

THE FEAR OF FAILURE<sup>1</sup>  
Mark 6: 1-13  
A Communion Meditation by Thomas R. McKibbens  
October 2, 2011

We are in the middle of a series of sermons that I am calling “Things That Go Bump in the Night: Five Fears That Plague Us.” We began on 9/11 with “The Fear of Islam,” followed the next Sunday with “Fear of God,” and now we take up the subject of “The Fear of Failure.”

I

At the outset of preparing this sermon I thought to myself, “Tom, everyone will expect that they already know what you are going to say about failure. First, that failure is common with even the most successful people (usually accompanied by a salient illustration about Thomas Edison); second, that it is OK to fail and we must move on beyond our failures; and third, that God loves us even when we fail.” We’ve all heard enough sermons and pep talks about living beyond our failures to know what to expect.

Instead of heading down that familiar road, I want to start by considering the failure, not of individuals like you and me, but of the church. You remember, I am sure, the story of Galileo, who lived in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Orthodox religious belief at the time held that the Earth was the center of the

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<sup>1</sup> ©Thomas R. McKibbens, October 2, 2011.

universe and that the sun, moon, and stars all rotated around the Earth. The church taught that Psalm 104: 5 was literally true when it said that God *laid the foundations of the earth, that it should not be moved forever.*<sup>2</sup> There it is! The earth does not move; the Bible says so, and that was good enough for the church!

But Galileo saw things differently. He used the telescope he had invented, and he saw further into the sky than anyone. He used his mathematical skills and his geometric calculations, and he concluded that it was in fact the Earth that revolved around the Sun. At that, the alarm bells sounded in the church. One religious leader declared that “geometry is of the devil” and that “mathematicians should be banished as the authors of all heresies.” Another said that one cannot believe in God and also believe that the Earth revolved around the Sun.<sup>3</sup>

These religious leaders were afraid of failure—the failure to have the whole truth. They were afraid that scientific assertions would undermine the authority of the scriptures. Galileo was tried for heresy and found guilty in 1633. Church leaders forced him to recant, held him under house arrest for the remainder of this life, and banned his books. Only in 1992, three and a half centuries later, did the Catholic church finally admit that it had failed. The

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<sup>2</sup> Psalm 104: 5 (KJV).

<sup>3</sup> Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God* (New York: Free Press, 2006), pp. 154-55.

earth does indeed move. They finally admitted that Psalm 104 was never intended to be literal scientific truth, but was poetry intended to convey a theological truth about the way God related to the universe.

## II

Galileo was a free thinker, and some segments of the church have always been wary of free thinkers willing to challenge orthodoxy. Jesus was one of those free thinkers willing to challenge accepted orthodoxy. There were those in his day who set themselves up as experts on all things religious. They had all the answers. They considered themselves the spiritual masters of all others. Jesus said to beware of the teaching of the Pharisees.<sup>4</sup> Pharisaic orthodoxy said, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” Jesus said, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Pharisaic orthodoxy said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” Jesus said, “...whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.” That is to say, if you want to be a follower of Jesus, you better be a bit wary of straight-arrow orthodoxy because Jesus was constantly challenging straight-arrow orthodoxy.

## III

We live with a cultural orthodoxy that is so ingrained within us that we hardly think to challenge it. For example, successful churches are defined by

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 16: 6.

cultural orthodoxy solely in terms of membership, balanced budgets, buildings, money, and music programs. Go to any coffee shop, and you might overhear this conversation: “Where are you going to church now?” And the other person names a church. Then comes the question: “What’s your attendance on Sunday morning?”

How many warm bodies are in the pews of your church? How big is your budget? How many do you have on staff? These are the cultural orthodoxy questions. But what if we were to overhear questions Jesus would ask in the coffee shop? What do you think he would ask?

Cultural orthodoxy says, “How respectable are you?” Jesus says, “How much trouble have you gotten into lately in behalf of the despised and rejected of the world?” Cultural orthodoxy says, “How many people do you get into the church?” Jesus says, “How many people did you send out from the church to make a difference in the world?” Cultural orthodoxy says, “How much power and prestige do you have?” Jesus says, “How much have you done for the least of these?” Cultural orthodoxy says, “How much endowment do you have?” Jesus says, “How much love do you have?”

Friends, numbers are good. We want more people to come to church. Money is good—the more we have the more we can do with it to help the world. You will hear me speak fervently about the need to give our money as

stewardship time comes in a few weeks. But there are things more important than numbers and money! And if that is all we care about, then we might as well do what Jesus told his disciples to do: shake the dust off your feet!

#### IV

Truth is, we all fear failure. Nobody wants to fail. We all want to see this church booming. We all want to see the pews filled and the budget balanced. But if we are going to fear anything, let us fear real failure: the failure to take the teachings of Jesus seriously and follow those teachings as best we can understand them; the failure to love God with our whole heart and our neighbor as ourselves; the failure to do unto others as we would have them do unto us; the failure to love and care for one another; the failure to forgive one another; the failure to give a cup of cold water to the thirsty and bread for the hungry; the failure to put grace into practice; the failure to stand with “the least of these.” These are failures worth fearing.

As for cultural orthodoxy, it would consider Jesus an absolute, total, outright failure. Of his twelve disciples, one of them betrayed him, another denied him, and the rest ran away when it was dangerous. He never even had a budget or a stewardship drive or a staff of any kind. He had no music ministry or youth ministry or Sunday School. He likely never heard of an endowment. He got himself into trouble with the authorities and was

eventually arrested, tried, convicted, sentenced, and executed. That is not success; that, in the eyes of all but a few, was utter failure.

No wonder the Apostle Paul called the cross a stumbling block!<sup>5</sup> Of course it was! Who wants to follow a failure? But this failure was a success in things that really mattered, and because of that he lives among us still as the judge of all we do. Yet his judgment is full of grace, full of love, and full of compassion.

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<sup>5</sup> I Corinthians 1: 23.