

God, Cooperation, and Evolution

Matthew 5: 21 - 37¹

Rev. Dr. Benjamin J. Broadbent
The Community Church of Sebastopol
United Church of Christ
6th Sunday of Epiphany / Evolution Sunday
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I.

The church divides the liturgical calendar into two major sections – the life of Christ and the life of the Church.

The life of Christ section begins on the first Sunday in Advent and runs through Lent and Holy Week, Easter and the season that follows it, all the way up through the Feast of the Ascension.

The life of the Church section begins on Pentecost and continues through the long season that follows it, also known as “Ordinary Time.”

But the season of Epiphany, in which we find ourselves currently, is also called “Ordinary Time” – the visual cue is that the preacher is usually wearing green.

One of the luxuries of Ordinary Time is that we have some additional freedom to explore issues that aren’t necessarily required by a particular Sunday.

On Easter, the story of the resurrection must be told, but not so on the 6th Sunday in the season of Epiphany.

Today we join with 13,473 Christian pastors, 522 Jewish rabbis, 459 Unitarian-Universalists ministers, and 25 Buddhist clergy in recognizing an “Evolution Weekend.”

I have participated in the Clergy Letter Project for the past 11 years, preaching on the compatibility between evolutionary science and classic Christian belief.

Perhaps you are already convinced of this compatibility and perhaps not.

Either way, it’s good to stretch our thinking because stretching our thinking may be part of the evolutionary process itself, not to mention the process of spiritual transformation.

¹ *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1*. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Editors. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2010.

II.

It is unfortunate that our modern minds have driven a wedge between religious belief and scientific theory.

Unfortunate because the divide is based on some false premises exacerbated by the fact that the most vociferous voices are either religious people who disavow the claims of science because those claims do not fit into their rather narrow theology, or scientific thinkers who move beyond the bounds of science to make unverifiable metaphysical claims about God's non-existence.

One false premise is that some people believe in religion while others believe in science.

(I can't resist the temptation to point out that our current president appears to believe in neither science nor religion.)

It seems to me that to be human is to be religious, that is, to have religious questions and to participate in religious ritual, even if we don't call it that – for what is the Super Bowl if not an American liturgy of controlled tribal violence and conspicuous consumerism.

It also seems to me that to be human is to be concerned with what can be known through scientific method.

A fundamentalist shares his view that the world is 10,000 years old by typing on a computer made from petroleum products formed in the Jurassic period 180-140 million years ago.

Our religious selves ignore scientific method and theory at our own peril, and our scientific selves cannot ignore timeless questions of meaning and purpose, let alone the historic role of religious practice in creating the scientific method itself.

A second false premise is that God and evolutionary science are competing for the same space.

In this view, God plays a role in a much larger system described by scientific theory. The problem is that a "God of the gaps" is not, and cannot be the God of classic Christian thought, not to mention Jewish and Muslim thought.

That God is the creator of all that is, not a part of the system, but the creative origin and sustaining energy of the system itself.

God's existence is of a wholly different order than existence itself, or else God is not God.

In other words, God is not a thing, nor a principle, nor a power alongside other competing powers.

We should therefore not make God into a thing, should not thing-ify God.

When we treat God like the Wizard of Oz, we are bound to be disillusioned.

We should welcome such disillusionment because if we pull back the curtain and find someone there, we can be certain it is not the Creator of the Universe.

III.

To say that religion and science are compatible does not mean they are just different names for the same thing.

Religious practice and scientific method are very two different ways of approaching the universe, but they are both concerned with the same universe.

Rather than dismissing or coopting the other, these two aspects of our humanity should attempt to find places of overlap and connection and compatibility.

Theologian Sarah Coakley has suggested that one such place is around the concept of "cooperation."²

Evolutionary theory has been built around the dual principles of mutation and selection.

In short, as species compete for scarce resources, certain traits give some individuals a survival advantage and those traits are passed along to offspring.

This view of evolution emphasizes individual fitness for survival.

But some evolutionary scientists have suggested that "cooperation" is a third crucial principle, as important as mutation and selection.

From bacteria to humans, species that cooperate to support and protect each other are more likely to pass along their traits, including the cooperation trait, to their offspring.

Arguably, religion at its best is always trying to cultivate an atmosphere of cooperation whereby a variety of gifts are honored and shared to bring about the wellbeing of the group.

The danger is that people start to see themselves as part of a group meant to protect only the members and interests of their own group.

