

University Park United Methodist Church

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Sermon: Evolution and Faith “Genesis or Darwin”

Scriptures: Genesis 1:1-5 and Romans 8:19-23

Theme: To perceive that one has to choose between faith or science is a false choice. Both reveal reality and meaning to life that are God-given and God-inspired.

Two hundred and five years ago, Charles Darwin was born [1809] in England. His seminal work, *On the Origins of Species*, was published in 1859.

From his book, are these words:

As many more individuals of each species are born than can possibly survive; and as, consequently, there is a frequently recurring struggle for existence, it follows that any being, if it vary however slightly, in any manner profitable to itself, under the complex and sometimes varying conditions of life, will have a better chance of surviving, and thus be naturally selected. From the strong principle of inheritance, any selected variety will tend to propagate its new and modified form.

What he wrote was that in any species, if a slight variation enables that individual to survive over another, then that variation is likely to continue to exist and even become ingrained part of that species over an extended period of time.

And his closing words to his book, which is the only time that the word “evolve” is used:

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.

It was not until his book, *On the Descent of Man* [1871], that Darwin specifically addressed the evolution of humankind.

And thus began a debate that endures to this day. Did the theory of evolution fundamentally replace the affirmation of a Creating God? It would seem that for over 200 years, people have largely felt that they had to take one side or the other in this debate. Quite simply, from my perspective as a Christian pastor, who believes strongly in the creative force of God, which has been, is, will be continuing to create – such a dichotomy of choice is not only wrong but tragic.

Tragic – in that we live in a contemporary existence that has been largely shaped by science. The abundance, ease, and health with which we live is a direct result of the benefits of science, which itself is based on the process of scientific inquiry [asking questions, establishing a theory, creating a test to get verifiable results, and then having someone else in another location being able to replicate those same results]. There is not one of us here who has not received the benefits of medical science. There is not one of us here that has not received the benefits of engineering science as we drive our automobiles, as we live in homes with electricity and heat, as we eat of foods from around the world. For religious leaders to encourage their people to deny the possibility of the science of evolution is to encourage them to live in a world in which their faith is disconnected for their lives.

Wrong – in that the choice is a false choice. God’s life-giving presence is as much experienced to the wonders of science as much as it is through faith. It would be the equivalent of saying that all writings much be done in one form – that analytical analysis is superior to poetry, that a text book is superior to a novel. The truth is that all the various forms enrich

our lives and none of the forms are a threat to another. They each serve their purpose.

As I mentioned in my Friday email, there is a historic relationship with the United Methodist Church and the movement that Charles Darwin initiated. First, a confession, in my Friday email [no doubt some of you caught this], I collapsed two centuries into one! I stated that Darwin and his writings were peer to John Wesley and the founding of the Methodist movement. My appreciation to those of you who reminded me of my mistake. In fact, John Wesley lived the century prior to Darwin. However, the point of my reflection still holds true - the Methodist movement was born with the Industrial Revolution of England during the 1700s. During this period, England was undergoing a transformation from an agrarian society to an urban society – people coming to the city seeking a better life. The tragedy is that they often ended up worst, caught up in unthinkable poverty, hundreds of thousands of people living on top of each other with no sewage drainage, no clean water delivery, and the heating coal with such thick fumes that the air was literally poisonous. Alcoholism became the standard of function for men, women, and children. Child labor was without any control. People working seven days a week without any safety concerns. And health care non-existent.

Into this environment the Methodist movement was born, offering hope based on God's grace, and encouraging people into lives of discipline to overcome the dysfunctions around them. The Methodist of England and then the United Colonies of America, soon to be the United States, took great interest not in a faith that prepared people for heaven but a faith that engaged the real world. And so into the 19th and 20th centuries, the people called Methodist built hospitals and universities. Our own University of Denver, founded in 1864 [this is its 150 anniversary] was founded by the Methodist of this area. Our church was chartered by the faculty of the Colorado Seminary, as it was known then, in 1894. This September we will be acknowledging our 120th Anniversary. As United Methodists, we are a people who clearly embrace the importance of reason based faith. We accept that God has given us our minds to be used and we have seen the benefits of such engagement. Isn't it of interest that the vast

majority of hospitals and universities/colleges across this country had their roots within the organized religion? In your bulletin is an insert that has been affirmed at the last two General Conferences of the United Methodist Church.

