

A sermon preached at
the First Congregational Church of Reno
by the Rev. Rich Smith

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1 Corinthians 2:1-16

The Missing Link

Question: What does our church have in common with the Blue Mountain Lotus Society of Henderson, Nevada? According to the website of the Clergy Letter Project, we are the only two religious organizations in Nevada who are celebrating Evolution Sunday today! The good news is, that's twice as many as two years ago, when we were the only one. Which means that if the trend continues, doubling every two years, by the time I turn 100, every congregation in Nevada will be doing so! So that's progress! I know, this doesn't mean that we are the only two congregations in the state that believe in evolution, or who don't see evolution as incompatible with our religious teachings. Catholics, Presbyterians, Methodists, to name a few, all have official statements saying as much. And the latest findings of the Pew Research Center show that some 60% of Americans and 78% of white mainline protestants believe that humans and other living things have evolved over time – so maybe a lot of churches just don't see it as an issue. Evolution Sunday, what's the point? Why not have "Gravity Sunday" next week, and "Round Earth Sunday" the week after that?

I do note that we are not the only organization in Reno engaging in this sort of celebration today. The Reno Skeptical Society is holding an event this afternoon in honor Darwin Day (his 205th birthday is this Wednesday). It will feature lectures and discussions of science and evolution and how they relate to current events in our culture. Downtown Library at Noon. Free!

But it IS an issue in our culture, and the 33% of adults, including 64% of white evangelical protestants who believe that humans have always existed in our present form – at least for the last 6,000 years when the six days of creation supposedly took place – this group holds a lot of political power, and in many states where they control the school boards and legislatures, evolution is just not taught at all, or it is offered as one option alongside the literal biblical view, creationism.

It's like saying, science is a choice. But it's not, really. It's like saying, you can choose to believe in the law of gravity, or you can believe that somehow God keeps us from flying out into space. There was an old premise, actually, that astronomers held. They could see that the planet Neptune had a somewhat irregular orbit around the sun, and surmised that whenever it got off course, God intervened to put it back. Then they discovered Pluto, originally a planet, but recently downgraded to a planetoid. But the gravitational influence of Pluto was enough to account for Neptune's irregular orbit. God wasn't needed as an explanation anymore, got downgraded along with Pluto!

When one relies on that kind of theology, that of an interventionist God who micro-manages the creation, then both God and science are short-changed! And to present evolution and creationism along-side each other, on equal footing as explanations of biological reality, is to demean both. It's to say you can be religious or you can believe science – you can't have it both ways.

In actuality, science and religion are two different ways of understanding the universe, two different ways of knowing, but they are not mutually exclusive. You don't have to choose, and say that if you believe in evolution then you don't believe the Bible, or that if you are a person of faith then you must accept the literal view of scripture and reject science as the enemy of faith. Each is a lense through which to view reality, and we need both lenses!

How you view reality is important, the kind of lense you look through makes a huge difference. I think that's what Paul was talking about when he wrote those words to the Corinthians which were our scripture reading for the morning. At the beginning of the chapter he says, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." And at the end he declares, "We have the mind of Christ."

In Paul's preaching, "Jesus Christ and him crucified" is shorthand for the event that acts his interpretive lense. Christ crucified is not what Paul sees, but how he sees. Everything he knows – from the Jewish scriptures, to the wisdom of the age – is seen and interpreted through that lense. All the problems that the Corinthian church has – and they have their fair share -- are addressed in light of who Jesus is. Paul even views his own status as an apostle through the lense of the Christ-event. He has not founded this church for his own glory, but in order to advance the kingdom of God, which Jesus came to inaugurate.

Of course Paul doesn't address any conflict between science and religion – that wasn't an issue for them. He does pit the wisdom of the age against the wisdom of the ages....which is to say, he prefers the Christian lense he is now using...

If we can apply this to our age, we would say that religion and science are two different lenses, two different ways of knowing. They use different methodologies to ask and seek answers to different kinds of questions. To put it simply, science asks "How?" Religion asks "Why?" Science seeks facts. Religion seeks an ethical response to those facts. Science seeks information. Religion seeks transformation.

They need not be in conflict. They are not merely compatible. They really are collaborative! Einstein: Religion without science is blind; science without religion is lame.

Maybe you heard about or even tuned into the debate that CNN held this past week, for 2 ½ hours, between Ken Ham, the proprietor of the Creation Museum in Kentucky, and Bill Nye the Science Guy. Ham staunchly defended the book of Genesis as being a literal historical account of creation; Nye promoted evolution over time (13.8 billion years since Big Bang) as the truth. These kind of debates have been going on ever since Charles Darwin first proposed the theory of evolution back in 1859, and most famously in the Scopes Monkey Trial in 1925. I'm not sure this latest version of the debate really settled anything, nor could it. The chief objective was probably to get TV ratings. But I think it was the wrong debate to have. In the first place, there was little likelihood that anyone listening would have their mind changed. Framed wrong – Like apples and oranges. Either/or. The real debate is between which kind of religious lense to look through, that is, between differing

approaches to faith. One kind of faith takes a very literal approach to scripture, reads the Bible as a scientific textbook, full of rules and depicting a God who is capricious and who insists we are really just puppets, who wants us to believe certain things, who loves some people more than others.... The other kind of faith is more open, believes that God has given us minds capable of critical thought, wants us to use them in discovering everything we can about reality, and holds that how we love is far, far more important than what we believe. That's the real debate, not between science and faith but between differing types of faith.

