

“Spin Control”
Jeremiah 18:1-11
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I’m pretty sure you’ve heard one or more of the following statements:

I was just following orders.

My subordinates must have done this without my knowledge.

My opponent is just using this small misunderstanding for political purposes.

It’s not about the money.

I’m just glad to be able to help the team.

Even though my opponent won more votes, our second place finish shows
momentum is building for our platform

We will find the person responsible.

This is an isolated incident.

The woman gave it to me to eat.

The serpent tricked me and I ate it.

Spin, the mostly political, but also personal, practice of making the best of a bad public relations situation, is like putting makeup on a monkey; it has mostly to do with denial, or at least plausible deniability. The monkey will always be ugly no matter how many people you get to say otherwise. Put more academically, the purpose of spin is “to forestall negative publicity by publicizing a favorable interpretation of the words or actions of a company or political party or famous person.” A couple of weeks ago, I recalled for you Hans Christian Andersen’s story of “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” a classic tale of an elaborate spin finally undone by the wonderful naivete of a child. In that story an entire town was in denial while the Emperor paraded before its citizenry in nothing but his birthday suit, all of them worried about being uncovered as “stupid or incompetent,” the persistent theme of that particular spin job.

Denial is a fairly natural human tendency. It is hard being honest all the time, because being honest means owning up to, and confronting, our failures or shortcomings, or put in more theological language, our sin. Leaving aside those people whose wearing of their honesty on their sleeves is its own form of denial, I think most of us hope that no one discovers our misdeeds, and that if they do, that we could come through it relatively unscathed. And so we outright lie, or we shade the truth, or we shift the blame, or any number of other methods of spinning the discovering of our sin so that we don't have to go to jail, or forfeit privilege or change, or lose face, or, heaven forbid, repent and apologize. The kind of ignorance gained by denial is truly bliss, if only for a short time, for as we are told in the Epistle of First John, "If we say that we are without sin, the truth is not in us and we deceive only ourselves," and sooner or later our denial catches up with us.

The people of Jeremiah's time were in a serious state of denial. For them, there was nothing wrong that more politics, or more spin, or a bigger army couldn't fix. If there was a problem, it was that Jeremiah guy running around condemning them all the time, reminding them that "Thus says the Lord," followed by a list of all the ways they were forgetting what God had done for them or ignoring the Sabbath, or neglecting the poor or chasing after gods who were no gods at all. They were simply unable, or unwilling, to accept the fact that they had strayed so far from the covenant God had made with their ancestors that God needed to send prophets like Jeremiah and Isaiah and Ezekiel to tell them to shape

up. And so they try to spin God's own words by dismissing Jeremiah as a crackpot who didn't even know the history of the faithfulness of the very God he claimed to represent; after all, *their* God would never forsake them no matter what. Ah, "If we say that we are without sin, the truth is not in us and we deceive only ourselves."

The depth of this denial, this self-deception, was so deep that in this eighteenth chapter of Jeremiah we see God as close to despair as God can be, so close that we learn of our God, the Creator of the Universe, the maker of covenants, actually "shaping evil" against them, "devising a plan" against the very people chosen to be a light unto the nations, which is to say, to make God known everywhere. God is ready to destroy the hope of the world, to throw it down like a piece of stubborn, unyielding clay and to start over again. Not since the flood of Noah had God been this close to wiping the slate clean. And so Jeremiah is sent with the message, "Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings." And what is the response? "We will follow our own plans, and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of our evil will." "We will follow our own plans, and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of our evil will." And even though this last statement does sound more like someone's summary of what was actually said, rather than a direct quote, the spin is, for once, more accurate than the truth, for that is how we tend to behave.

