

Lent 1A February 10, 2008 Genesis 2.15-17; 3.1-7 Evolution Sunday

~Pastor Randy Spaulding, The Covenant Mennonite Fellowship, Sarasota, FL

When I was a little boy I had a very active imagination, and by the age of eight or nine, I was also developing an empathy for the “little guy,” those that seemed to have no voice or were the underdogs. An active imagination and empathy in a child often makes for strange stories. I think you are the first people with whom I’ve shared this story out loud:

Living in rural Indiana, I remember riding my bike down empty country roads in the summertime, when the maple leaves had turned from their bright, spring yellow-green to a deep, heavy forest green. All alone, I would stop my bike along the road next to a tall maple tree, and for several moments, I would stare up into the tree, past the outer leaves, past the large branches, up through the middle of the dense shadowy center, until the leaves almost became black and lost. There, I would single out one, lone leaf and, out loud (I never did this with anyone else around) I would say, “I see you, little green leaf. You aren’t alone anymore. You’ve been recognized and someone knows you’re there. Even if no other person ever sees you again, I have seen you. I know you. I love you, little green leaf. And so does God.”

Now, I never expected the leaves to talk back and say “thank you” in some tiny, elfin voice. I did, however, think that the leaf was somehow grateful that someone had valued, loved and acknowledged its existence. I did this for years with individual blades of grass, grains of sand, velvety cattails; even the weedy dandelions that no one wanted in their yards—I’d lay on the grass on a hot summer day, shoeless and shirtless, and select one, lone dandelion. Knowing it would soon be mowed over without a thought by one of my older brothers, I spoke to it and said “thank for being here. I’m so sorry you have to get killed.”

When and where I started doing this I’m not sure. But I think I understand a little bit of the why. I think I was trying to give something meaning that I thought had no real meaning or reason for its existence. I guess I thought that if something greater and more intelligent acknowledged a maple leaf’s existence, then the life of that tiny leaf would finally have meaning and worth. Was it a little Randy trying to be God? Was it my own insecurity that needed to anthropomorphize an Indiana maple leaf? My own need to be valued and thought of as special?

The need to be valued—to be thought of as special and needed and of worth is not new. An old Jewish folk tale makes the point. One day God said to Abraham, “If it weren’t for me, you wouldn’t be here,” to which Abraham replied, “True, but if I weren’t here there wouldn’t be anyone to think about you.”

Ever since homo sapiens became uniquely self-aware, we have struggled to make sense out of our world, our existence, and to give it meaning. Some scholars think that the book of Genesis was written in Babylon, where the tribe of Israel lived among a foreign culture. In the creation myth from Babylon, the universe was made from the dismembered corpse of the goddess Tiamat, whose skull was split by her youngest son Marduk with a lightning bolt. By murdering his evil mother, Marduk brought order out of chaos with an act of redemptive violence.

Israelite parents and leaders did not want their Babylonian-born children learning that the sky and the earth were made from the severed body of a serpent-like goddess. Perhaps there were school board members who were not Israelite and wanted to teach something contrary to what the Israelite parents believed? So the Israelites set down their own account—about a good creation made by a good God, who created a paradise called Eden and gave it to humans to enjoy. They even sought to explain the concept of self-awareness and free will with a story about a tree of good and evil, a crafty serpent and the first glimpses of the ethic of modesty when the man and woman used their Eden-Kenmore sewing machine to make the first designer fig leaf undies to cover their nakedness.

For millennia creation myths were accepted as the norm by tribes and cultures who each had their separate story of the how, why, when, where and who of creation. Science was a part of the ancient world, but religion and science had not split into “sacred” and “secular” realms. They existed side by side as simply two ways of being curious about life.

The great chasm between science and religion came in the 16th century, when Copernicus guessed that the earth circled the sun instead of vice versa. This was counter to the biblical understanding that believed everything revolved around the earth. Copernicus and the Bible could not both be right. The Church stuck with the Bible and the scientific community separated from the church, finding themselves condemned as heretics and heathens.

Ever since then, religion and science have been fighting like Tiamat and Marduk, both sides sure they hold the truth. “Religion is superstitious and locked in a vintage paradigm!” yells Science. “Science is nihilistic and devoid of morals!” Shouts Religion. For a progressive Christian like myself, and perhaps some of you, I find myself caught in the middle. My conservative Christian friends and family frown at me for affirming Evolution. My liberal and scientific friends roll their eyes at me for believing in God.

Today, the fight has spilled over into the church pew, the classroom and the courtroom. Our morning study group has been viewing the NOVA documentary “Judgment Day: Intelligent Design on Trial,” about the landmark Dover, PA court decision that pitted a quiet community against one another when the school board mandated that classes on evolutionary science begin with an announcement supporting the study of “intelligent design”—the idea that life is too complex to have evolved due to purely natural and random causes. Dover parents filed suit, and after a lengthy trial, conservative Bush-appointed judge John Jones found for the parents, declaring that Intelligent Design is “a religious view, a mere re-labeling of creationism, and not a scientific theory.”

Of course, that’s not the end of it. Florida’s state Board of Education is holding a public hearing in a few weeks to consider using the word “evolution” instead of phrases such as “biological changes over time.” At the same time, a Panhandle lawmaker is urging the Board to use the word “theory” each time the word “evolution” is used in textbooks. Politicians have joined the debate, some demanding that intelligent design be included, others raising the fear that the separation of church and state is being eroded.

