

**THE CONFIDENCE TRAP 2 – A STUDY IN THE BOOK OF MARK
MARK 1:23-42
SEPTEMBER 18, 2016**

Florence Foster was born in 1868 in Pennsylvania. She grew up in a wealthy household with a passion for music. Early on, she began to chase her passion by playing the piano and she became quite good. She was known as Little Miss Foster and she played in multiple venues including the White House where she gave a recital for the sitting president.

Life threw Little Miss Foster a curveball after she got married and contracted a disease that caused nerve damage and ruined her dreams of being a professional pianist. Some years later, she received an inheritance that allowed her to renew the pursuit of her dream. She began to take voice lessons and immersed herself in the music scene of New York City. She became a patron of the arts who was greatly involved in and supportive of music in the city.

In 1912, Little Miss Foster was all grown up and became known as Lady Florence. She began to give private recitals for her friends. These recitals were always well attended and well received mainly because it was her friends attending them. You see, as it turns out, Florence Foster was a great pianist but a terrible vocalist. It was her dream. Her friends showed up anyway and they loved it. Florence put her money, her time and her heart into her dream, and she was terrible. If you don't believe me, please "enjoy" 30 seconds (or as much as we can stand) from one of her solos.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DMu9PKWthLE>

Why would someone ever put themselves out there in such a manner? Was she enabled by sycophants who made her delusional? Was she tone deaf and had no idea or maybe something in the middle? It is these questions that linger because she eventually rented out Carnegie Hall and gave a recital for all who would come. And it sold out. They applauded wildly and stood to their feet regularly. The next day critics excoriated her performance. So was she bad or good? Confident or delusional? I'm not sure. I'm more interested in the

motivation to put yourself out there in such a way. Even if you have a sneaking suspicion you aren't that great, why then would you expose yourself to such potential criticism?

It's a question people have always asked of other people. Because when you put yourself out there, it could be applause or it could be boos. You could stick the landing or fall on your face. It is the conundrum of being human and making your way through this world, and it leads to different kinds of people. Some of you today are unafraid to put yourself out there for the sake of your career, your family, the Kingdom of God. It comes naturally. You're like Peter, the first one out of the boat, your hand is up first, you talk first and think about it later. While others of you are more Thomas, sitting in the corner considering it, weighing it, drawing up a pros and cons list. While everyone else is hugging Jesus, you are summoning the courage to ask to touch the holes. You are just wired that way.

Last week, we began a series about the Gospel of Mark titled the *Confidence Trap*. The Gospel of Mark is full of people with way too much confidence and people with way too little. More specifically, there are people with way too much confidence in what they think they know about God and many people with way too little confidence in what God can do. We introduced these polarities last week. In reality, you can succumb to the confidence trap where all of your theology has been answered. No questions remain. You have certainty about everything you know about God. There is no mystery. There is no flexibility only a theological system that you have solved. On the other end of the spectrum, some of you have a confidence gap. You have little trust in a personal God or a miraculous Jesus. That he rose from the dead. That he cares about or is involved in your day-to-day life. You live on the periphery of this faith experience because of a family member who brings you along. You have a confidence gap, an inability to see past what you can see.

And you cannot fathom why someone would ever put themselves out there. How someone could take a step of faith and possibly look foolish. How someone could pray for something big and never see it materialize.

Mark 1:29-30

This is the first healing recorded in the book of Mark. It's Peter's mother-in-law who is suffering from a fever. Now fevers are extremely mundane today even though they can be occasionally dangerous, but don't forget 2,000 years ago, a fever could be extremely difficult and hard to manage. Beyond that, like many maladies of the ancient near east, people conflated physical illness with disfavor from God, and not without reason. Two different passages from the Pentateuch lay out the results for disobedience of God and breaking of the covenant. Guess which malady is included for breaking the covenant?

Leviticus 26:14-16

Deuteronomy 28: 22

Good, bad or otherwise, all fevers became aligned with sinfulness. Not only sinfulness, but someone so sinful that God has smote them with a fever to teach them a lesson. It's possible that God did use sickness and fever at some point to get the Israelites attention, but this was not a declaration for all fevers ever, but the Israelites didn't think like that.

So this person has a fever and ostensibly is being punished by God. When you extrapolate that out, if God has given the fever, only God can take the fever away. Keep that in mind as we continue. Before we get to that, this person has a fever and this person happens to be a woman. As we have talked about before, women in this culture were second-class citizens and sometimes little more than property. On the totem pole of life, they were not important or prioritized.