So why then the animosity from so many within organized religion? I would suspect that it has to do with three notions: the notion of random development, the notion of the competitive edge of those species which survive, and the notion of species changing over time [evolving].

A quick response to each concern:

Random development – When we read Genesis chapter 1, we have a sense of very specific actions that God acted in very specific ways within creation. This often is the source of the so-called “Intelligent Design” – that everything is as God created it and that nothing has changed. Yet, looking closely at the priestly story of Genesis, one quickly realizes that this is lifted up in a metaphoric way much like a poem uses metaphor. Even with our baptisms, I recount the story of our faith, not as literal fact but as symbols of our lives. If we acknowledge free will, then we must also acknowledge that God gives “space” to creation to move and change and have experiences that are not God initiated. To state that God is responsible for every action is to state that God is responsible for the sin and the evil that is in this world.

Survival of the fittest - this is the concept of Darwin that has been most abused. There emerged the notion of Social Darwinism, which stated that those who have the greater wealth and privileges of society clearly deserve to be on top of the pile and those who have less clearly deserve to suffer. As well, there has been the use of Darwin to justify that might makes right – that the “fittest” is defined by physical dominance. I would suggest that when the ratio of resources in this world was much greater to the demands placed on it, humanity had the luxury to be highly wasteful. To be blunt, war and the weapons of war are always wasteful. To be sure, necessary under certain selected situations to fight back against aggression. But the history of war is that most of the time it could have been avoided or seen as a last resort and not a first strike option.

According to the Center for Defense Information, the estimated cost of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan will reach \$1.49 trillion by the end of fiscal year 2013. What if half of this money had been used to build infra-structures for communities locally and internationally so that people could more fully engage in abundant living with their families? What is becoming increasingly clear is that we can no longer afford the notion that the strongest is the one who survives. The world has become so interrelated. The ratio of resources to demands so tight, that our only hope is to work together to maximize the effectiveness of the whole and to minimize the hoarding of the few. Today, survival is not defined by dominance through force but by cooperation, by the mutual sharing of resources via the ancient religious value of hospitality. [Cub Scouts - learning the importance of balancing your self-reliance with the experience that together you become better.]

Change of creation over time - when we read the words of the Apostle Paul, which he spoke 2,000 years ago of the all the world groaning in labor pains, there was a recognition by him that creation is not something static, made once in the beginning. He believed that through the acts of Christ a new creation was emerging. We continue to affirm such an insight as well today. Creation is dynamic. We have been made to be co-creators with God. There is within all of creation an energy, a life force, that which we can call the Holy Spirit of God. All of life seeks to live. All of life seeks to heal itself. Something is wrong when a body turns on itself. Today we call that cancer. We mobilized our medical expertise to help the body heal itself. All of life seeks abundance of meaning and happiness. It is our task to be stewards with God's grace to assist the dynamic process of this creation in which we live.

In closing, we do well to remember that science at its essence is not about the demonstration of facts but rather an inquiry into questions and propositions whose end results can be duplicated. Out of this scientific inquiry, we have been able to unleash resources beyond human imagination. There seems to be no end to where curiosity and imagination can lead us. Science itself is always dynamic, never static. The theory of evolution is no different. It is not based on a static body of facts but is used to help us access and understand our role within this beautiful

and mysteriously filled creation that is our home. Religion itself would do well to open itself more to the dynamic insight of question and spend less time protecting assumed fundamentals.

The paleontologist and Jesuit priest, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin [d. 1955] suggested that the next phase of evolution is what I would like to call the collective formation of community. [His term – bio sphere.] The challenge for us in this 21st Century is, “Can we as religious leaders be advocates/disciples for healthy and whole communities within this diverse world?”

To use the words of Charles Darwin, can we enable not only the survival but the thriving of creation not through the notions of force and domination, but rather can we bring about the survival and thriving of all of creation with the God-given conviction that we are all in this together? To hold community together in life-giving ways.

This I believe is our challenge and our opportunity to be mid-wives for the new creation which is unfolding. May it be so.