

You Asked for It: What If We're Wrong?
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: Acts 10 (selected verses)

I don't suppose I ever step into the pulpit without remembering Mark Twain's observation that if every person who sleeps during the sermon were laid end to end...they'd be a lot more comfortable. Call it an occupational hazard in our visual, high-tech culture. While I don't underestimate the power of language, of the spoken and written word, I am also realistic about context and competition, especially in the summer months. Hence our annual summer sermon series "You Asked for It."

But what was born out of a desire to pique your interest in summer worship has grown into an opportunity for genuine dialog between pastor and people. The best sermons in my opinion are not ones that dazzle the congregation with their language and erudition, but ones in which members of the congregation can readily find themselves. . . .and the spiritual resources needed to live faithfully in these complex times. Your questions and topic suggestions open a door into you and the things that concern you, and contribute to the on-going conversation shaped by Scripture, tradition, experience, and that mysterious movement of the living Spirit of God. The line-up is rich: there are explicitly theological themes: how can I know the will of God? how can we in the mainline churches get our message of love and joy to the multitude who envision Christianity as self-serving, with a narrow and literal reading of the Bible? Why does Fairmount pray the Lord's Prayer differently from other Churches?—specifically why do we say "Leave us not in temptation" rather than "Lead us not into temptation?"

There are questions ripped from the headlines of the daily newspaper: Discuss the spiritual, financial and human costs of the war in Iraq; provide some Christian perspectives on self-determination about death and dying; What can heal the deep divisions between perspectives on life and choice? What does Reformed theology teach about "just war"—are there evils so great that it is morally justifiable to counter them with another evil?

The #1-requested topic is the same one as the past two years: forgiveness. I guess we need to keep practicing that one until we get it right.

I want to say at the beginning that I am grateful for your topics and questions, for allowing your church insight into your heart and mind and soul. May God illuminate our speaking and our hearing, and keep us awake and attentive to God's Word.

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What if we're wrong? The topic under consideration today cuts to the chase. The questioner—a young person--has encountered and appreciates the diversity of religions in our community and wondered about the truth of Christianity. *What if the Muslims have it right, or the Hindus, or some other religious group?* Underlying these questions seemed to be the crucial matter of outcome: *if we're wrong, will we be condemned?*

The logical text for this sermon might seem to come from the gospel according to John in the fourteenth chapter at the sixth verse, in which Jesus is preparing the disciples for his imminent departure from the earth. He remarks that they know the way where he is going. One of the disciples presses him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going. How can we know the way?" And Jesus delivers the oft-quoted response "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Case closed. I guess one possible response to this young person's question is, "We're *not* wrong. Stop worrying about it. We have the way, the truth, and the life." Sometimes I hear this text used to shut down questions, as if they represent a threat to faith. And unfortunately this text is used on occasion to make judgments about people of other faith traditions, who do not worship Jesus as the Son of God. Because it comes from the Christian sacred text, it clearly is a faith statement, and as such is open to the same scrutiny as the original question: *...but what if we're wrong?*

So I've chosen another text instead, one that I believe speaks to the underlying concern by illustrating what the early church did when it discovered one of its core understandings to be...well, wrong. To understand the sea change represented in this text, we need to recall that the early church began as a movement within Judaism. Jesus, of course, was a Jew, and so were the first disciples. They ordered their lives in obedience to Torah, the Jewish law, and observed the customs and rituals outlined there.

The new believers at Pentecost were also Jewish, part of the covenant people. In fact, the first church conflict arose when non-Jewish people became attracted to “the Way” as it was called. Apparently the matter was hotly debated, a conflict between those who believed that new non-Jewish believers had to adhere to behaviors and practice as set forth in Torah (in essence, to become Jewish), and those who believed these practices didn’t matter as long as one affirmed Jesus as Lord. While to our contemporary ears this matter may seem trivial, it was no less significant then, than our debates about, say, homosexuality are now. Listen for God’s Word to the church in the reading from the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 10, at the first verse; found on page____ of the chapel/pew Bibles if you care to read along.

[ACTS CHAPTER 10]

What if we’re wrong? Well, the church has always been “wrong” in some ways. Our knowledge is partial and incomplete. Our understanding is limited and prone to error. To acknowledge this is not to diminish faith, but to be reminded that we don’t have the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. The church is a body of seekers, walking together on a path we believe will lead us closer to God. As Christians we find that path revealed in the person and ministry of Jesus Christ, including his death and resurrection. Furthermore, we experience it as a *good* way. Christian faith has transformed individual lives and made a positive difference in communities and nations.