Three strikes here. Low power level, spiritually ostracized and don't forget she is sick. You may get what she has, and it says they talked to Jesus about her. Keep in mind, the disciples knew very little about Jesus. They had heard him preach a bit. They had seen him preach in a way no one had ever preached and had seen him exorcise a demon, which few people had ever done. Still they didn't know much about him. They didn't know about the depths of his compassion or his vast abilities to heal.

It all begins when they talked to Jesus. They brought her up. Keep in mind, as far as the disciples are concerned at this point, Jesus is a new rabbi, which means, a keeper of the law, an interpreter of the law and a teacher of it. They knew what Jesus knew, this woman was surely sick because of sin. Plus, she was of less importance because she was a woman. Plus, she was sick, yet they talked to Jesus about her. They brought her up.

There had to be a decent amount of fear regarding this moment. What if Jesus is angry? What if he kicks the disciples out for not being holy enough and bringing up this sick woman? What if they are publicly shamed for aligning themselves with this physically and spiritually sick lady? On top of all of this, it is the Sabbath, and no work is to be done on the Sabbath.

In all honesty, I don't know what they talked about, but they made a bold move and brought it up to Jesus. They could be shamed. They could be humiliated. They could be outcast, or nothing could happen. That's the risk of singing your song. But you know this story, and none of those bad things happened.

Mark 1:31

There was no shame. There was no rejection. In fact, Jesus did something completely unexpected. He heals her and does it on the Sabbath. Remember, according to their theology, God gave fevers and so only God could take them away, and this guy took her fever away. But God said don't work on the Sabbath, yet this guy just lifted this woman up and healed her both with elements of exertion and work. Can you imagine how this knotted up their minds theologically? The things they thought they knew were falling away in an instant.

Here is one of the take-aways: I think God likes boldness. Not recklessness but boldness. Speaking up for someone else. Putting yourself out there when it may backfire. Not just

thinking about doing something for someone but putting yourself out there. I think God honors that, and I think he likes that.

When Casey and I moved back from seminary, we had a 6'x12' trailer, a new apartment payment, a seminary degree and little else. Yet for some reason, God put it on our hearts to help send some inner city children to a Christian camp that we had grown up with. It was a life-changing camp for us, and we wanted that for them. I'm not sure why he gave us that idea, maybe because I had just finished from seminary, and he wanted me to thaw out from the sterility of the classroom experience and remember the real world. So I got the idea of sending a kid to camp, which would have been \$180 bucks. That was a lot of money to a seminary graduate with no job. It was a lot, but it was possible. Then God spoke to me clearly, I think you should pay for a cabin of kids, which is ten kids, and is ten times the price. This went from manageable to impossible in a heartbeat. Here is where it gets interesting. I thought if God wants to do that, he can bring us \$1,800 bucks, and we will pass it along. That is where we got push back. He wanted some boldness, and so with a shaky pen and paper, with nothing in our bank account, we wrote the camp and told them we planned on sending an entire cabin of kids to camp because we thought God was telling us to even though we didn't have any money.

Dropping that letter in the mailbox was bizarre, because there was now a chance for us to look dumb, for us to look reckless, and if we are honest, a chance for God to look dumb. If God told us, and it doesn't happen, then we didn't hear him correctly, he couldn't do it, or he isn't there. Either way someone comes out looking bad. But we did it anyway.

A week later in the new small group we had joined, a guy we barely knew, handed us a check and said God told him in a dream to give it to us. It was \$1,000. Then dominoes started to fall, and in no time, we were sending ten low-income kids to camp for a week to learn about Jesus. Little acts of faith often have rippled effects.

Mark 1:32-34

The amazing thing is what happens next. Everyone starts coming to Jesus. That first healing sets off a chain of events, a domino effect as everyone starts showing up to get healed. I believe Jesus had a plan and nobody forced his hand or his agenda, but I also know there are moments in the Bible, moments of boldness, which lead to miraculous outcomes. Jesus' mother encourages him to do something at a wedding, and he says, "It's not yet my time," but he does it anyway and a miracle occurs.

The boldness of these young disciples to ask Jesus for something, to advocate for someone else leads not only to her healing but the healing of countless others. Let me show you one other quick story that continues this theme.

Mark 1:40-45

You might already know this but just as a refresher, leprosy was a death sentence for more reasons than one. Leprosy would physically eat away at your body as lesions covered your skin and left you constantly in pain and agony. If the physical toll wasn't enough, there was also an emotional toll. If you contracted leprosy, you were to leave the community because of the highly infectious nature of the disease. You would be sent to a leper colony and spend your remaining days as a pariah. Finally, according to the Old Testament, a priest was the one to declare leprosy present or absent. There are actual Levitical standards for detecting and declaring leprosy. Because of this, people conflated physical disease with spiritual disease, and it was inferred that you were physically unclean because you must have done something spiritually unclean. Leprosy was a lesion upon the mind, body and soul. When Jesus heals this man, he is blessing him physically. He is also giving him the gift of returning to the community of his friends and family and he no longer has the spiritual stain of leprosy. This man has been restored in every sense of the word.

