

First Congregational Church – Glendale – UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
Sixth Sunday after Epiphany – February 15, 2009 – Evolution Sunday
The Rev. Anne G. Cohen

Mark 1:40-45

FOR REFLECTION

By nature, I mean the laws ordained by God to govern the Universe.

Charles Darwin's Natural Selection,
Being the Second Part of his Big Species Book Written from 1856-1858 p.224

There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.

Charles Darwin, On the Origin of Species (1859) p.492

With respect to the theological view of the question: This is always painful to me. I am bewildered. I had no intention to write atheistically, but I own that I cannot see as plainly as others do, and as I should wish to do, evidence of design and beneficence on all sides of us. There seems to me too much misery in the world. I cannot persuade myself that a benevolent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the Ichneumonidae with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars or that a cat should play with mice... On the other hand, I cannot anyhow be contented to view this wonderful universe, and especially the nature of man, and to conclude that everything is the result of brute force. I am inclined to look at everything as resulting from designed laws, with the details, whether good or bad, left to the working out of what we may call chance.

In an 1860 letter to his collaborator, Asa Gray, Darwin expressed his doubts about the teleological argument which claimed nature as evidence of God.

*February 12, 1809 – Birthday of Charles Darwin
1859 – On the Origin of Species published*

Preface: February 12th was the 200th birthday of Abraham Lincoln. It was also the 100th anniversary of the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) – which is no accident as it was founded on Abraham Lincoln's birthday. This is Black History Month, Presidents' Weekend and St. Valentine's Day Weekend. According to our congregational calendar, this is Gospel Music Sunday and, according to our Christian Common Lectionary, the Gospel lesson for today is a healing story from the Gospel of Mark. Charles Darwin and Abraham Lincoln were born on the same day – so this also happens to be Darwin's bicentennial – as well as the 150th anniversary of the publishing of his book On the Origin of Species. I chose to focus the sermon and worship service today on Evolution – which I believe is related to many of the issues raised by our anniversaries today – and is certainly one of the foundations for my understanding of human change, healing and transformation. And all I can say at this point is THANK GOD it's not Mothers' Day and Pentecost too – because then I'd have an even greater problem focusing this sermon.

See Me, Feel Me, Touch Me, Heal Me

Stephen Donaldson, one of the best science fiction/fantasy writers of our time, wrote a six volume series entitled Thomas Covenant, The Unbeliever. Our so-called hero, Thomas Covenant, has leprosy which has ended his job, his friendships, his life in community. In true sci fi/fantasy tradition, his internal physical and psychological condition is externalized. He ends up in a land that is dying of disease – and encounters situations in which his own internal brokenness must be addressed – externally. By doing battle on behalf of this foreign land, Covenant conquers his own demons – comes to terms with his own disease – finds healing – and restoration to community. But it takes all six books. He makes a lot of mistakes and he gets a lot of help. It is an arduous life journey.

Although it is fiction, it is a true story on many levels. Our internal brokenness does manifest in the world around us – in broken relationships, chronic illness and cancer, loss of job and community. It often takes a lifetime to work through the sufferings or tragedies of childhood. Our brokenness as a species also manifests in the world around us – in social disruption, warfare, pollution of our environment, global warming. And healing is a matter of doing battle with our social demons – fighting for human respect for natural laws and consequences – undoing the harm we've done and doing no more if possible. Like Creation, Restoration of Creation will take a long time and we will need a lot of help.

One of the underlying theories that both Stephen Donaldson and I have integrated into our world views is Evolution. People and environments are in a process of constant

change. Every choice we make, every action taken, changes our trajectory – which, over time, brings us to different destinations from those we first believed we were destined. And there are always surprises – unexpected developments and encounters – matters of chance. And we apparently agree that, because of the process of evolution, and because of our participation in something larger than ourselves that we value, human beings can be transformed, become stronger, better, healthier, more compassionate, more just.