This group-think based on religious identity can help the group thrive for a time, but cooperation must extend to the rest of the human species and beyond humans else we undercut our ability to survive.

In other words, we evolve when we learn to cooperate and we stop evolving when we barricade ourselves within our own personal or group identity.

IV.

You may be wondering what, if anything, the Gospel reading has to do with Evolution Sunday.

² *Evolution and Sacrifice: Cooperation as a Scientific Principle*. Sarah Coakley. The Christian Century, October 20, 2009.

Or perhaps you saw coming what I will now make explicit:

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, including these verses from chapter 5, represent an attempt to mutate, that is, to change the DNA, of human morality.

Jesus' words are an example of evolutionary thinking, thinking that moves us forward as a species on this planet, forward toward cooperation, forward toward survival, or, in religious language, forward toward salvation.

What you thought were some moralistic teachings about murder, reconciliation, adultery, divorce, and oath-taking are in fact mutations in our interpretation of what it means to be human.

"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times..." Jesus begins.

It's important to remember that Jesus is Jewish rabbi who does not intend to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but like all good rabbis, he is offering a new interpretation of an enduring law.

Do not murder. Pretty basic law. But Jesus says, watch out when you're even angry at another person. And then he goes into a long story about making an offering in the temple without first reconciling yourself with that person. Jesus point is that anger festers and it begins to feel normal, especially if we go about practicing our religion as if reconciliation with our neighbor didn't matter.

Jesus' evolutionary thinking toward cooperation is: Everyone knows they shouldn't kill. Now you make a leap forward and deal with your anger as soon as it arises.

"You have heard that it was said," Jesus continues, "you shall not commit adultery." Okay. Another basic law. But Jesus says, it's possible to commit adultery in your heart.

And then he uses an image of chopping off your hand if it offends you.

Need I tell you this is hyperbole? And Jesus uses hyperbole to point out, like a good Buddhist would, that our actions are rooted in our thoughts.

Jesus' evolutionary thinking toward cooperation is: Not only should you not commit adultery, pay attention to your thoughts, because the next thing you know, they're not just thoughts.

"It was said," Jesus continues, when you want to divorce, go ahead and give your wife a certificate and be done with it.

That's straight out of Deuteronomy 24. But, Jesus says - and you have to pay attention to the syntax here - "anyone who divorces his wife, causes her to commit adultery."

Who is Jesus speaking to here? Men.

But how is this the evolutionary thinking? It seems like a step backward, but in Jesus' time it was an advance.

A man could divorce his wife, but a woman could not divorce her husband.

A man who gave his wife a certificate of divorce was leaving her vulnerable, even bereft of economic support.

Jesus' evolutionary thinking toward cooperation is: People should not use their privilege, male or otherwise, to dismiss others to poverty or powerlessness.

"Again," one last mutation, "you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely,' but I say don't swear at all."

This is a teaching about making oaths and promises.

The ancient law said that if you make an oath you need to keep it.

Jesus is pointing out that oaths and promises can be used to manipulate.

We need to look no further than our most recent national election to witness the ways that words have been used to make promises that either aren't kept or that are kept in ways that are deceptive, self-serving, and even unconstitutional.

Lest we simply demonize our politicians, we all do this at some point.

We make promises we forget to keep.

We get defensive when someone tells us we let them down.

We manipulate things to get our way and are happy when we get away with something.

Jesus' evolutionary thinking toward cooperation is: "Let your yes be yes and your no be no." If you are true to your word, you need not make an oath. Just do it. Your actions will speak louder than words.

V.

Of course, for Jesus, and for the church that gathers in his name, these aren't just interesting interpretations or a sampling of suggestions that we can take or leave, but an invitation to live into a new way of being set into motion by the God of all creation.

And the God who creates is also the God who, Christians profess, was embodied in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God with skin on, God in relationship with humanity and all creation.

And the God who creates and whom Jesus embodies is also the God who broods over the earth as the Holy Spirit.

The Trinity is the distinctively Christian way of describing God, not as a divine singular Being but as a mysterious inter-relation of 3 in 1.

In other words, God is a cooperation, a co-operative relationship, and the evolutionary process is exactly the process such a God may well have created.

No one can be or should be coerced, or even compelled, to believe in such a God, but for those of us who do, Jesus' evolutionary thinking has the power to change DNA so that we might be an organism that evolves into a new, cooperative way of being in the world.