

**A SERMON GIVEN BY PASTOR PAUL KOTTKE  
UNIVERSITY PARK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

**Sunday, February 13 2011**

**Title:** Evolution and Faith – “Genesis or Darwin”

**Scripture:** Genesis 1:1-5, Romans 8:19-23

**Theme:** Our affirmation is that God’s movement through Creation and through history is one that is dynamic and not static.

This sermon is the last in the series “Questions of Faith.” If you have been present for this sermon series, two core values are woven into each one. The first is any attempt to give an either/or answer – a yes/no – is invariably missing leading. We are far better served by staying with the tension of seeking the intent of either side of a given answer, seeing both its strengths and its weakness. And then charting a “middle course.” The second value is that there is very little that we are able to directly experience or know. Everything that we live by and everything that we articulate has some limitation of language. This includes both science and religion. It is precisely this limitation of language that should keep us about becoming absolutists about any one position. Truth be told, we are “feeling” our way along in life and in reality. Now, even this can be taken to such an extreme that we become paralyzed and throw up our hands and declare as Ecclesiastes did 2,800 years ago, “Vanity, Vanity, all is Vanity!” In what can be seen as a paradoxical manner, we live by hope and trust, not despair – this is the power of our faith. Even as we acknowledge that we really do not know [Now I see in a mirror dimly – I Corth.13], we live with the assurance that there is meaning and purpose in being alive. We are reconciled with God not through the purity of doctrines but by the conviction of love [Faith, hope, love – these three but the greatest of these is love – I Corth.13]

And so we visited these topics in this series:

- Does God Really Have a Beard? - Limitations of Language, and an invitation to acknowledge our human limitations.
- Doctrines over which we fight - Historic battlegrounds such as the Virgin Birth, listening to what our doctrines are attempting to tell us that is timeless but not letting them become dogmatic.
- Love/Science/Evil - The relationship between science and faith and between a God of goodness and the existence of evil. That these challenges and questions are an

asset to our religious journey, assisting us in honing our relationship with the Sacred.

- Is this really the body of Christ? Sacrament of Holy Communion – An affirmation that all of life is in some way an invitation for sacramental living, experiencing the grace of God in our daily lives.
- And finally, today, Evolution and Faith – “Genesis or Darwin?” In addition to being part of the sermon series, the other impetus for today’s sermon is that yesterday was Charles Darwin’s birthday [born 1809, 202 years ago] His seminal work *On the Origins of Species* was published 152 years ago.

There is a movement across this country called The Clergy Letter Project which invites clergy to acknowledge in worship services that a belief in the theory of evolution is not contrary to one’s faith position of God as the source of creation and that it is indeed appropriate that the theory of evolution be taught in schools across this country. The Clergy Letter Project also challenges the pseudo-scientific present of the so-call “Intelligent Design,” which is nothing more than a religious intent cloaked in scientific language for political purposes. It behooves us as a religious people to take a stand against such political usurpation of our faith. In your bulletin is a resolution adopted at the 2008 General Conference of the United Methodist Church which endorses this very Clergy Letter Project. As a side note, this resolution is also a strong impetus for our efforts at becoming a more “green” church, which we are taking steps towards.

As I stated in my sermon a few weeks ago, science plays a crucial role in our society and in the quality of life worldwide. Any purist of science would acknowledge that there is indeed no proof of anything, only probability. It is probable that the sun will set today around 5:30pm, but at this moment, no one can actually prove that there will be a sunset. Yet some acts of probability are so

strong that there is no question raised. Can we prove the theories of evolution? No. But the consequences and conclusions drawn from the longevity of the formation of life on earth have proven to be very beneficial to our understanding of life as we know it. Certainly, various forms of evolution are more believable than the declaration that in 4004 B.C., God created the world in seven 24-hour days [as referencing Archbishop Ussher in the Scofield Reference Bible].

Is the theory of evolution somehow a proof that there is no fundamental purpose to life? – That there is no God? That there is no driving force that is moving humanity towards some end? No. Is life really driven by the survival of the fittest? Certainly, our intent is not to somehow deify Darwin or to establish his book as the final answer. His proposition of survival of the fittest as being a driving force for the changes which he observed has had value in opening the question of how changes might have occurred. Even to this day, we would acknowledge that survival is important – but we do well to question the notion of “the fittest.” Perhaps our word today would be survival in community and through relationship. In the 21st Century, the awareness is increasingly that we will survive only by our ability to embrace the inter-relationships we have with each other and the world. In short, what is happening in Egypt is of importance, if for no other reason, then that it will impact us here. We do not survive in isolation but rather in relationship. How we evolve in our relationships and in our inter-connectedness will determine how we thrive in the 21st Century.

