

The Rev. William Graham
12 February 2017

Homily Epiphany 6A 2017 Holly & Gordon

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 Ψ 119:1-8 1 Corinthians 3:1-9 Matthew 5:21-37
or Sirach 15:15-20

“You have heard it said, . . . , but I say to you . . .” from the fifth chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew. If I counted right, we find these to clauses four times in this morning’s gospel passage.

In three of those instances, Jesus is giving his teaching on one of the ten commandments inscribed on the tablets which Moses brought down from Mount Sinai. Each time Jesus was giving an interpretation by which he hoped to help his listeners meet the intention for which the original laws were written.

This morning, I don’t want us to worry about the literal commandment. Nor do I want us to worry about the teaching given by Jesus. I do want us to remember that God gave laws to help human beings achieve health and wholeness, especially in regard to relationships. I want us to remember that God created this planet as a hospitable place where life can thrive. God gave laws to help us take care of what he created. It is caring for each other and caring for all that God has created is what I want us to worry about this morning.

Today is the Sunday which happens to fall in what the Clergy Letter Project has designated as Evolution Weekend. We are now in the eleventh year of what Dr. Michael Zimmerman began as Evolution Sunday and later expanded as leaders from religions other than Christianity signed on. It always falls on the weekend closest to February 12th because that marks the birth of Charles Darwin in 1809.

Over the years, we have strived to teach that our deeply held religious faith does not, in Dr. Zimmerman’s words, “preclude accepting, promoting, and yes, celebrating the best modern science has to offer.” On this weekend, we want it made clear that the majority of us do not see science and religion in direct conflict with each other. Both fields have much to offer as we seek to understand the world around us.

Events of recent months make this message especially important this year for reasons I hope to share. One of those reasons is the continuing actions of the Texas State Board of Education.

Acting on the Board’s instructions, a panel of educators and scientists reviewed the state’s science curriculum standards. The expert panel was charged with making recommendations to simplify the standards, standards that teachers found all but impossible to implement.

The panel did its work and made its recommendations, recommendations which included removing an array of requirements both promoting creationism and presenting incorrect biological information.

Although some of the panel's recommendations were adopted, the ones which centered on offering of an accurate portrayal of evolutionary theory were dismissed by the board. In so doing, the Board's chair Don McLeroy stated, "Somebody's got to stand up to experts."

Those experts are represented by the Texas Freedom Network, an organization fighting to ensure that Texas students receive the best possible education. They have consistently wrestled with the State Board of Education over its insistence that creationism be taught in Texas public schools. Kathy Miller, TFN's president, summarized the Board's latest action clearly and succinctly when she said: "This is like watching the sequel to a bad movie. Once again we see the board overruling and rewriting the work of classroom professionals and other experts who know better than anyone else how to teach our kids. Teachers are practically begging the board to stop forcing them to waste classroom time on junk science standards that are based mostly on the personal agendas of board members themselves, not sound science. But these politicians just can't seem to stop themselves from making teachers' jobs harder."

Even more worrisome to me has been the appointments to cabinet positions and the executive orders issued in recent weeks by our new administration. It was these action which was foremost in my mind when I jotted down a few notes as I began reflecting on what to say in this sermon. Two areas of concern which I noted were climate change and justice regarding the care of people. As I began doing more research, it became immediately obvious that I was not alone. A Methodist church in Maryland is hosting a forum this afternoon titled, "Are Our Children At Risk? Food Insecurity, Climate Change, and Racial Bias."

What most worries me is probably the denial of climate change. Of the hottest average temperatures in recorded in history, nine of them have been the last ten years. The rate at which the polar ice caps have been melting and the subsequent rise in ocean levels means that some Pacific islands are in danger of actually disappearing. The agreement signed by President Obama and other world leaders would only slow this significantly, not fix the problem and that agreement is now in danger of being ignored.

As to the increase in greenhouse gases, I like to use the bathtub analogy. If a tub's drain is open, but water is coming into the tub faster than it can leave, the level in the tub will continue to rise. Slowing down the rate at which the level rises will not keep the tub from eventually overflowing.

I simply can't imagine the anxieties that are likely to be present among the current workers at the EPA.

Racial bias has certainly been a problem for many years. Perhaps the greatest progress in this area was in the 1960's when Bobby Kennedy was the Attorney General. The current nominee for that position was denied a judgeship because of the racial bias he had verbalized. I see similar problems in attacks upon all those considered different, especially Muslims.

Another group which shares many of my concerns is the Franciscan Action Network. This week's commentary on the lessons, titled "Time to Make Clear Choices" was by Sr. Marie Lucey.

She points out that we are living in an unprecedented time in our nation's history. She writes: "Many of us now feel like strangers in the land that we have known and loved, with its faults, its limitations, and its treasured values of freedom and welcome to all. Day after day, Executive Orders are issued that challenge both our faith values and our American values. These include orders to build a wall, further militarize the southern border, stop refugee resettlement, ban all travelers from seven predominantly Muslim countries, and more."

I hope that you recall as I began this homily, I stated that it is caring for each other and caring for all that God has created is what I want us to worry about this morning. Science and religion are certainly not in conflict over the importance of those concerns.

One other organization which shares my concerns is The Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences. Its website states that it is time to begin a new and creative interaction between theology and science, which honors and respects the integrity of each partner. It is an interaction in which convictions are held self-critically and honest engagement is prized; it focuses specifically on the most rigorous theories of mainstream natural science and the most central positions of mainline theology. It aims at serving the broader concerns of the global human and ecological communities.

Those broader concerns are the same ones I've been addressing. I further believe they are concerns consistent with the teachings of Jesus which I find throughout the gospels. Amen!