



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Wrong”

(or **“The Rightness of Being Wrong”**)

II Samuel 12:1-7a, Acts 9:1-9

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I was driving on an interstate in the research triangle around Raleigh. You know how congested the roads can get around there. I couldn't believe it. I came up behind two cars going *35 miles an hour!* Their windows were rolled down and they were chatting away. One had his arm out the window gesturing in a friendly way to make his point. Cars slowed down and piled up behind me, but I guess they had a lot to catch up on because they wouldn't stop. It got beyond ridiculous so, finally, I pulled over on the shoulder and passed them. I then passed the only car in front of them. I then looked in my rearview mirror to give them one final, scornful look. It was then I noticed that the other car I passed was weaving all over the road. In a moment, it all came to me. This was a dangerous drunk driver on the road and those two individuals were protecting everyone behind them. I was sure they had called 911 and were waiting until a patrol car arrived to remove the hazard.

I was wrong about the whole situation, and I felt stupid.

“What does it feel like to be wrong?” In a TED Talk, Kathryn Schulz asked her audience that question. They shouted answers like:

Bad

Embarrassing

Ashamed

Silly

Dumb



She then responded, “No, it doesn’t feel like any of those things. What it feels like to be wrong is exactly what it feels like to be right. It is only when you *realize* you are wrong that you feel bad, embarrassed, ashamed, silly.” This is called, “Error Blindness;” to be wrong, but not see it... to merrily live in a “*zone of rightness*.”

Schulz compared Error Blindness to a Road Runner cartoon where Wiley Coyote runs off the cliff without realizing it. Then comes the moment of realization. He looks down, sees the drop below him, looks up at the viewer with an “Uh oh” expression. Then his body plummets stretching his neck, till his head snaps down.

He always survives the crash below, but it can’t feel good.

And it usually doesn’t feel good when we suddenly realize we are wrong.

Our passages are both about such a moment. Each is a story about having that dreadful experience of realizing not only that one is wrong, but also the damage being wrong has done.

II Samuel 12:1-7a

¹ And the LORD sent Nathan to David. He came to him, and said to him, “There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. ² The rich man had very many flocks and herds; ³ but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. ⁴ Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man’s lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him.” ⁵ Then David’s anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, “As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; ⁶ he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.”

⁷ Nathan said to David, “You are the man!”

Acts 9:1-9

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³ Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” ⁵ He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶ But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” ⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. ⁸ Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹ For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.



These stories are iconic. Each describes a terrible moment when two of the most significant figures of scripture, David and Paul, suddenly realize that they are terribly wrong. It is a devastating experience, and yet in Christian tradition we celebrate both moments because they are turning points in the lives of people who were servants of God.

For Saul, who changes his name to Paul after this experience, the moment is devastating because before he realizes he is wrong, he is convinced he is *doing the work of God*. He had been living in the kind of determined zone of rightness that only a zealot knows... you know, those who are so caught up in a righteous cause that their filter cancels out any possibility of righteousness in those who are not in it. He is defending the true faith, seeking to cleanse the Jewish people of the corruption of Christianity. So certain is he of the *rightness* of his cause, he joins in the killing of those following Jesus, the one Saul is certain is a false messiah. It is unclear whether he, like David, is guilty of actual murder, but his hands are not clean.

And then, the moment. He is stopped in his tracks when the crucified Jesus appears on the road in front of him and asks, “**Why do you persecute me?**” In that blinding moment, Saul realizes that he is attacking the God he thinks he is defending. He is devastated and for three days cannot see straight or hold his food and drink down. On the third day, he rose from his desperation with a new name, Paul, and a new cause, following Jesus.

You might think that King David’s devastating moment is different in that he already knows he is in the wrong. He had an affair with the wife of one of his most loyal soldiers. Learning she was pregnant, he tried to cover up what he had done—first by trying to trick Uriah into thinking the child was his and then, when that did not work, arranging to have Uriah exposed in battle so he would be killed.

But here is where David is like Saul in being wrong and not knowing it. He thinks he has *gotten away with it*. But a prophet pays him a visit. Nathan tells a story of a powerful man who steals something beloved from a poor man, simply because he is able to do so. David is furious and cries for punitive justice, only to then be told that the story was about him all along. “**You are the man!**” Nathan says, and in the moment of his saying it, David’s denial is pierced and he realizes that his secret is no secret at all. Shame and guilt overwhelm him.

