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**Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ**

But I Thought . . .

*A Sermon by*

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Scripture: 2 Kings 5:1-14

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This Thursday is the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Charles Darwin's birth, and so in this context today we are observing Science and Religion Sunday. Actually, across the country this weekend over 1,000 churches and synagogues are exploring the relationship between science and religion in what is officially called Evolution Weekend; this is the fourth annual observance.

But for some reason, I couldn't bring myself to actually call this "Evolution Sunday." It's interesting, isn't it, that in a community of faith where we value thoughtful and challenging questions, still I somehow felt constrained about putting the words "Evolution" and "Sunday" side by side atop the Order of Worship?

It's almost as though the meaning of the term "evolution" has itself evolved, taking on such anti-religious, even atheistic overtones that to name a Sunday after it might offend some people of faith, or so I surmised. In some irrational corner of my mind I worried that a stray Order of Worship would make its way into the wrong hands and the good folks of Church of the Beatitudes would have our reputations besmirched as a bunch of "godless atheistic evolutionites"—is evolutionite a word?

Why is it that at times there has been an almost visceral assumption that science and religion are opposed to each other?

It's clear that the subject is beginning to gain traction among mainstream and progressive religious groups who are increasingly alarmed to see the issue framed in such black and white terms by more conservative and fundamentalist Christians.

Evolution or creation. Choose. Darwin or God. Choose.

In his recent *Pastoral Letter on Faith Engaging Science and Technology*, the United Church of Christ's General Minister John Thomas writes:

*Many today are hungering for an authentic spirituality that is intellectually honest and at home in a scientific era. They are searching for a new kind of wisdom to live by, one that is scientifically sophisticated, technologically advanced, morally just, ecologically sustainable, and spiritually alive.<sup>1</sup>*

The late Pope John Paul II also speaks strongly to the relationship between science and religion:

*Science, he said, can "purify religion from error and superstition," and religion can "purify science from idolatry and false absolutes."*

We could take some time unpacking those statements, but suffice it to say that the Christian history doesn't have the best track record in its treatment of scientists. Too often our best minds have been punished when their findings contradicted the received wisdom of the day.

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<sup>1</sup> *A New Voice Arising: A Pastoral Letter on Faith Engaging Science and Technology*, The Rev. John H. Thomas with the United Church of Christ Science and Technology Network, January 2008, <http://www.ucc.org/not-mutually-exclusive/pdfs/pastoral-letter.pdf>.

Galileo comes to mind. Condemned by the church in 1592, his official condemnation stood until 1992 when it was reversed by church leaders. Galileo was condemned by the church for discovering and teaching that the earth moved around the sun. At the time, the good church fathers read the scripture literally and understood it to say that everything revolved around the earth.

But Galileo believed we ought to use the minds God gave us, stating

*I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason, and intellect has intended us to forgo their use.<sup>2</sup>*

So why do we assume that science and religion oppose each other? I wonder if it has to do with the question of what or who we place our ultimate trust in. Trust.

Religion and faith advocate placing our trust in God who holds the key to all that we do not understand. There is comfort in surrendering to this wise One, this all-knowing One who will help us understand things better by and by, as the old hymn promises.

Religion and faith can provide comfort in the midst of uncertainty.

On the other hand, science advocates placing our trust in the scientific method by asking questions, doing research, forming hypotheses, testing, analyzing results, drawing conclusions, and testing again. The scientific method, it is argued, holds the key to what we do not understand. And there is a comfort in surrendering to this tried and true method knowing that it will help us understand things better by and by.

Science can provide comfort in the midst of uncertainty.

You might think these two disciplines should be compatible, because it appears that science and religion are serving similar purposes, providing comfort in the midst of uncertainty.

I wonder if another reason we think science and religion oppose each other has to do with the question of what or who provides a sense of order to life. Order.

Religion and the Christian faith describe a world in which God creates and establishes order in creation, making known God's will for right relationship with ourselves, with other people, with all creation, and with God. And when we didn't quite get it, the Christian faith teaches that Jesus came to reveal to us what God is really like. By his living, Jesus provided a sense of order to how we are to live.

Religion and faith can provide us with a sense of order in the world.

On the other hand, science examines a world in which there are established laws that govern how things work, the law of gravity being a basic example. Science tries to help us understand the laws

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<sup>2</sup> *The Hand of God: Thoughts and Images Reflecting the Spirit of the Universe*, Edited by Michael Regean, (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 1999), p. 84.

of nature so that we can live healthy and productive lives, free of disease, and thriving in every way. When we follow the laws of nature, there is a sense of order to how we live.

Science can provide us with a sense of order in the world.

Again, you might think these two disciplines should be compatible, because it appears that science and religion are serving similar purposes.

But are they?

In our story today, the great general Naaman has been looking for exactly what science and religion seem to offer. He's been looking for some comfort and a sense of order in an uncertain world, a world in which lepers are social outcasts, really. But apparently, as our story begins, neither science nor religion has been able to help him in his quest for healing.

