

Senior Pastor's Column for the February 2024 Alert

Science and Faith – Two Sides of One Creation

Like most kids, I was fascinated by dinosaurs. One of my favorite photos was from a trip to Vernal, Utah, with me standing in front of the exposed skeleton of a real dinosaur. It was so big on the wall of rock, yet I was the center of attention of my family!

Dinosaurs weren't the only long gone creatures who enthralled me; so did ancient human ancestors. In the 1960's, Louis and Mary Leakey were uncovering human fossils and tools from millions of years ago in the Olduvai Gorge in Kenya, Africa. In fifth grade, I had to check out a book from the library that detailed what archaeologists and anthropologists were theorizing then about human origins.

My interest in Neanderthal, Cro-Magnon, and other ancestors of modern day humans has not abated over the years. I still enjoy reading about the latest discoveries and modifications to the branches and trunk of our evolutionary tree. The evidence is fragmentary at best, and it's surprising how much today is still not certain about how we, *homo sapiens*, came to be.

Science asks, "What makes us human?" That's also a question which the Bible raises, too.

To some ears, it may sound strange that a minister of the Gospel would confess to reading about and affirming the scientific origins of humanity and life itself. After all, the Bible – the authoritative source for salvation – begins with an account of how and why the Divine created the world. How can an evolutionary science perspective co-exist with a six-day creation story in a committed believer in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior?

For some persons and churches, it is impossible to believe in Christ and at the same time embrace theories like biological evolution. "The Bible says it, I believe it, end of story," is a closed minded way to regard any divergence between science and religion.

But for The United Methodist Church, faith and science are not in conflict. Instead they are complementary, approaching the physical world in which humans as well as galaxies exist, from different perspectives. Paragraph 160(F) of the 2016 Book of Discipline states:

"Science and Technology — We recognize science as a legitimate interpretation of God's natural world. We affirm the validity of the claims of science in describing the natural world and in determining what is scientific. We preclude science from making authoritative claims about theological issues and theology from making authoritative claims about scientific issues. We find that science's descriptions of cosmological, geological, and biological evolution are not in conflict with theology.

We recognize medical, technical, and scientific technologies as legitimate uses of God's natural world when such use enhances human life and enables all of God's children to develop their God-given creative potential without violating our ethical convictions about the relationship of humanity to the natural world. We reexamine our ethical convictions as our understanding of the natural world increases. We find that as science expands human understanding of the natural world, our understanding of the mysteries of God's creation and word are enhanced.

"In acknowledging the important roles of science and technology, however, we also believe that theological understandings of human experience are crucial to a full understanding of the place of humanity in the universe. Science and theology are complementary rather than mutually incompatible. We therefore encourage dialogue between the scientific and theological communities and seek the kind of participation that will enable humanity to sustain life on earth and, by God's grace, increase the quality of our common lives together."

The Bible gives an elegant and poetic description of God's hand in the development of a human being in their mother's womb. *"For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well."* Psalm 139:13-14

Biology elucidates the intricacies and stages of a fertilized egg transforming into organs and limbs that after nine months produce a unique human being filled with great potential and hope. The psalmist did not have the tools to observe cells and their growth, but he (or she) did understand the miracle of life and birth. If anything, science only adds to the appreciation of the mystery of human existence.

To use another analogy, science is like the hardware – the physical circuits and components of a computer – and faith is like the software – the programs which operate and run on a computer. Science can describe and explore the brain in our heads and how it works, while faith shapes our spirit which directs our behavior and choices. A conscious functioning mind consists of both/and, not either/or.

The more I learn from science, the more I appreciate the creation around me. My physical body has amazing and complex machinery functioning 24/7. The planet, solar system, galaxy and beyond are similarly astounding, and I am grateful to God that the physical laws that govern my existence are dependable in my little corner of the vast universe. I am also grateful for the moral codes and spiritual guidance of faith that allow me to enjoy life, live securely, and give purpose to my life.

Holding faith and science together in our lives might be a challenge at times, but I hope it is not a struggle. They are equally important and to be honored in our common heritage as human beings. We need Jesus' love and forgiveness as much as we need oxygen and water to survive and thrive.

So may the wonder and awe of our existence draw us closer to the One who created, redeemed and inspires us now and always.

Pastor Marty