As I said, these stories are iconic. They have been central stories for the church in talking about sin; our need to confess our sin and our need for forgiveness. They are stories about how committed moral wrongs diminish us as human beings and as children of God. We become less than who we were created to be. Guilt, and sometimes shame are the ugly but appropriate responses and, in the light of God’s grace, are the means by which we are driven to confess, seek repair and begin again... maybe even gain a new identity.

But we need to be careful with these stories, and we need to be careful with our theology of sin, because while these stories are about being wrong, there is more to being wrong than what these stories have to say.

I’m going to repeat that: *These stories are about being wrong, but there is more to being wrong than what these stories have to say.*



Think about our church practice of offering a corporate Prayer of Confession in worship on Sunday mornings. We did so earlier in this service. The words you were to say are printed in the bulletin or were shown to you on a slide. Occasionally, I have to defend this odd practice of asking everyone to confess together something like the prayer we prayed, or this ancient prayer:

We have left undone those things which we ought to have done,
And we have done those things which we ought not to have done,
And there is no health in us.

I remember a conversation with someone who had a hard time praying a prayer like that in church. When she looked at what she was asked to say out loud along with everyone around her, including people she did not even know, she wondered, “Why do I have to pray this? This prayer doesn’t speak for anything I did this week. What sins did I commit? What did I do that was so wrong?”

I don’t remember all that I said then, but it seemed to help. But, now that I’ve had more time to think, whatever I told her, I have more to say to her today. For not only do I want to defend the practice of corporate confession, I want her to know that she was heard, and she has a point.

If you’ve heard me defend the practice of confessing sins in church, indulge me as I repeat myself. With all of liturgy, we are practicing how to live faithful lives. Corporate prayers of confession are not meant to be manipulative. They are not meant to artificially create a devastating moment such as those experienced by David and Saul. We pray them to prepare for when those moments do come in our lives. They remind us first to be open to the possibility that we may be wrong,

that we are not perfect,
that we are capable of harming others with what we do or fail to do.

Then, when we realize that we have done harm, and that we can do even greater harm by denying it, we’ll be better prepared to admit it and seek to repair what we have done. We’ll be better supported, too, because we’ve also practiced remembering that we find healing and wholeness in God’s love and grace.

That’s my defense of the Prayer of Confession. But while the Prayer of Confession is about being wrong, *there is more to being wrong than what the Prayer of Confession has to say.*

Go back to the words of the classic prayer I quoted earlier. Remember the last words, “There is no health in us”? Those words date back to at least 1552, and the doctrine behind it, the doctrine of total depravity, dates back at least to St. Anselm. Anselm was a brilliant theologian for his time, but his understanding of human nature was, I believe, *flawed*. He said that the very fact that we human beings are fallible—

the very fact that our knowledge is limited,
that we make mistakes,
that we have to practice and learn—
points to our fallen nature.



Our fallibility points to our depravity.
That we get things wrong... makes us wrong.

Did you hear that? Anselm wasn't just talking about moral wrongs—
the wrong of having an affair and then trying to cover it up with murder;
or the wrong of zealous self-righteousness that tries to cancel others out
because they dare to follow a different path;
the wrongs that violate the ten commandments,
that violate the laws of the land,
that violate the land itself;
the wrongs that violate the healthy boundaries of a relationship.

No, he was talking about *all* wrongs.
Even our mistakes are signs of our depravity.
This doctrine so easily leads to this terrible idea so many of us have:
To get something wrong must mean there is something wrong with us.

No wonder we hate to admit that we are wrong.

Truly, with no disrespect for Anselm, I must say that I believe that he was wrong about being wrong. Another saint had it much more right when he said something that was later adapted—and diluted—by Descartes. St. Augustine said, “**I err, therefore I am.**” We make mistakes because it is within the nature of our humanity to do so. We are not gods and so we do not, nor will we ever—in this life anyway—know all there is to know. We will never get it right in what we do, even when it is our intention to do what is right. It is not shameful to be this way. It is to be human. It is to be embraced so we can gain the crowning virtue of Christianity: humility.