The kind of faith we celebrate and teach in this church does not take the Genesis accounts of creation literally, but it does take them seriously. We approach them as poetry, not history; the testimony of one standing before the cosmos and mystery of life in awe and wonder, sensing its grandeur and imagining that God must have been very pleased with it – It was good! In another era a visual poet, an artist, named Vincent van Gogh said, “Whenever I have a terrible need of – dare I say, religion? – then I go outside at night and paint the stars.” I wouldn't be surprised if Jackie Manley said/felt much the same thing when she went into her studio and created the quilt that is before us, called “Night Sky.” Of course the stars she quilted or that Van Gogh painted don't look anything like the stars as photographed by the Hubble telescope, in all their breathtaking detail, but that doesn't mean they are wrong. One rendering is science, the other, faith. It takes both. Jackie's quilt is no more literally true than the book of Genesis is literally true, but like Genesis, it is a lense through which to see the deeper meaning of creation.

We need both the lense of robust science and the lense of a mature and progressive faith if we are to understand our world and make a difference in it. We need science because we need to know the truth of how the world works. It's what allows us to build bridges or fight cancer or travel through the air and into outer space or communicate on our Smart phones. We need the lense of faith to help us make sense of the world, to approach life with gratitude, to respond to evil with love, to use what science tells us in the right way, to have the right kind of conversations on our smart phones, or use the information they give us for a good purpose. The first bit of technology, the club, could be used to knock fruit from a tree or brains from a man. A more evolved “club,” in the form of nuclear energy, can be used to cure disease or blow up a city. Science tells us how to do it, faith tells us what to do, and what the meaning of it all is. We need both. How do we bring them together? Where is the missing link?

I don't remember very many of the lectures I heard in college, and even the notes I saved are yellow and brittle, but I remember one in a class on “Human Ecology,” over forty years ago now, where the professor taught us about the differences between the right side of the brain and the left. He said that a person who is “left-brained” is often said to be more logical, analytical, and objective, while a person who is “right-brained” is said to be more intuitive, thoughtful, and subjective. Left brain people tend to be mathematicians, lawyers, critical thinkers. Right brain people are more likely to be musicians, artists, creative types. This was cutting edge scholarship at the time, and the person who pioneered it was awarded a Nobel Prize in 1981, a few years after I sat in that college lecture hall. In the years since, the

science has evolved, and it is now believed that it's not as cut-and-dried as first thought, but even more mysterious. Brains, it turns out, are very complex organs, and like most things, the more we know, the more we know we don't know! Our knowledge is.... evolving! Later research has shown that the brain is not nearly as dichotomous as once thought, that abilities in subjects such as math are actually strongest when both halves of the brain work together. Today, neuro-scientists know that the two sides of the brain work together to perform a wide variety of tasks and that the two hemispheres communicate through what is known as the corpus callosum.

“Corpus callosum” is a term I remember very vividly from that lecture over forty years ago. The professor said even then that it was this part of the brain that coordinated the two halves, and he suggested that the healthier and stronger and better developed your corpus callosum, the more whole you would be as a human being; you would be more fully human if you employed both sides of your brain, working in consort. And then he closed the lecture by suggesting: Jesus had the most fully developed corpus callosum ever!

Now that's something I never heard in a sermon. And this actually the first time I have used it in a sermon! Why have I not mentioned it before? I mean, wouldn't you want to come to church if the sermon title was advertised as “Jesus and his amazing Corpus Callosum?”

I bring it up today not to get into the anatomy of Jesus' brain, but rather to suggest that what we need today is the equivalent of a corpus callosum planted between religion and science – something to get the two working together. Not accommodating each other, or compromising them, but allowing each to do what each does best in the search for truth, truth with a small “t” and Truth, with a capital “T.” It takes both, and too often the link between them is missing!

It's kind of like the way a gifted musician performs. You can play by sight, give a perfect and literal rendering of the notes on the printed score. Or, you can play by ear, as you feel. Each one is a skill, and most musicians tend to approach making music one way or the other. But really great musicians marry the notes on the page to feeling, and when they do, you sense that while the notes may be coming from the outside, the music is coming from within. And when that happens, it is a wonder! It is transcendent. It is as if heaven and earth have joined as one. So maybe the most important instrument in any orchestra or ensemble is the corpus callosum!

So Happy Darwin Day, Happy Evolution Sunday. May your corpus callosums be highly evolved, may you seek to learn as much about the universe as possible and not fear where the truth may take you. May you stand before the mystery of creation in awe knowing that you are not separate from the One who creates it, and you. May you enjoy a healthy skepticism and a live out of a deep faith. Paint the stars with abandon, dance creation's dance, and honor in everything you do, the gift of abundant life!