As we have observed, we human beings are masters of one kind of spin, but the good news of the Gospel is that God is master of another, the spinning of that

potter's wheel, the shaping of history and lives and meaning and beauty. God is the spinner of purpose and intention, power and invention. We spin our mistakes. God spins planets. We shift blame. God shifts the stars. We are into plausible deniability. God is about implausible generosity. The biggest difference between us though, is that when God spins, people win and when people spin, people lose. You see, what God is spinning on the potter's wheel is the fulfilment of the promises of creation: peace with God, shalom with one another, the absence of shame and guilt, all things we – in our daily efforts at spin control to try to save ourselves from the consequences we deserve – all things we are working against, just as they were in Jeremiah's time.

The spinning God does on the potter's wheel Jeremiah was sent to see had a purpose, a purpose bigger certainly than Jeremiah's opponents could discern. It was beyond their imagination, or at least beyond their collective, long-term memory, that God's purpose was for the whole world, not just for them, even though they had been chosen especially for that purpose, that through their faithfulness, they might lead the other nations into the same type of covenant relationship Israel enjoyed with God. It wasn't just that God was peeved with disobedient children. And so if, like clay that simply won't conform to the shape the potter intends, Israel refuses to live in such a way that truly demonstrates the glory and love of God, can we begrudge God the option of trying again with a more pliable people? Is not the purpose of God larger than the petty doings of a

pathetic people? Were not others waiting to experience the blessing Israel had chosen to snub?

The visual metaphor of the potter and the clay is not hard to understand. God's people were like a pot that just wasn't turning out right, a pot the potter decided needed to be started again from scratch. What may be harder for us to understand is what is at stake in God's relationship with the world, and just how important God has made us to be, first as the nation of Israel, and now as the church of Jesus Christ, and just how important it is that we allow God to be the Spin Doctor rather than us. You see, in the midst of this passage is the wonderful message that God has not only chosen us as partners in fulfilling the purpose, but that God doesn't simply give up on us when we fail, but gives us the chance to return and be that light to the world. "Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings."

Getting out of the habit of applying spin control to our mistakes is no easy task, especially when we live in an environment in which spin is clearly more valuable than truth. But we can begin by learning to place our trust in God's ability to spin rather than our own. This is what Jeremiah had to do. He was one man against a whole people, one lone voice of truth against a machine of spin. And though his life was no picnic, God did indeed provide for Jeremiah, saving him repeatedly from those who sought his life. For us, it is not so much a matter of remaining true to delivering God's pronouncements to intransigent governments as

it is of demonstrating daily the power of humility and trust in God that comes with honestly confessing our errors and seeking the forgiveness of those we've hurt or wronged. If politicians have earned our mistrust, it is more their application of spin to an already bad situation than the misdeed itself that raises our ire. How much more time might we have for the shalom God desires for us, were we simply to say, "I'm sorry, please forgive me," and leave behind the work and worry of trying to convince people of something they will probably never fully believe anyway?

As we learn in this passage from Jeremiah, that's all God wants: for us to turn from our evil ways and amend our ways and doings. And when we do that, we have more power than we could ever imagine, for we are the instruments of God's purpose to bring all the nations streaming towards the shalom that God has in mind for all of us. It was for this reason that God contemplated, and even completed, the destruction of Jerusalem, so that its citizens might not thwart God's purposes but fulfill them. Knocked down a few pegs by the Babylonian invasion of their city and by spending generations in a foreign land, God's people came back stronger than ever, a pot on the potter's wheel that came a lot closer to being what God wanted it to be. But I have to believe that God would rather have avoided all those generations spent, indeed wasted, in captivity, just as God would rather avoid them in each of our lives, the lost moments and even years of spin we will never get back, when all we need to do is repent.

For some weeks now, as a congregational response not only to the benediction but more importantly to the grace we have experienced in worship, we have been singing a hymn called “Spirit of the Living God,” the lyrics of which include “Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.” As we heard, the congregational response to Jeremiah’s benediction, and more importantly, the grace contained in God’s call for repentance, was somewhat different: “We will follow our own plans, and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of our evil will.” I think it is safe to assume that to God’s ears, “Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me,” is preferable to “we will follow our own plans.’ May each of us seek a path of humility that relies on God’s abilities to spin, rather than our own. Amen.