What's this really about? What's really going on? The issues are complex, deep, and go to the core of people's values, ethics, and lifetime understandings. There is a real fear among some Christians that acceptance of Darwinian evolution would mean the end of faith, the end of a God who controls every flutter of the butterfly's wing, who literally has written down in a college-ruled, spiral bound notebook exactly how many hairs are on the heads of all six billion humans on earth. And there is an uncomfortableness—a fear among the scientific community that religion is out to stifle free thought and halt new discoveries in technology and science, bringing back a new Inquisition and throwing the world back into the Dark Ages.

And yes, such camps do exist. But more and more, the good news is that these are becoming the minority voices. An Emerging consensus is growing in strength and number that is ready to step up and call for an end to the Tiamat/Marduk fighting match of Evolution vs. Creationism. The Covenant Mennonite Fellowship counts itself in those numbers this morning, joining with hundreds of clergy and congregations today who are participating in Evolution Sunday. Our proclamation is simple: science and religion are both valid ways of seeking truth in our world. Religious truth is of a different order from scientific truth. *And that's okay.* The purpose of Christianity is not to convey scientific information; its purpose is to transform hearts and lives.

Teacher, Episcopal preacher and author Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that embracing both science and religion as valid paths that co-exist and compliment one another might just “excuse religion from the doomed enterprise of trying to explain the undiscovered and unknown, and free its energy for the discernment and communication of meaning. However far human beings turn out to be from the center of the universe” she says, “we remain at the center of the generation of meaning.”

And that's what Christianity brings to the table, to our lives; not literal-factual scientific truth about God and the universe, but meaning to our lives.

Let's face it: we who trust in a Sacred Other, a Ground of Being, a mystical Energy of the Universe, a God of Creation—whatever you call it— cannot logically, scientifically explain how such a thing IS or exists. But that's never been the point of an authentic, religious journey. The journey has never been about scientific explanations. It has been about meaning.

At the same time, I don't want our children and youth –I don't want US to feel we're inadequate or hiding behind religion, or that we're just allowing science to pat us church people on the head and say, “well, isn't your imaginary God just cute as a button!” when religion cannot offer explanations that satisfy scientific inquiry. And so I'd like to suggest that the Church create some “Let the Church”-isms that might help us move beyond the fighting match to find common ground and healthy conversation:

- Let the Church admit that our role is not to satisfy scientific inquiry or critique.
- Let the Church affirm that our role is to nurture ethical behaviors of kindness, helpfulness, service, love, reconciliation, equality—gifts that Science welcomes from Religion.

- Let the Church affirm that the “sacred mystery” of God, the Ground of Being, the Creator of Love and Life, a Sacred Other is symbolic of what gives our lives meaning and guidance and hope—such things that Science cannot always give.
- Let the Church affirm that whether we believe in a Creator God or not, we have sacred texts, sacred stories, millennia of faith heroes and a meaningful journey out of which we have distilled a call to radically ethical living.
- Let the Church embrace Evolution as part of the natural order of the universe, and revel in the miracle that all life stems from one great tree, and that though humans are but one green, maple leaf among thousands, we are unique in that we are the only species that *knows* we are one, green maple leaf.
- Let the Church celebrate and encourage the scientific community in its quest for its own discovery of truth.
- Let the Church admit—with some relief—that it doesn’t have all the answers (something Science readily admits) and that, like Science, the Church is on a journey of discovery is even itself in the process of evolving and growing and becoming.
- And Let the Church find ways to work *with* Science in the search for truth and meaning.

But, you may ask, if we embrace evolution, does that mean we have to accept that we’re just children of some accidental, mucky goo that got lucky four billion years ago when a zap of lightning sexed up the right chemicals to produce life? Well, it may. But who cares? We have the capacity, the intelligence, and the unbelievable gift four billion years later to give *meaning* to that so-called, sexy, gooey accident and why we’re here. And I believe that, in critical ways, thanks to science, the future of our own evolution is now in our hands. But that’s another sermon.

On this first Sunday of the season of Lent, we have the opportunity to begin to name our failures, to repent, accept forgiveness and begin anew to walk in God’s way. It’s time the Church named its failure to embrace the evolutionary process that created humans. It’s time to turn around, find meaning and symbol in our evolutionary existence, and incorporate the natural world into our walk with God. It’s time to create a future where Christianity and Science respect one another and the ideas each has to offer.

The Tree of Life is a powerful symbol shared by both Evolution Science and Religion. In fact, a tree of life image is found in nearly every culture on earth. In the Middle East, it symbolizes permanence, growth, majesty, and enlightenment. In the Hebrew Tabernacle, the sacred lampstand was in the shape of a Tree of Life. For Christians it represents knowledge, self-awareness and ethical living, and in the book of Revelation its leaves are for the healing of the nations and those who find their way to the tree are no longer forbidden to eat of its fruit. For Science, the tree represents life in all its wonderful diversity, connected to one another by a single sturdy trunk and branches nurturing countless generations of plants and animals.

Perhaps our future shared symbol will be the Tree of Life, symbolizing our shared truth that we belong to a web of creation in which all things are connected and nothing is inconsequential not

even a single, tiny green leaf. For someone who once talked to leaves, I find this a most hopeful symbol of a future where science and religion can co-exist in harmony, pondering the gorgeous geometry of life, the universe, and everything. That's the theory. May it be so. For the religious and spiritual I say Amen and Eureka!

Resources:

~Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Luminous Web*, 2000 Cowley Publications

~Judgment Day: Intelligent Design on Trial, 2007 NOVA and WGHB Educational Foundation and Vulcan Productions

~Sarasota Herald Tribune, week of Feb 3, 2008, "State urged to call evolution a theory"