Jesus. Let me say this clearly. The people didn't just find Paul annoying, they hated him. A group of approximately forty had taken an oath to kill him. Their scheme was uncovered, and Paul was sent to Caesarea for his own protection. Last week, we looked at Paul's time with Governor Felix. The issue was spiritual maturity. I asked you the question, how spiritually mature are you? That takes us to today's lesson.

According to the last verse of the previous chapter, Felix remained governor for two more years. He was replaced by Porcius Festus. History tells us, he held the office for three years, AD 59 to 62. Like Felix, Festus's greatest problem was the growing Jewish hostility against Rome. To appease the Jews, the governors would do favors for the Jews. The question is, how many favors is too many favors? The Jews wanted Paul to stand trial in Jerusalem, so they could execute him. In the end, Paul goes to Rome. However, the issue is not, *where* Paul would be tried. The issue is, *why* he is being tried. In his own defense, Paul speaks the truth. He had done nothing wrong! He had not broken any Roman law. He had not broken any Jewish Law. The reason Paul is on trial is more personal. He simply told everyone about the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If he had never spoken of the resurrection, then there would be no trial. If he had rescinded his words about the resurrection of Jesus Christ, then the trial would have been canceled. But, Paul stood firm. Paul did speak of the resurrection and he didn't rescind his words. We are not really surprised that Paul stood firm. He was, after all, the Apostle Paul, the greatest missionary and evangelist the church has ever known. He stood firm because he was a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ. The question is not if Paul stood firm, the question is, will you stand firm? If that question makes you think, say, **“Amen!”** Paul is not the only example in the Bible of faithfulness. There are many.

One of the highlights for me during this calendar year was the Living Last Supper. You remember it. Thirteen men from the church played the parts of the of the characters in the Upper Room. Dressed in costume, one by one each disciple took their turn. Each disciple told their story. How they came to know Jesus. How Jesus changed their lives. What they did with the rest of their lives. Each one told us how they died. Except for Judas Iscariot, who hanged himself, and John, who died of old age, the disciples died a martyr's death. Tradition tells us, Andrew went to Russia and was crucified. Tradition tells us, Thomas went to India and was speared to death by four soldiers. Tradition tells us, Bartholomew was stabbed proclaiming the Gospel in Ethiopia. The Jewish historian Josephus tells us, James, the son of Alpheus, went to Syria, where he was stoned and

then stabbed to death. Tradition tells us, Peter was crucified upside down, unworthy of dying like Jesus. Do you get the point? These disciples died a martyr's death because they stood firm in the faith. We really aren't surprised because they were disciples of Jesus Christ. Surrounded by a world of problems, Paul stood firm in the faith too. We remember them as being faithful because they stood firm. The question is, how will you be remembered? If that question makes you think, say, "**Amen!**" They remained faithful to Jesus; others have walked away.

Brad Pitt will be remembered as a Hollywood elite. Everyone knows his name. Pitt is worth a small fortune. Some have estimated his worth at \$240 million. He is financially rich, but he is also spiritually bankrupt. It wasn't always that way. His parents were Baptist. They instilled the Christian faith into his and his siblings' souls at a young age. Pitt claimed his spiritual roots through college. He didn't denounce the faith until he was an adult. In his own words, he found the Christian faith to be too stifling. If you ask Brad Pitt today, he will be glad to tell you, he is an atheist. He says, he lives his life without religious influence. I know this is all true because it came from the internet 😊. It came from beliefnet.com. So, what went wrong? Why did Brad Pitt walk away from Jesus? It is a fair question. It isn't just Brad Pitt. Many have walked away from Jesus. I am not talking about not going to church. I am talking about walking away from Jesus himself. Do you know of anyone who has walked away from Jesus? You must know someone. There are so many.

There is an American Christian blogger by the name of Christina Patterson. She blogs at belovedwomen.org. She blogs for one reason. She wants to encourage people to stand firm in the faith. She encourages others to stand firm with Jesus because she knows standing firm is hard. She says, there are three basic reasons people walk away from Jesus. I think her thoughts have some merit. These are her reasons:

One of the greatest chapters in the Bible is the thirty-second chapter of Exodus. The people are already out of Egypt and the sea has been parted. Moses is on top of Mount Sinai, receiving the Ten Commandments. Moses has been gone quite awhile and the people are impatient. They are afraid the great lawgiver isn't going to return, so they begin to look for a replacement. You remember the story. The people made a golden calf, which was like the gods back in Egypt. When Charlton Heston, a mean Moses, returns, he is shocked by their idolatry. The point of the story is clear. We are not to have idols in our lives. God wants to be our top priority.

