

“Faith Journey—Part 2”
Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

Pastor Mark McDaniel
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This morning I will pick up where I left off last week, as I continue my Faith Story:

I learned to live with the depression without the use of alcohol, so I thought I was doing better. I was wrong.

I was in a good relationship with a girl I had met in college. Unfortunately, she decided, at the end of our freshman year, that college wasn't for her, so she decided not to come back in the fall. We were able to maintain the relationship through that next year, but, with the distance and our busy schedules, it was getting more and more strained. By the time I was ready to go back to college for my junior year, we had broken up. That was a very difficult time for me.

Then I met Connie, and things got better. We got married, we started our new life together; I got a job; we bought a house; we had a baby; and then the dark clouds started gathering again—worse than before. I felt more abandoned by God than I had before. One Christmas Eve, when we were visiting my in-laws, Connie and her parents went to a Christmas Eve service, but I didn't want to have anything to do with it. That night, I stood outside in the freezing cold of northern Michigan, staring up at the stars, and begging God to give me a sign that he still cared about me.

Connie knew that something was wrong, that I was different, so she convinced me to go to a psychiatrist. I did, and was diagnosed with severe clinical depression. He started me on anti-depressants, and I did begin to feel better. The dark cloud wasn't completely gone, but at least I could see through it to the light.

During that period of time, we had our first child, Jessica, baptized at Connie's parents' church, because we didn't have a church of our own. When we started talking about having a second child, we both agreed that we wanted that child to be baptized in our church, so we started looking.

I was working at a hospital at that time, so I spread the word around to my co-workers that we were looking for a church to attend. We got many invitations, and visited many churches. We finally settled on the Presbyterian Church because it seemed to have the friendliest and most welcoming people, and, since our daughter attended the nursery school that met in that church, she was already comfortable in the building.

Connie and I became very involved in the church. We both served as Sunday school teachers, and we were both ordained as Deacons. I served for a time as the moderator of the Deacons. During my time with the Deacons, we began a ministry called Community Café. Every Thursday evening, we would serve a hot, nutritious meal, free to anyone in the community. When we started the program, we would have 20-30 folks a week. By the time I left to go to seminary, we were serving well over 100 folks a week. While preparing this sermon, I checked, and the Community Café is still going strong. Here is what they say on their web site.

“Community Café, for more than 20 years, continues to be one of the premier outreach ministries of our Church. Fellowship, as well as a hot, nutritious meal, is part of the experience of the Café.”

Another significant event for me was experienced as a part of the church drama team. We decided to stage a production of *Godspell* at the church. I played the role of Jesus. We only had two performances over one weekend, but it was very well received.

After that production ended, I was scheduled to direct a play at the community theater. Unfortunately, I didn't get enough people to audition for that play, so I asked the board of the community theater if my church troupe could do *Godspell* on those dates originally scheduled for the other play. They said that would be fine, so we had an opportunity to do the play again; this time for the community over two weekends with six performances. Before each performance, the cast and crew would meet in the makeup room, stand in a circle, holding hands, and dedicate the performance to God. Judging from the discussions we had with the different audiences, and the comments we received, I think we made a greater spiritual impact at those community performances than we had for the church performances.

For regular worship back at the church, I sang in the choir, sang solos, served as liturgist, and occasionally did the children's sermon. When our second child, Ryan, was born, he was baptized in our church, by our pastor, and was embraced by our faith family.

I finally came to the realization that God had not deserted me. I was just looking for God in all the wrong places. I knew that I should stop looking for what I had with The Spokesmen, and begin to recognize what I now had: a loving wife and two beautiful children, a supportive faith family, and the opportunity to serve God in a new way. That was when I began to feel God's call more urgently. God was telling me that I needed to become more involved in ministry to the larger church. I say "began" because it didn't happen all at once. I continued to push back, but a tragic incident finally convinced me to move forward.

It was after dinner on a Friday evening. Connie and I were at a car dealership on a highway north of Alma. The sun was very low, and very bright, in the western sky. If you were driving west-bound, you were easily blinded. As we were looking at the cars at the dealership we heard a huge BANG at the intersection. An east-bound car, traveling at 55 mph, had t-boned a west-bound car that had turned left directly in front of them.

I checked on the eastbound car, and saw two adults in the front seat. I checked the passenger, and realized that she was dead. The driver was moving, and didn't seem to be bleeding anywhere that I could see, so I went to check on the other driver. She had been thrown onto the floor on the passenger's side. She was unconscious, but she was breathing and had a strong pulse. I noticed that the other driver was trying to get out of his, so I went over to him, helped him out, told him to sit down, and propped him against the tire of his car. By that time, I heard sirens.

When the emergency personnel arrived, I told them what I knew, and stepped out of the way to let them work. They did find two children in the back seat of the eastbound car that I had

missed. A 10-year-old boy was seriously injured, but a 4-year-old girl only seemed to have some minor cuts. Tim, an EMT who was a friend of mine from the hospital, called me over and asked me to take the girl until they could get to her, as she was the least seriously injured. I got a gauze pad to put pressure on a gash on the back of her head, and took her in my arms.

She was crying and calling for her Mommy. I started to softly sing children's Bible songs as I rocked her gently back and forth, praying that God would be with her. As I stood there amid that chaos, I felt a sense of calm and peace. She must have felt it, too, because she calmed down and stopped crying. Finally, they were able to tend to her, so I handed her to Tim and moved out of the way. I thanked God for being with her, and me, and said prayers for the rest of the victims.

That night I told God that I was ready to take that leap of faith, enter seminary, and prepare for full-time Christian service. I guess that completes my pre-Seminary faith journey. I suppose I have a few more chapters in me covering Seminary, the five churches I have served, and my work with the presbytery, but those will have to wait.

Ministry is kind of like a rollercoaster—it has its ups and downs, but I have never regretted my decision. The depression makes ministry rather challenging at times, but it also gives me greater empathy as I counsel those with similar issues. However, it is important to me to always be up front and honest with my congregations about who and what I am. Hopefully, it helps you to understand me a little bit better. AMEN.