No doubt he has pursued every possible specialist and is so desperate for a cure that he even follows up on the tip of his wife's servant girl, a foreigner from the despised nation of Israel whom he and his army had recently defeated in battle.

But when Naaman decides to go visit the prophet, he doesn't go empty handed. He goes with a generous dose of self-importance, and with some pretty clear notions about how the man of God is supposed to operate. He seems to have some set ideas about religion, and about how God works.

When the prophet Elisha merely sent a lowly messenger out with simple instructions for the great general, his sense of self-importance and his religious understanding are offended:

*"I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! <sup>12</sup>Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?"*

Naaman comes perilously close to missing out on the very relief he so desperately desires, because it doesn't come in the form that he expects it to come in. He goes to Samaria looking for something particular to happen.

He has probably played the scene out in his mind again and again on the trip to the prophet's house. He knows how these holy men work. He knows how religion operates. He understands what this God-stuff is all about. Only, it doesn't work that way.

I wonder if at times a similar dynamic may be going on in the conversation between science and religion.

- Could it be that at times expectations are placed upon science, or religion, that they were never meant to fulfill?

- Could it be that, like Naaman, at times we look to religion or science knowing in advance what answers we want them to provide us?
- Could it be that questions are put to these disciplines that they were never intended to answer, indeed, perhaps more accurately, cannot answer?

Last spring and summer I had occasion to participate in several wonderful ceremonies of love and commitment. One ceremony happened in June when Leroy and Rita Calbom celebrated fifty years of marriage with a quiet family ceremony in their home renewing their marriage vows. Leroy has been a mentor to me, and for that I'm incredibly grateful, and Rita and Leroy are my dear friends.

So, there in the living room of their home, surrounded by children, grandchildren and a great-grandchild, Rita and Leroy remembered their wedding day and the promises they had made to each other. They gave thanks to God for fifty full and rich years, and gladly renewed their vows for another fifty years, or as long as they both shall live, whichever comes first. It was beautiful.

The other ceremony was last March when my friends David and Jonathan, together for four years, stood here surrounded by family and friends and committed their lives to one another. It too was a beautiful ceremony, and there were more than a few moist eyes in the house as they exchanged promises and rings.

Both Moms were nervous, as is required by the Mom's Manual, and the Dads wisely tried to stay out of the way, as is their assigned role. There was perhaps a bit more uncertainty than usual, as Mom and Dad from the Midwest told me they hadn't been to a wedding like this before and weren't sure what to expect, but they were grateful our church welcomed them.

The reason I mention these two events is this: imagine that our best scientists had been present last June and had outfitted Leroy and Rita with the latest monitoring devices and equipment so that we could monitor their brain activity, measure biochemical secretions, and record a host of other physiological responses. What truths would that tell us?

- Would it tell us the meaning of the ceremony to Rita and Leroy?
- Would it help us understand what love really means to them?
- Would it explain why they love each other?
- Or why their marriage has lasted fifty years, when so many do not?

No, the scientific data couldn't answer any of those questions, because science was never intended to answer such questions. We're glad our scientists are fascinated by what they learn from experiments, especially when that knowledge helps cure life-threatening illnesses.

But factual scientific truths will never tell us about the meaning and purpose of their love for each other, what we might call the religious truths of that event. Science can't tell us about the ripple effect of their commitment and love on their family, on this community of faith, in fact on the whole world.

The same would be true for David and Jonathan. There is no doubt that we could gather a huge store of factual, scientific measurements from the event. But what truths would that reveal to us?

- Would it tell us why commitment is important to them?
- Would it help us understand why they have chosen to have a wedding when there is no legal recognition of their marriage in Arizona?
- Would it tell us the purpose of their feelings?
- Or why they love each other?

On the level of science, the factual truths that might be gained could be fascinating. But on the level of meaning and purpose, do we gain any religious truth?

Naaman went to visit the prophet looking for one kind of religious experience, and when it didn't happen in the way that he was expecting, he went away in a rage. Thank God for the wisdom of Naaman's servants who talked him down and advised him to take another look at the situation.

And though he didn't get what he was looking for in the way that he expected, he did receive an amazing answer. Naaman received healing, new life, and if you read a bit further than verse fourteen, he received faith as well.

Pierre Teilhard De Chardin states that

*After close to two centuries of passionate struggles, neither science nor faith has succeeded in discrediting its adversary. On the contrary, it becomes obvious that neither can develop normally without the other. And the reason is simple: the same life animates both.<sup>3</sup>*

In the weeks to come, we will be hearing a lot about Charles Darwin and his effects on religion and faith in America.

And as we do, we can give thanks to God for the gift of science. We're grateful for the amazing curiosity and ingenuity that God has blessed our scientists with. We give thanks to God as our scientists probe the mysteries of life to understand how things hold together.

And we give thanks to God for the gift of faith. We're grateful for the amazing meaning and purpose that we find when we discover more fully God's will and ways in our daily living.

Friends, both science and religion spring from God's generous hand and knowing this truth, we have nothing to fear and everything to gain by embracing them both as good gifts from God. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 90.