Evolution is a scientific theory that was developed by Charles Darwin through his observations of the external world of flora, fauna and geologic disruption. The evidence compiled by scientists in most disciplines over nearly 200 years overwhelmingly supports Darwin's theory that species have evolved. It is a theory that has been twisted and misused under the title "Social Darwinism" – people making claims that humans of different cultures and races are actually different species – some of them superior to others. "Social Darwinism" was used to justify racial apartheid in South Africa – a country Darwin visited briefly on his return voyage from the Galapagos Islands – an important visit in the development of his theory of Evolution. But Darwin himself always claimed that all human beings are of the SAME physical species – regardless of our physical and cultural adaptations to our environment. "Social Darwinism" as a movement took his name in vain.

Darwin's theory of evolution has reshaped many disciplines of human thought and study regarding individual human development – physical, psychological, ethical, spiritual development.

It is widely accepted today that most human individuals evolve EXTERNALLY from infant to child to adult; we also evolve INTERNALLY - from wonder - to a claim on the truth – to a realization that there are more questions than answers – and then perhaps to a new kind of wonder.

SOME individuals - perhaps with limited exposure to new ideas and diverse experiences – perhaps traumatized and "stuck" at one place in our young lives - have been known to remain in early stages of mental and emotional development, exhibiting tendencies toward literalism and social intolerance.

MOST individuals – like our Thomas Covenant character – continue to change over time – through a series of events and choices and relationships. We evolve – in fits and starts – for better or for worse – into something new.

And this is what MOST meaningful literature – written and adapted over thousands of years – describes.

Fossilized BONE leaves a record of the physical evolution of species. Scientific journals record such findings and are rewritten when new evidence is discovered.

On the other hand, LITERATURE leaves a record of the internal evolution of humans. And even though the Theory of Evolution can explain much of what we see and read, the studies of each are very different disciplines.

External physical reality can be best measured with objective scientific approaches. It is a subject for the human cerebral cortex – the rational part of our brains.

Internal psycho-spiritual reality – difficult to measure - is usually expressed through story, metaphor, images, creative endeavor and emotive-description. These are mainly filtered and shaped by the reptilian and mammalian parts of our brains – the reactive and emotive centers of our bodies.

Literature that has endured throughout hundreds, even thousands of years, has captured in some form our human psycho-spiritual realities. It holds up a mirror, evokes in us a recognition of our own longings and understandings. It describes the evolutions and journeys of other humans searching for meaning and truth and the answers to questions – showing where we've gotten stuck and where we have made miraculous leaps of faith. It is not a scientific map – but it is a record of exploration.

One of the questions that has been addressed since the dawn of human existence is, "Why and How were we created?" And one of the beliefs that has evolved in most human societies is that the Creator of the Universe - Creator of each one of us - is something or someone we call by many names - including GOD. If I were to ask each one of you to describe God as you understand God, I'm pretty sure that I would get a different answer every time.

If we look into the literature of our Tradition, we would find a plethora of descriptions of this Divine progenitor – metaphors, stories, events, manifestations – all expressions of SOMEONE's beliefs about GOD, understanding and experience of GOD – none of it scientific fact. This BOOK is a complex and selective compilation of writings – intended to offer a meaningful way to explore who we are, why we exist, and what our relationship with our Maker is and is becoming.

This is a powerful collection of writings – some of it contradictory, some of it shocking. It affects us in the oldest and most reactive parts of our brain. And if we are not careful, if we do not use our cerebral cortex to remember things like the Theory of Evolution, we can get stuck in one place – one interpretation, our earliest most literal understandings of this book and the GOD we might profess.

Biblical scholars believe that this collection or “library” of literature that we call The Holy Bible evolved – over thousands of years. These particular books were not chosen to the exclusion of thousands of other writings until the 4th century. They have been translated thousands of times – each translation an interpretation – each interpretation an evolution of the text reflecting the personal and cultural evolutions of human beings.

If we open our eyes to the literature that was excluded from this collection – to other libraries and The Classics – to the literature of our time – we can find that The Bible as a spiritual library is still being written. Literature describing and attempting to capture the meaning of our lives and our relationship to the One Who Made Us – in a variety of genres and languages and mediums – is pouring out of the human psyche and soul onto paper and into computers and onto cassette tapes and digital recorders. One minister I’ve met along the way gives Bibles to confirmands on the day they join the church. But he rips off the back cover before giving it to them – suggesting that they go forth to write the next chapters – their stories of faith – inspired by their experiences of GOD.

