

The Rev. William Graham
Grace Church
Chadron, NE
15 February 2015

Homily 2015 Holly

2 Kings 2:1-12 Psalm 50:1-6 2 Corinthians 4:3-6 Mark 9:2-9

“For it is God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” - the 6th verse of the 4th Chapter of the letter of Paul to the Corinthians.

The light which shone out of darkness refers to the creation story in Genesis. The light of knowledge refers to the conversion of Paul which is recorded in the ninth chapter of Acts.

“Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ 5He asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ The reply came, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” When we read scripture, when we study a variety of Christian writing, and when we spend time in prayer, we are often seeking to gain a kind of knowledge which answers questions of faith and religion.

This is certainly not the only knowledge sought by human beings for there is a different kind of kind of knowledge which deals with an entirely different set of questions. Those are the questions that arise when we seek to understand how things function in the world around us. Those are the questions which we explore and try to answer via the discipline of science.

As long as people have existed there have been persons of science who have wanted to dismiss persons of faith and persons of faith who wanted to dismiss persons of science. A so called war between these groups has arisen when people have failed to recognize that the tools of science do a rather poor job of answering question of faith and the tools of faith do a rather poor job of answering questions of science.

About ten years ago, a science professor named Michael Zimmerman began a project to demonstrate that science and religion do no need to be in conflict. He began by establishing The Clergy Letter Project. Last month, Zimmerman wrote:

“I created a grassroots organization that has grown to more than 15,000 clergy members. This organization, The Clergy Letter Project, has three clear and simple goals:

- To demonstrate that religion and evolutionary biology are compatible;
- To demonstrate that Fundamentalist ministers who demand that people choose between religion and modern science are not speaking for all religious leaders; and
- To raise the quality of the discourse on this important topic.”

(See more at: <http://huumanists.org/blog/201502/clergy-letter-project-demonstrating-compatibility-religion-and-science>)

In the early years, those of us who had signed Zimmerman’s letter were all Christian clergy and he chose the Sunday closest to Charles Darwin’s birthday to be “Evolution Sunday”. It was a day on which we were urged to encourage discussions of the relationship between science and religion. After three or four years, this was changed to Evolution Weekend as a number of Jewish Rabbis and clergy from other religions signed the letter. For a number of years now, I’ve made a conscious effort to address the relationship between religion and science in the sermons I’ve prepared for this Sunday. I’ve sent several of them to Dr. Zimmerman and he has them (along with many others) posted on The Clergy Letter Project website.

Before returning to our text, let me say a bit more of a personal note regarding the relationship between science and religion. Most of you have heard me say in the past that we are each on a journey to grow in our faith, to grow closer to God.

Science has been an important part of that path for me. In my junior year of high school, we had a career day in which we were able to pick three careers and meet with persons working in each one. My three were science, teaching, and religious vocations. As I now transition into my retirement years, it’s safe to say that I’ve continually worked in all three.

My undergraduate degree was in Chemical engineering and I spent seven years in that field before entering seminary. After moving to Nebraska, I also became a teacher, certified in special education for both mentally handicapped and gifted students. I continue to be involved in this wide range of teaching. Two weeks ago I substituted for a science teacher and last week for a Level two special ed teacher.

Science has always been my favorite subject and much of what I’ve learned from that discipline, I’ve applied to my study of the Holy Scriptures. When I was ordained I signed a declaration saying that I believe the scriptures contain all things necessary for salvation.

That means I study scripture looking for the truths which answer questions of faith, not questions of science. It means I take a historical, critical approach to understanding the Bible. It means I understand the creation account in Genesis to which Paul refers in our text about the light as expressing the scientific knowledge of several thousand years ago, not that of our age.

One example I like to use in this regard has to do with the waters above the firmament and the waters below the firmament. People at that time could dig down into the earth and find water. They could also look up at the sky and see that it was blue. They also experienced some of waters above them as falling down from time to time. To me, that's pretty good science.

I also find in Genesis an order of creation, that is the things created in successive days, as being somewhat consistent with the order in which came to be as observed by Darwin and the educators who include evolution in our present science curricula.

I've never felt I had to make a choice between my scientific knowledge and my faith; I've only had to figure out how the two fit together. Since most of what I've been saying has been dealing with the questions of science, I'd like to return to the questions of faith and make a brief inquiry into the meaning of the text from 2nd Corinthians, into the knowledge we obtain by faith. Acts told of a light that could be explained in a scientific manner, but when Paul wrote of a light shining in his heart, he was speaking of a faith experience. He had experienced a spiritual presence of God, a presence he had suddenly connected to Jesus Christ. It was that presence which led Paul to proclaim Jesus as Lord to all those with whom he was to have contact from that day forward.

We may not have had, or ever will have an experience like that of Paul, but we do have God present in ways impossible to describe by science, we too have God shining in our hearts. Becoming more knowledgeable of that presence is what it means to move along on our journey of faith. It is a knowledge which neither contradicts the knowledge we obtain through science, nor can it be explained by scientific knowledge.

I'd like to conclude with a prayer "For Knowledge of God's Creation" which I think does an excellent job of expressing a healthy relationship between science and religion.

Almighty and everlasting God, you made the universe with all its marvelous order, its atoms, worlds, and galaxies, and the infinite complexity of living creatures: Grant that, as we probe the mysteries of your creation, we may come to know you more truly, and more surely fulfill our role in your eternal purpose; in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.