As I say these things, however, I am aware that except for the content, adherents of other religious traditions might describe their truth similarly. A Jew would point to Torah as the reflection of God’s covenantal love. Buddhists speak of “the way” of enlightenment that leads to the Universal Consciousness. Muslims are required to show their praise to Allah through a discipline of regular prayer and contributing generously to those in need. Are these religious expressions not equally a mix of “right” and “wrong” as Christianity? In his book written after 9/11, columnist Thomas Friedman discussed religious strife with Rabbi David Hartman, who works for an organization committed to bringing Jews and Muslims together in search of mutual understanding. Rabbi Hartman asked a profound question that bears on our topic: *Is single-minded fanaticism a necessity for passion and religious survival, or can we have a multilingual view of God—a notion that God is not exhausted by just one religious path?* [Friedman, *Longitudes and Attitudes: Exploring the World after September 11, 2002*, p. 113]

How you answer that question depends in part about your fundamental view of religion. There are those who are absolutist—that is, they see their religion as the one true one. On the opposite end of the scale are those who see all religions as human inventions without any transcendent reality behind them. Somewhere along that spectrum is the understanding that all religions are human inventions based on experiences of the sacred. There is a reality behind what can be known through science and the senses. Religions point to this reality, to the absolute, but they are not themselves that absolute.

Biblical scholar and author Marcus Borg (*Heart of Christianity*, p. 218) envisions the human search for God as climbing a mountain, with the world's religions pictured as many paths going up it. At the bottom, the paths are farthest apart (the doctrines, beliefs, practices and rituals). As the paths lead higher, they become closer together until they converge on the mountaintop. The place to which they lead is not "heaven," but to God; not the next life, but this one, with God here and now.

Huston Smith –historian of religion and religious thought (*Why Religion Matters*, 2001)—counters the distinction often made between "spirituality" and "religion." Religion is to spirituality what institutions of learning are to education. One can learn about the world and become educated without schools or books, but it is like reinventing the wheel in every generation. Institutions of learning are the way education gets traction in history; so also religion is the way spirituality gets traction in history. The beliefs, practices, "organized" part of it are vessels of spirituality, bearers of the divine that help us focus vague notions and take hold of fleeting feelings. In the Acts text, the church codified its conviction that what God had created was not to be dismissed, belittled, or excluded. (something the Church has forgotten over the years, and has needed prophets and reformers to recall us to its truth).

When a Christian seeker asked the Dalai Lama whether she should become a Buddhist, his response was "No, become more deeply Christian; live more deeply into your own tradition." Huston Smith makes the same point with the metaphor of digging a well: if what you're looking for is water, better to dig one well sixty feet deep than to dig six wells ten feet deep.

But what if we're wrong? We could be. But the proof of the pudding, they say, is in the eating. And finally, Christianity is not so much a set of philosophical tenets to be proven true or false, but a life path. As someone who has been on the journey for ... half a century, I can say that this path has been a good one, a joyful and purposive one. It has provided a light for the way--I'd have stumbled even more without it.

It has created community where there was none before. On my own, I might have chosen other friends, and in so doing missed the witness and wisdom of these companions (the ones with whom we share bread, the literal meaning of the word). That includes you! We are rooted in tradition, so we don't have to reinvent the wheel in every generation. The Christian life pulls me out of self-centeredness and offers me the joy of service, of self-giving, and even sacrifice. The example of Jesus shows me how to live with compassion, and helps me do so. Jesus shows me the heart of God and it is a heart of unconditional love, of grace, of passion to transform the whole creation and bring it to life, abundant and eternal. In the end, if we discover that the claims of Christianity are false, it will have been a good ride, a worthy life.

Friends, the best way to answer this question is to try it out. Risk walking the Christian path! Live the faith, even with your questions, your doubts, your honest wondering. What if we're wrong? You'll never know, unless you experience the path of relationship and transformation yourself. Grace Hopper, the 79 year old woman who retired as a rear-admiral in the Navy had a saying she offered everyone, from the greenest recruit to the most seasoned veteran. It works well in reference to the Christian journey: "A ship is safe in port, but that is not what the ship was built for." Go out and live it!

O THE DEPTH OF THE RICHES AND WISDOM AND KNOWLEDGE OF GOD!
FOR FROM GOD AND THROUGH GOD AND TO GOD ARE ALL THINGS. TO
GOD BE GLORY FOREVERMORE. AMEN.

Rev. Louise F. Westfall, D.Min., Pastor