It is my profound belief that this book – The Holy Bible – is a product of evolution but it is not a scientific proof FOR evolution. The scholars who taught me in seminary showed evidence of literary evolution – editing and rewriting, sometimes referred to as “redaction.” Human stories, language and ideas changed over time and across civilizations. Reading The Bible exposes us to new ideas and diverse experiences – pushing us to expand our understanding and ponder our beliefs. The Bible was taught to me as a meaningful LIBRARY of faith stories that touches my soul and transforms my heart. It is an important collective work - one that has led me to my life’s work; but it is not the only book that reflects, touches, changes and heals me. And I believe that it is not the ONLY book that touches the souls of other humans and transforms other human hearts.

Although I have found that ideas in many books have informed each other in essential ways while co-habiting my inner reality – they have retained their genre identities. By this I mean – The Bible is literature, a spiritual journal – it is not a science text book. And Darwin’s Origin of Species is a science text, a journal of external evidence – not an emotion-provoking creation of literature. It is essential that these disciplines remain separate in our minds, in our schools, in our churches.

Therefore, you will hear many things from this pulpit – ideas gleaned from a host of genres and disciplines. But you will never hear me say that The Bible proves a scientific fact – or that The Origin of Species is proof of the existence or absence of GOD. Both books address questions raised by the human search for meaning and

understanding. But Darwin's science offers evidence in support of a physical reality. And religious writings offer perspectives and experiences in the hope of understanding and living a meaningful spiritual reality. These realities inform and affect one another – just as the different parts of our brain inform and affect one another. But ultimately they are separate and deserve separate attention.

What we do here in church is search for meaning – which is not a scientific discipline. It is a process of raising questions – especially the important ones – and reflecting on possibilities and meanings. Pulpit renderings are spiritual explorations – hopefully based on literature from our religious tradition and scholarship appropriate to the genre. Even this sermon began with a biblical text – a text I want us to look at before this evolving chapter in my faith journey ends with the usual dot dot dot...

Our reading this morning from the Gospel of Mark tells the story of a “leper” coming to Jesus and begging to be “made clean.” 2,000 years ago when the Gospel of Mark was authored, “leprosy” referred to a variety of diseases that were considered contagious and ritually unclean. A “leper” was subject to exclusion from their religious and social communities because of that “uncleanness.”

The man challenges Jesus, “If you choose, you can make me clean.” According to this translation, Jesus was “moved with pity.” Scholars have found earlier manuscripts, however, that say Jesus was “moved with anger.” This sets up an interesting interpretive challenge – Pity for whom? Anger with whom or what? And how does this inform what happens next?

After Jesus touches the man and the disease “leaves” him – and he is “made clean” – Jesus “sternly warns” him to say nothing to anyone. In Greek the phrase “sternly warning” literally means “being disturbed” or “snorting.” Jesus, visibly disturbed, snorts and tells the now-former-leper that he is to go directly to the priest of his village to have the banishment lifted and to be declared a full member of his community again.

The man disobeys, tells everyone what happened, and Jesus is mobbed by people with needs. End of story...dot dot dot...

Does this text leave the audience with more answers or more questions?
As a modern person, are our questions different than those of the original audience?
Here are some of the questions I am left with:
What disease did the man really have and does that matter to the story or to us?
The man asked to be “made clean” not to be “healed.” What is the difference?

Why did the man challenge Jesus to choose to make him clean or choose NOT to make him clean?

Did Jesus have a history of choosing to help one person and not another?

Was the man projecting onto Jesus his understanding of his own priest who could have chosen to banish or not to banish him – and chose the former?

Was the man a chronic victim of other people's whims or the whims of chance in the universe or the whims of God?

Was Jesus moved by pity or anger or both - and for what or whom?

What disturbed Jesus?

Was his snorting response a reaction to being challenged by a sick man, frustration at the man's predicament,

impatience with religious purity laws that caused the exclusion of unlucky and poor - but otherwise faithful - members of the community?

Was he just tired or did he have a sinus infection?

Did Jesus physically heal the man or, in some other way, make it possible for him to reenter his community by a loophole in the purity code?

Did a supernatural miracle take place which superseded the laws of nature as we now understand them?

Does this story describe something specific about the character of the man Jesus?

Does it lead us to speculate on the character of God as revealed in Christ?

