

When the church gets it wrong

The woman looked at me with fear, pain, and trust—all things that the church has instilled in its faithful all these centuries.

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [August 17, 2016](#) issue



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It had always been a mysterious relationship. She came to church once a year or so, and she'd always say, "I'd like to talk to you, sometime . . . do you ever have any time?"

How does one respond to such a question? "Don't you realize that I'm busy beyond any mere mortal's imagining?"

I'd said yes, once. We'd gone to a prestigious venue for what was called lunch, but was in fact a lesson in obsequiousness from the waiter. My companion played around with the conversation like a child would play with his food. We passed the baton of speech from one side of the table to the other. She sat very still, with fearful eyes that anticipated my rejection of her with a dismissive remark or unexpected leap to the feet, and departure. I'd learned that she'd been married once, but the marriage was short-lived. She reminded me of a jumpy batter who's afraid the softball is going to hit her.

And then we found ourselves at lunch a second time. She still gazed distrustfully at me, and I wondered how I'd got myself tangled up in this ball of wool.

We played the same game: start a subject, respond, change the subject, respond, and change again. We ranged around the issues of the day—grandchildren, LGBT rights and whether those rights included marriage, the church and its waning grip on the nation's imagination. Then suddenly, without warning, she announced that she had a question to ask me—the kind of question that's introduced with a silence that has the same effect as a drum roll.

“Do you believe the archbishop of Canterbury was correct when he told Princess Margaret that she should not marry Group Captain Peter Townsend?”

There it was, the question on which everything was to rest. A question about an event that occurred in 1954, more than a half century earlier—one that involved not either one of us but the queen's sister, who had a celebrated love affair with a senior servant of the royal household. He was divorced, and Princess Margaret decided, with more than a little help from her sister and the political and ecclesiastical heavyweights, that she would not accept his proposal of marriage.

This was the question that my lunch companion had been trying for several years to articulate—the question that our lugubrious social dance, our Esther-like extension of one banquet invitation to another, was meant to elicit. I was lost for words. I started to piece together clues like Hercule Poirot amassing circumstantial evidence. She was very nervous about asking me. She seemed to identify with the princess's notorious unhappiness in love, and while the story had long been over for me, it must have been fresh in my companion's mind when her own marriage was breaking down.

I was beginning to make some progress—her attention on my response was unwavering, she waited breathlessly for my answer—when she interrupted with a crucial clarifying detail. “After my marriage failed,” she said, “my husband asked me for a divorce. I think he'd met someone else. But I was brought up to believe that marriage was indissoluble. Even though there wasn't any prospect of a reconciliation, I said no. And he took his own life.”

My stomach lurched. I nodded and waited, trying to digest the enormity of what she was saying.

Then I asked, “Does it feel as if you’ve based your whole life, your whole understanding of God, and your whole family’s unhappiness, on a mistake?” I don’t know how she did it, but she held my gaze. “Yes.”

And right there, right then, I had a vision of all the honest, genuine, and earnest ways that the church seeks to lead faithful people in the paths of righteousness, and how absurd, how damaging, and how tragic some of those paths seem a generation or two later. This woman looked at me with fear, pain, and trust—all things that the church has instilled in its faithful all these centuries. Who had been wrong? The clergy of Princess Margaret’s day, for upholding what church and society both took for granted was good and right and true? This woman, for living a life of obedience when the evidence of the eyes and her heart told her otherwise? Or my generation, for jettisoning the strictures of the past and having confidence in the justice and humanity of its own perceptions?

It’s hard to respond when your lunch companion comes to the realization that 50 years of her life have been based on a mistake. But words were not required. My companion wasn’t angry; in fact, she almost looked relieved. I hadn’t even answered her question—she’d answered it herself.

Maybe that was the mistake the archbishop made in 1954. He’d assumed that ministry was about providing answers, guidance, and direction. All I’d done was not leave the table until my companion had found the courage to face the truth. Perhaps that’s what ministry really is.