I have a terrible memory, but I remember something my pastor-father told me when I was a kid. When you hear it, you'll wonder why something like this stuck with a child. He said that he thought that sometimes in Sunday worship, instead of having a *Prayer of Confession*, we should have a *Prayer of Acceptance*. We should offer a prayer that asks God to help us accept that we're not going to get everything right, and that doesn't make us bad people. Dad wasn't talking about those true sins where our pride or shame causes us to do or not do something when we know better. He was saying that it is healthy to accept that we are limited, and we need to be reminded that God gives us grace—and that means we should give ourselves a break. Our value should not be tied up in being right all the time. There is, in other words, *a rightness to being wrong*.

I want to go back to Kathryn Schulz who gave the TED Talk I talked about before reading our passages. In her book, *Being Wrong: Living on the Edge of Error*, she argues that while we have to assume most of the time that we are right in order to be productive (second guessing ourselves all the time is not a smart strategy), we should accept that even in our “Zone of Rightness” there is some degree in which we are wrong. Always. And that, she says, is what makes life such a great adventure as we continue to discover what we did not know before.



For instance, imagine living in a world where it is common knowledge that the world is flat. In that world, you can draw accurate maps to navigate by and define borders so you can be better neighbors, friends, and enemies. You can enjoy the beauty of the stars overhead and marvel at how the sky, which is just out of reach, is a ceiling allowing beautiful light to shine through. You can write poetry about it. You can appreciate each sun as it crosses the sky and then burns out on the horizon, then anticipate the new sun that will be born tomorrow. So much was wrong in the minds of those then who thought they were right, yet still survived and often thrived despite what they had wrong.

Now imagine living in a world that is now known to be round and revolves around the center of the universe, which is the sun. You enjoy hearing the stories passed on of the people and places on the other side of the globe, so unlike the small part of the world where you have lived your life. You hear also of the discovery of the bones of huge animals. They are called dinosaurs, which means “terrible lizards,” and you wonder if somewhere on this round earth those lizards are roaming still. So much was wrong in the mind of those who lived in that world, and yet they survived and sometimes thrived.

Now imagine living in the world we live in today. We know that the sun is simply a minor star of an immense galaxy, which is itself one of countless other galaxies. We know that it takes millions of years for the light of stars to reach our eyes. We live successfully in this world, too. We are even able to send our billionaires into space. But let’s be clear: The day will come when others will say about us, “[If they only knew...](#)”.

We moved from one world to the next because of the gift of our being wrong. For us to fully enjoy the wonder of God’s creation, it requires that we step out of the tiny, suffocating space of insisting on being right and looking around to see what else we have to learn, and to be willing to say, “[What do you know? I was wrong.](#)”

Just a week or so ago, I heard an interview with, I think, Ira Glass. If it wasn’t him, it was one of the producers of the wildly popular podcast, *This American Life*. He said that the joke among the staff is that every one of their stories is about being wrong. What makes the stories interesting is the humanity of them, and thus they are always about people who have to let go of what they thought was true... sometimes, as with Saul, to a different identity.

Mind you, I am not forgetting the harm our being wrong can do. I have not left David and Saul behind. If we get so defensive about being wrong about things that are simply mistakes and shouldn’t inspire awful feelings of being embarrassed, silly, dumb... how much more unwilling we are to admit those wrongs that are at least flavored with evil. With David, it was doing something he knew to be wrong but tried to cover up. With Saul, it was doing something he was certain was right which blinded him to the great harm he actually was doing.

What is it with you and with me? I don’t know where you need to ask this question in your life, but what are those areas where we are perhaps too confident we are right but where we should be more confident that we are, at least in part, wrong?

- Does it have to do with race? I’m talking about *all* theories about race, and who it is that we think are racist and who are not?



- Does it have to do with health and medicine? Our certitudes about viruses, masks, and vaccines?
- Does it have to do with elections and candidates?
- Does it have to do with the virtues, but especially the faults
 - of those we love
 - and those we hate?
- Does it have to do with just how smart or stupid,
 - how wonderful or how shameful
 - we think we are?
- Does it have to do with what we know of the mind and will of God?

We have to survive and we should seek to thrive in life, so of course we need to spend most of our time in a zone of rightness. We need to act on what we think we know, and we need to take stands about what we believe is moral, ethical, and important.

But let's remember to embrace the right kind of wrongness.

- Let's stop making "being right" the key to our value and identity as human beings so
 - we can be less defensive,
 - less ready to demonize and attack those who challenge us,
 - more ready to consider data and reasons that might prove us wrong,
 - more able to get out of our own way, and
 - more ready to enjoy the adventure of life.

For remember, because it makes us human, there is *a certain rightness to being wrong*.