How does this story relate to all the other leper stories or miracle stories or healing stories in the Gospels?

Is this a true story?

Is it an historical account?

Is it Jewish Midrash - a story referencing other stories - told to communicate and underscore a belief about someone or something within that tradition?

Is it a Christian myth carrying a universal truth for people of this tradition?

Does the story affect what we believe about God? Jesus? Humans? The meaning of our lives?

Does this story in its present form and translation have anything to do with us in 2009 – as we come to the text with our modern understandings and the myriad cultural lenses through which we interpret our world?

If not, what are we doing here?

One approach to this text would require us to enter into a scholarly study of existing original Greek manuscripts, an etymological study of the vocabulary, an exploration of the religious, cultural, literary, sociological, and archeological history of the place and time. We would need to understand the roots of Jewish Messianic movements, the evolution of Jewish Christian practices and the influences of oppressive or accepting ruling empires on the life of religious movements. We would need to call in experts in

the medical field to explain the host of diseases once called by one name – leprosy. And each of us would need to do an in depth psychological self-study, try to understand fully our own core values, the effects of our upbringing and culture, and the expectations with which we come to the text.

Another kind of textual study would be to take the rabbinical approach – which does much of the above – and also assumes that there are at least 72 interpretations of any text and explores the questions that those many interpretations raise. Most rational human beings live with questions every day and rarely get answers to the big ones. The questions change over time and with increasing maturity as our lives unfold. The questioning itself gives meaning to life. Right now, Peter at the age of two knows all the answers (usually “no!”). I’m expecting that at the age of three he will begin to ask, “why?” with increasing regularity. And I can’t wait for that question to evolve into longer and more complex inquiry about how and why he is alive.

The worst thing we could do on Sunday mornings is to take the text literally, ignoring the implications of our personal and cultural world view, pasting our values and assumptions onto the story, coming to a comfortable conclusion and missing the rich complexities of context and transmission. And the worst thing we could do on any day with our internal spiritual reality is to impose it onto other people as if our personal experience is superior to that of others.

I appeal to the best in all of us – let’s keep asking questions.

Let’s keep ourselves open to learning from the external
and internal experiences of others.

Let’s allow science to evaluate evidence –
and religion to contemplate meanings –
and both disciplines and all parts of our brains to inform
our evolving understandings
of life and GOD... dot dot dot

Scripture Reading for Sunday February 15, 2009 – Epiphany 6

Mark 1:40-45

40 A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, 'If you choose, you can make me clean.' ⁴¹Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, 'I do choose. Be made clean!' ⁴²Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. ⁴³After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, ⁴⁴saying to him, 'See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.' ⁴⁵But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

The Clergy Letter - from American Christian clergy – An Open Letter Concerning Religion and Science

Within the community of Christian believers there are areas of dispute and disagreement, including the proper way to interpret Holy Scripture. While virtually all Christians take the Bible seriously and hold it to be authoritative in matters of faith and practice, the overwhelming majority do not read the Bible literally, as they would a science textbook. Many of the beloved stories found in the Bible – the Creation, Adam and Eve, Noah and the ark – convey timeless truths about God, human beings, and the proper relationship between Creator and creation expressed in the only form capable of transmitting these truths from generation to generation. Religious truth is of a different order from scientific truth. Its purpose is not to convey scientific information but to transform hearts.

We the undersigned, Christian clergy from many different traditions, believe that the timeless truths of the Bible and the discoveries of modern science may comfortably coexist. We believe that the theory of evolution is a foundational scientific truth, one that has stood up to rigorous scrutiny and upon which much of human knowledge and achievement rests. To reject this truth or to treat it as "one theory among others" is to deliberately embrace scientific ignorance and transmit such ignorance to our children. We believe that among God's good gifts are human minds capable of critical thought and that the failure to fully employ this gift is a rejection of the will of our Creator. To argue that God's loving plan of salvation for humanity precludes the full employment of the God-given faculty of reason is to attempt to limit God, an act of hubris. We urge school board members to preserve the integrity of the science curriculum by affirming the teaching of the theory of evolution as a core component of human knowledge. We ask that science remain science and that religion remain religion, two very different, but complementary, forms of truth.

http://www.butler.edu/clergyproject/Christian_Clergy/ChrClergyLtr.htm