There is an aspect of evolution that we do well to not embrace. A voice began to emerge in the late 1800s that took the notion of “survival of the fittest” and use it to justify as evolutionary rights the domination of others and, if necessary, the destruction of others if they were deemed inferior. This came to be called Social Darwinism. Such was an undergirding belief for the Nazi movement – to create a superior human race. As such, Jews were deemed inferior and a drain on the state and thus could be “eliminated”, along with anyone with physical or mental conditions. Such was the case in Romania until just that last few decades - children with handicapping conditions simply disappeared once they became of adult age. From an entirely different perspective but with the same attitude in mind, in the mid 1980s, Colorado Governor Richard Lamm advocated that buses should not be made handicapped accessible because it would be too big of a drain on the economy and would

bankrupt the public transportation system. Such become part of the conversation with health care reform, when voices surface that say, “I don’t want to be burdened with the health care of someone disabled.”

One of the exciting developments within the ministry of University Park UMC over the last few years has been our advocacy for persons with disability. In this ministry, we recognize two values: First, as we embrace persons with various degrees of disability, we come to understand that each of us operates out of some experience of our own disability. Second, as we embrace a ministry of disability, we come to a new understanding, not of limitation, but of possibility.

The scriptures read this morning reflect two possibly different faith narratives of creation. The one from Genesis when heard metaphorically, as one hears liturgy and as is presented during our baptisms, presents a dynamic form of God’s creation within the world. However, if it is read literally as the Scofield Reference Bible suggested in 1917, then this reading is a reflection of creation that was completed 6,000 years ago, creation as having been once and for all time done and is now static.

The other faith narrative is of creation that is dynamic and an on-going process – to embrace the phrase of the Apostle Paul: all of creation is groaning in labor pains in hope of that which is about to occur.

Obviously, a static faith narrative of creation would fight the notion of evolution – after all, any change from perfection is a movement towards imperfection and could not be of God’s doing. But a faith narrative that is able to embrace the dynamic nature of God is equally able to embrace the notion that creation is not only changing but is in some process of continued formation. I can give two forms of evidence for the dynamic nature of God. First, when we look at the world and its various life forms, we become aware that life itself is very much dependent on the flow of dynamic energy. Death is the cessation of this dynamic flow. Second, it is a core proclamation of our faith that God desires a relationship of love with us. The only way a relationship can exist is if both parties are impacted by the relationship. In short, when we are faithful, when we extend our commitment of love, God is changed as the result of our relationship. To restate this, the two primary ways that we experience God: as reflected in the dynamic energy of the world and

as reflected in our desire of faithful love, suggest that God is a dynamic God. In contrast, there is in fact no evidence that God is a God of stasis, of the static. As such, it becomes almost incomprehensible then that God's creative acts would have only occurred once. Our faith narrative therefore is far more inclined to embrace some concept of evolution than the notion of creation being a seven-day event 6,000 years ago.

hope in the unfolding of creation in ways that we cannot yet even conceive

In closing, I read a reflection from the book *Radical Amazement* by Judy Cannato [2006, Sorin Publishing],

We are participants in a grand unfolding of life that is eons old. What makes human beings unique but not better than the rest of creation is our capacity for self-reflection, for a quality of consciousness that allows us to know that we know. It appears that only humankind has this capacity. We alone can comprehend the unity that is at the core of the cosmos. We alone can be radically amazed at the work of creation.

Teilhard de Chardin, citing Julian Huxley, said that human beings "are nothing less than evolution become conscious of itself." The consciousness of each of us is the result of the evolution of consciousness which has proceeded for eons. In us the evolving universe is capable of self-reflection. What a profound insight, one that compels us to look at ourselves in a much larger context. We are the universe conscious of itself...

At the heart of the passage from chapter eight of Romans is the awareness of connectedness. All creation, together as a whole, awaits freedom from bondage. All creation groans for wholeness and stretches forward in transformation. The language of this passage from scripture suggests a birthing process, one filled not only with travail but with eager longing for a fuller revelation of God in our midst. All creation is mysteriously bound together in a process of becoming all that we hope for. [pp. 57&58]

Indeed, even in the uncertainty of the living of our days, we trust in the presence of the God of Love, Grace and Life. As disciples of Christ, we eagerly