But it might not have happened. The story begins with the man approaching Jesus, which he was not supposed to do. He was supposed to keep his distance, and if people were

within six feet of him, he was supposed to declare himself unclean. He was supposed to keep his distance. A later rabbinic tradition stated that lepers were to receive 40 lashes for entering areas forbidden to them. Another rabbinic tradition, a rabbi was to protect the people from spiritual and physical impurity by throwing stones at lepers and yelling at them, "Go to your place and do not make others unclean."

So this man has some gumption. Some boldness. There is a chance he will get yelled at, maybe lashed, maybe stoned. He approaches Jesus, falls at his feet and begs for healing, and Jesus heals him. Jesus often responds to boldness. Think about it. The woman who had the issue of bleeding sneaks up and grabs his garment, which was a big no no but it led to her healing. There is also the story next week, where four friends dig a hole in the roof to get their disabled friend to the feet of Jesus. Jesus tells the story of a widow who repetitiously asks for justice and is granted it. The Bible says that in some places people did not believe and thus no miracles were done there. God favors boldness. He favors those who sing their song for all to hear.

Which brings us back to you. Some of you today are unwilling to sing because you have no confidence in God. Or maybe you did once and something happened that drained your confidence in him. Let me tell you something today. God favors the bold. He likes acts of faith. He likes those who step out and put their money where their mouth is. This is not about recklessness or name-it-and-claim-it theology that allows you to blackmail God into getting what you want.

If God is tugging on your heart, see where it goes. If you have felt the nudge but you haven't jumped, today is your day. The Bible is full of stories where people step on stage unsure of what will happen. Here is the good news for you today: stepping out in faith will never be for naught. Sometimes it will lead to a ripple effect. Your story will be miraculous and it will lead to a domino effect of other stories. You see, God's calling on your life is not just for you. It's for those who are watching you too.

For some of you today, this is something relatively small in which God is telling you to give some money away or God is telling you to walk across the room at work and check in on somebody. Maybe ask them over for dinner or invite them to church. Maybe it is something a bit bigger. Maybe God is telling you to change jobs because this one is stealing your soul. Or maybe he is telling you to reach out and reconcile to a wayward child or an estranged friend. For some of you today, it's something huge. Your marriage is teetering on the rocks and God is calling you to some audacious act of forgiveness or service to a spouse you do not think deserves it. Maybe he is calling you to adopt a child or become a foster parent. Maybe he is telling you to give it all away and follow him.

These are the types of invitations Jesus gave in the Bible and they didn't stop there. They still happen today. As we discussed last week, the call of Jesus is not right belief or asking him into your heart or praying a prayer. It is to follow, to take him up on risky propositions, to call his bluff if he asks you to do something outside of your comfort level or ability.

At the end of the day, this is for your joy. Listen, I like coming together on Sundays, to worship and listen to sermons, but if that is the totality of the Christian life, then I am probably out. But, if this time is a launching pad for adventures and risky endeavors for bold moments when God has to show up or the whole thing will collapse, that is something compelling. Not only for you but all those who are watching you.

Florence Foster Jenkins finally decided at the age of 76 to rent out Carnegie Hall and give a recital for everyone. It was her dream. The house was packed. It included people that weren't her friends and the reviews were brutal. Florence Foster Jenkins must have known she wasn't the best. She might have even known she wasn't that good. Otherwise, why only have concerts for her close friends? But she put herself out there and people wrote her letters that her music helped them in a time of need. Not necessarily because it was good music, maybe because they needed a laugh. Maybe because they liked seeing a dreamer dream, or maybe because they saw boldness and someone willing to put themselves out there for the sake of others. Imagine the life of Christ. Even at his resurrection, many believed but several still doubted. He's just a carpenter. He doesn't have impressive people

in his audience. He hasn't changed the government. He hasn't kicked out the Romans. As you know, time has told a different story. He started a movement that has changed the world. Whether you see it now or later, God favors the bold. He wants you to step out and trust him. He wants your confidence not in what you know but in what he can do.

No matter the results of what happens this week, I hope you will remember the words of Florence Foster Jenkins. "She famously said, "Some may say that I couldn't sing but no one can say that I didn't sing."