

HOW DO WE HANDLE BURNOUT?<sup>1</sup>  
Matthew 3: 13-17  
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens  
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In January of 1990, Avianca Flight 52 from Columbia crashed just 15 miles short of New York's Kennedy Airport, killing 73 passengers. The reason for the crash? The plane just ran out of gas. The pilots, recognizing that they were low on gas, had requested "priority" landing. But because they had not used the word "emergency" in their request, and due to the heavy air traffic and bad weather, the plane was placed on a holding pattern. It finally just ran out of gas.

Is your physical and spiritual gas gauge nearing empty? Are you in a holding pattern, afraid you are about to crash? Let us think today about how to handle burnout.

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Notice, I did not say, "Let me tell you how to handle burnout!" Clergy are among those who are most prone to burnout. Clergy journals are full of articles about how clergy should guard against burnout. There is even a web site with the address: [www.pastorburnout.com](http://www.pastorburnout.com)! When Episcopal Bishop Gene Robinson of New Hampshire recently announced his plans to retire, he

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<sup>1</sup> ©Thomas R. McKibbens, January 9 2011.

was very honest about his reason: all the controversy surrounding his election has taken its toll, and he is exhausted.<sup>2</sup> This problem is the reason wise churches like this one provide a sabbatical for their minister. I wrote to this congregation at the end of last summer to express how deeply grateful I was and am for the sabbatical you provided. So I am serious when I propose that we think together about this problem, for burnout is a serious issue for any profession.

Burnout is not as easy to spot as, say, chickenpox or strep throat, but those who work with burnout assure us that it is more common than we imagine. Some people are invigorated by stress, while others fall victim to physical and emotional exhaustion, detachment from co-workers and friends, and loss of satisfaction or a sense of accomplishment. The economic stress individuals and families are under today adds to the problem. The threat of layoffs from work keeps many people under enormous stress. The pressure to perform at an extremely high level at work in order to keep a job places additional stress on many people.

In church, the place where we hope to find spiritual nourishment and replenishment, we are also under stress. Although there are clear exceptions,

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<sup>2</sup> Laurie Goodstein, "First Openly Gay Episcopal Bishop to Retire," *New York Times*, November 6, 2010. See also Lisa Wangsness, "Robinson Not Seeking a Quiet Retirement," *Boston Globe*, December 5, 2010.

most churches (even the so-called mega-churches) are experiencing financial stresses that they did not have a generation ago. Robert Schuller's Crystal Cathedral in California has filed for bankruptcy under a debt of \$48 million, leaving a trail of unpaid creditors from California to Washington, DC.<sup>3</sup> When the culture is under economic stress, church giving often becomes one of the places to make cuts. As a result, church programs and benevolences and staffing are often cut in a large number of congregations. All of that is to say that the very place where we hope to find spiritual nourishment and renewal can become a place of stress and exhaustion.

## II

Today we read the biblical story of the baptism of Jesus. I want to go out on a limb today and describe this story as an account of burnout. No, not on the part of Jesus, but on the part of John the Baptist. Think of John the Baptist as a successful mega-church preacher. He was wildly successful in drawing a crowd. While the poor priests in Jerusalem languished in the temple with a few of the faithful attending each Sabbath, this wild-eyed John the Baptist was drawing crowds so large that the gospel writers surely exaggerate when they say, *...people of Jerusalem and all Judea [ALL Judea?] were going out to him, and*

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<sup>3</sup> See "Crystal Cathedral's Cracks Show in Bankruptcy Filing," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 23, 2010.

*all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the River Jordan....*<sup>4</sup> He was a media star of his day!

But what if behind all the success in numbers, behind all the baptisms and applause, John had a gnawing sense of futility? And with that sense of futility came an exhaustion that he could not explain? Could it be that he was just going through the motions, but the old spark was gone? Could it be that he was experiencing a serious case of burnout?

That would help explain his response when Jesus came to him and asked for baptism. I imagine John saying under his breath to Jesus: *I need to be baptized by you; why do you come to me?* I wonder if in saying those words to Jesus, he was making a confession that he would not have made to anyone else. The thrill of the crowds was gone. Perhaps he had become a hollow husk of a minister, inwardly longing for that long-lost spirit that he saw so clearly in Jesus. *I need to be baptized by you*, he said. Perhaps he was disillusioned, exhausted, burned out.

### III

This brings us to the baptism of Jesus. We know the story. Jesus insisted that John baptize him, and when he came up out of the water, we are told that *suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the spirit of God*

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 3: 5.

*descending like a dove and alighting on him.* There is no indication that anyone else saw this vision. This was apparently an inner mystical experience. But it tells us a great deal about Jesus' conception of the spirit of God. He thought of the Spirit as a dove.

John, on the other hand, thought of the spirit of God in other terms. He spoke of God in terms of fiery judgment. That kind of angry, rigid, judgmental view of God cannot sustain itself over the long term. To think of God primarily in terms of vengeance and judgment is an open invitation to burnout. It invites disillusionment because that view of God expects the worst in people, and people usually oblige anyone who expects the worst.

Jesus' view of God stands in sharp contrast to John's. The dove, in Jewish thought, stands behind the creation story in Genesis 1, which speaks of the spirit of God hovering over chaos, and then sweeping down over the darkness of the abyss. Out of that formless void came all of creation. The dove makes another appearance in the flood story. When all of creation seemed to be destroyed by a great flood, Noah and his family got the first glimmer of hope when a dove returns to the ark, and in the dove's beak is a

freshly plucked olive leaf!<sup>5</sup> A sign of hope! To this day both the dove and the olive leaf are signs of peace.

Throughout the generations the spirit of God has swept into the lives of people when there was an utter sense of disillusionment. That spirit has brought hope and created order where there was only chaos. The spirit of God is not primarily fiery judgment, but the creation of something new and unexpected!

The truth about burnout is that it is often more disillusionment than exhaustion, more discouragement than fatigue. The image of God's spirit as a dove quietly fluttering over our lives is a reminder that God's spirit is always looking for ways to bring order out of chaos, hope out of despair, and meaning out of disillusionment.

In our generation we can take heart. Our attempts to build and strengthen a community of caring, to reach out to our neighbors in love, to support community projects that bring hope and wholeness, to combat hunger and homelessness, to welcome the stranger and offer a cup of cold water to the thirsty, to visit the sick and in prison, and to bring healing to age-old wounds, to provide a spiritual home to those who have been left out and ignored—all these efforts may hit roadblocks from time to time. People may

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<sup>5</sup> Genesis 8: 11.

shake their heads in disillusionment, but I am convinced that in the long run society cannot be healthy without a sense of the transcendent, and that generations of people will continue to find in Christ the most satisfying glimpse into what is both truly human and truly divine.

So we do not lose heart. If some or all of us die before these things are achieved, then let our children take up the torch, and after them let their children and their children's children join the succession of those faithful souls whom this burned-out world cannot burn out! We are told that only a few people started Salisbury Cathedral and handed it on for over six hundred years, until their descendents finished it. It takes a long-term faith to do great business and lift our spirits from the discouragement of burnout.

#### IV

In the meantime, there are moments when, like John the Baptist, we need a new baptism in God's spirit. Discouragement will sometimes get to you. Mere rest is insufficient. We cry out for a suffusion of God's spirit that comes as we are immersed in the quietness of worship, and the heavens are opened to us and the spirit of God descends like a dove upon us.

And out of the heavens comes a voice that says, "YOU...YOU...are my child. You are doing good work, and I am pleased."