First, some walk away from Jesus because of modern day idols. None of us has ever made a Golden Calf, but we live in a world full of idols. Our idols are not necessarily bad things, but our idols are more important to us than God. That is bad. Is your family more important to you than God? Is your marriage more important to you than God? Are your children or grandchildren more important to you than God? Is your character or public image more important to you than God? Are your hobbies more important to you than God? Is your church more important to you than God? Is your

country more important than God? What is the most important thing to you? If your answer isn't God, then you have idols. One of the reasons people walk away from Jesus is modern day idols. Do you know of anyone who has replaced Jesus, who is perfect, with something that is only good? If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**" Some have walked away because of modern day idols. Some have walked away from Jesus because of earthly distractions.

Last Sunday afternoon, Kathryn and I drove to Sandusky. We spent the night and spent Monday at Cedar Point. We took our four-year-old granddaughter, Pippa, who brought her parents. On Sunday evening, we went out to dinner. I rode in the back seat of their car, next to Pippa. I did to her what I used to do to her mother and aunt. Once Pippa got lost in thought, I reached over and squeezed Pippa's knee. She squealed in laughter and I said, "Are you paying attention?" She rode the rest of the way to the restaurant holding her knees. After dinner we got back in the car, and we took the same seats. Pippa looked at me and said, "Grandpa, I am paying attention!" Do you know what I think? I think, God would like to squeeze our knees from time to time, because we aren't paying attention.

Second, some walk away from Jesus because of distractions. The mission statement of the United Methodist Church is to make disciples for Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. That sounds so easy, but we have made it so difficult. One of the reasons it is difficult is that we are so easily distracted. We are distracted by all kinds of things. There is building maintenance and cleaning. There are the potholes in the parking lot and the unlocked doors. There is the light that wasn't turned off in the bathroom. There is the selection and the quality of the music. There are our family problems. There is always a new form from the conference office. There is the latest piece of gossip and the latest complaint. Our denomination is distracted by social issues. There is always the question that won't go away: Why does the minister have to be so handsome? 😊 I think it is true; God would like to grab our knees and ask us the question, "Are you paying attention?" Some walk away from Jesus because of all the distractions. People don't come to church to make their lives more complicated. They come to church to experience Jesus. Can I ask you these questions? How much time, money, and energy have we spent on our distractions? How much time, money, and energy we have spent making disciples for the transformation of the world? How many disciples have we made lately? If those questions make you think, say, "**Amen!**" Some walk away from Jesus because of modern day idols. Some have walked away because of earthly distractions. Some have walked away from Jesus because of fear.

On Tuesday afternoon, I will begin my journey to Kryuyy Rih, Ukraine. I am excited about this trip. I have never been there before. I am looking forward to spending time with the team, the staff and the orphans. Can I say this? I am not brave, but I am not afraid of going. I guess I am unique, because many have told me they would be afraid to go. We live near Youngstown, Ohio; how much worse can it get? One person told me

point blank, "I don't like you going on these trips." I responded, "It's a good thing I don't need your permission."

Third, some have walked away from Jesus because of old fashioned fear. It isn't just a matter of physical safety. Fear can attack us on a variety of fronts. There is the fear of losing our popularity. There is the fear of losing control. There is the fear of losing our dignity. There is the fear of losing our money and the fear of failure. What frightens you? I am afraid of living a meaningless life. However, this is my greatest fear: the fear of trusting God. How far do you trust God? If that question makes you think, say, "**Amen!**" Some walk away from Jesus because of modern day idols. Some have walked away from Jesus because of earthly distractions. Some have walked away from Jesus because of old fashioned fear.

Let us look at the scripture one more time. There is the Apostle Paul. He has done nothing wrong, but the whole world seems to be against him. The Jewish-Christians are against him for demoting the Old Testament law. The Jewish community is against him for promoting the resurrection of Jesus. It would have been easy for him to walk away from Jesus, but Paul didn't do it. Instead, he stood firm. We aren't surprised, because he was a disciple of Jesus Christ. We weren't surprised the disciples stood firm, because they were disciples of Jesus Christ. This is the question you must answer: Are you going to stand firm? I know your answer. You are going to stand firm because you are a disciple of Jesus Christ too. Do you remember the quote from Mother Teresa? She once said, "*We are not called to be successful. We are called to be faithful.*" And all of God's faithful people said, "**Amen!**"