

“The spiritual practice of being wrong”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Acts 11:1-18

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Four years ago, our nation faced one of its greatest and most divisive crises of all time: is that dress blue and black or white and gold? I’m referring of course to the viral photo of a dress that had some convinced it was blue and black and others ready to die on the conviction that it was white and gold. If that wasn’t enough, last year, a viral audio file brought us to a full stop. I’m going to play that file for you now. [[Play file.](#)] Who heard the word “Yanny”? Now, who heard the word “Laurel”?

This single audio clip brought families and co-workers to the brink of civil war. In our house, Jenna was Team Yanny; I, Team Laurel.

Turns out that what you hear depends on whether you’re more attuned to higher or lower frequencies, what kind of speakers you’re using, your age and hearing ability, and so on. Also turns out that I was right, and Jenna was wrong (which I only say so gleefully because it’s such a rare occurrence). The recording is taken from a website that’s saying the word *laurel*. Don’t believe me? Still convinced that you’re right and it’s saying “Yanny,” and there’s nothing I can say to persuade you otherwise? Good, because that’s the topic of our sermon today.

Of course, that’s just silly fun, but what happens when we apply this principle to something that really matters, like recovery from a heart attack? That’s what Archie Cochrane, a Scottish doctor, wanted to know. Archie wanted to know whether it was better for heart attack patients to recover in hospitals or at home. All his colleagues—other doctors—thought he was crazy. Of course hospitals were the best place for patients to recover!

Midway through his trial, Archie presented his data to his colleagues.

He said, “Well, gentlemen, turns out you’re right. It is dangerous for patients to recover from heart attacks at home. They should be in a hospital. And there’s this uproar and all the doctors start pounding the table and saying we always said you’re unethical, Archie. You’re killing people with your clinical trials. And there’s all this huge hubbub. Archie lets it die down. And then he says, well, that’s very interesting, gentlemen, because when I gave you the table of results, I swapped the two columns around. It turns out your hospitals are killing people, and they should be at home. Would you like to close down the trial now? (Tim Hartford, TED Talk, “Why do complex systems thrive on trial and error?”)

Economist and journalist Tim Hartford calls this the “God complex,” the belief that we’re infallible, all-knowing. Others of us might call it “arrogance.” It’s the assumption that we’re right; nothing can convince us otherwise.

It's easy to see how this arrogance has infected the extremes of society: flat-Earthers, anti-vaxxers, climate change-deniers, and the like. But the truth is that we are all susceptible. It happens every time I stop listening to what you're saying and am thinking only of what I'm going to argue. It happens every time I open the Bible and think I already know what it says. It happens whenever I persist in something I know is wrong, because I'm afraid to admit I made a mistake, afraid of what people will think of me.

We live in a culture that isn't exactly warm and forgiving. Make a mistake, and suddenly you're the limping gazelle on Planet Earth. The lions start licking their lips.

But there's also a more fundamental worry: if we admit that we got something wrong, we might start to wonder what else we've been wrong about. It could dismantle our whole world view.

So, rather than pull at that thread, we pretend like we're perfect. We ignore our blind spots. We entrench. Laurel or Yanny. And the problem is that when we close up shop like this, when we stop being curious about what we don't know, when we stop exploring our mistakes, we stop growing. As a church. As a society.

It's at this crossroad where we meet Peter today, in the Book of Acts. The church was just beginning, and it was embroiled in a debate: Who gets to count as a Christian? Who gets to belong? There were some who argued that the church should only exist for Jewish-Christians. Others argued that the church should be open to all, to Gentiles as well as Jews.

This debate hinged on a deeper question: Are we made righteous because we follow certain laws, eat certain things, do what is right and moral? Or are we made righteous, not because of anything we've done, but because of what Christ has done, which is choose to love and save us? That's a hard question, because no one had ever really thought about absolute grace before. It was a new idea.

Peter's in the first camp. He believes what he's been taught all his life: you have to obey certain laws to belong, to be saved. This means some people are in, some are out.

He is so sure that this is the right way that even the voice of God can't convince him otherwise. God gives Peter a vision of all these foods he's not supposed to eat and tells him to eat them. Peter replies, "No way, Lord; I've lived my life by these distinctions; no way am I giving them up now."

It takes God three times to convince Peter to accept that he's wrong.

And this is the guy whom Jesus names the rock of the church! Peter, who is always getting things wrong. Always! He's the foundation of the church. Why?

Three reasons.

First, by making Peter our leader, Jesus reminds us that we don't live in a black-and-white world, where you're either good or bad, in or out, smart or stupid. Peter *is* a brave and faithful disciple, who gives up everything to follow Jesus, who receives the Holy Spirit and leads the church—and

he's also the guy who denies Jesus, who never fully gets it, who refuses to believe something even when God tells him. Peter's both, just like we're both. Which means that when we admit a mistake, it doesn't make us bad, it doesn't push us out, any more than it did Peter. It just makes us human.

Second, what's important is not that Peter was wrong; it's that eventually he admits it and accepts the new vision that God gives him. He goes to a home of Gentiles, men he used to consider outsiders, rejects, and suddenly, he sees God's power and love in them, and he says, "If then God gave them the same gift... who was I that I could hinder God?" Because of his openness, the church grew; new people joined; and a new understanding of grace emerged. We need more leaders like that.

Third, when we hear this story in Acts, Peter's telling it to other leaders of the church who still think like he used to think. It must have been so tempting for Peter to lecture them from a posture of self-righteousness and condemnation, as is so common today. But he doesn't. Instead, he tells them a story of how he was wrong and how God helped him understand. He leads by humility. He uses his wrong to help them see the right.

Brian Resnick calls this "intellectual humility." I call it the spiritual discipline of being wrong. It's the willingness to listen to others, to God, to our own conscience and mind, to be open to the possibility that we are wrong, and to admit it, unabashedly, when we are. To use that wrong to make us stronger, wiser, better, and more compassionate.

It's actually the basis of our Presbyterian tradition. As Presbyterians, we are rooted in the conviction that we are prone to error; we have an incomplete understanding of truth. And so we remain open to the guidance of God to new understandings, discerned collectively. It's why we say we are a people always reforming, always being reformed. It's why a Presbyterian pastor like Henry Garnet, a former slave, could stand before the House of Representatives in 1865 and call for a true emancipation from the wrong of slavery and inequality. [Hold up bulletin insert about Garnet.] It's why we could repent of patriarchy and homophobia and other wrongs. It's why even these stiff Presbyterians can learn to dance, and evangelize, and go out beyond those walls. Because we are never finished. We are clay, still in the Potter's hands.

It's the basis of our Easter faith. It is how Easter is possible. We thought death ruled. We were sure of it. But with the resurrection of Jesus, God invites us to rethink and open our eyes to new revelation.

Let's be a church like Peter. We say it right there on our bulletins every week. We don't have all the answers. God knows I don't; Jenna knows that too. But we'd love to look for them together, with you. We'd love to ask hard questions, and debate hard issues, and study Scripture, and practice community, and take a stand for what we believe true, and just, and loving. And when we're wrong, and we will be, to be curious about that wrong, to grow and find a better, more complete truth, a better, more complete justice and love. That's the story of the church of Acts. That's the spiritual discipline of being wrong. **Amen.**