

February 9, 2020 – The UCC’s Science and Technology Sunday
OLD SOUTH CHURCH IN BOSTON

Knowledge, a sermon by Nancy S. Taylor, Senior Minister, based on the verses in Genesis 2 and 3 concerning the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil

Knowledge. Everybody wants it. *Scientia potentia est* is Latin for “Knowledge is power”.

The ancient Greek aphorism counsels: Know thyself. There is power in that sort of knowing.

Among the earliest stories in the Judeo-Christian scriptural canon is a story about knowledge, a story about a tree; a tree whose fruit would award its consumer with a particular kind of knowledge: knowledge of Good and Evil.

Which is to say, there are different kinds of knowledge and different ways of knowing. What you know from examining the contents of a petri dish is probably different than the knowledge of Good and Evil.

Our denomination, the United Church of Christ, has designated February 9th as *Science and Technology Sunday*. Why February 9th?, I wondered. The UCC has a reason for this. You see, over the millennia, science and religion have had something of a rocky, competitive, quarrelsome, on-again, off-again, kind of relationship. In fact, today, one in five US adults rejects the science of evolution, rejects the origin of the species and natural selection as observed and described by Charles Darwin and his scientist descendants. What’s more, 5% of US adults deny climate change; another 13%, while agreeing the climate is changing, deny human activity has anything to do with it; another 13% don’t know if the climate is changing.

In summary: a significant minority of US adults reject the preponderance of scientific consensus on these two matters.

The UCC designated February 9th as *Science and Technology Sunday* because it is the Sunday closest to Charles Darwin’s birthday (Feb 12). The UCC knows that the vast majority of US adults who discount Darwin’s work and the work of subsequent scientists devoted to evolutionary biology – like the majority of those who deny climate change – these deniers, these naysayers, most are Christian. These Christians dismiss the theory of evolution as unbiblical and ungodly.

In designating the Sunday closest to Darwin’s birthday as Science and Technology Sunday our denomination is putting a scientific stake in the ground, is making a claim, is shouting: We believe in science! Is shouting: We Christians, we God-fearers, we people of faith – we people of a book, of sacred story and sacred scriptures – we believe in science.

In fact, Old South Church is chock full of scientists, all kinds of scientists. How many of you are scientists? (Many hands are raised.)

Our first minister, Thomas Thacher, called to serve this church in 1669, was a scientist. He was a medical doctor, as well as a minister. Among our 28 founding members was at least one

scientist: William Davis, apothecary. Benjamin Franklin, a child of this church, grew to become a great scientist. Also among our members was Edward Bromfield who, in the mid-1700s, made the first microscope in America by grinding and polishing his own lenses.

You, today's scientists, are in good company. You are part of a generational continuum, the passing down of knowledge, of experimentation and testing, from the tedious labors and careful observations of prior generations.

In the early 20th century, Darwin's contributions became a focus of the *creation–evolution* controversy in the United States. This, though Darwin himself, at the time, saw no conflict between evolution and creation. Like me – and like most of those in the United Church of Christ – Darwin could proclaim: I believe in science, I believe in evolution, and I believe in God.

And yet, these two – science and religion – often live in uneasy tension, each vying for our attentions.

Ponder these questions:

Are science and religion enemy combatants for whom there is only room for one or the other?

Which has the real “savior”? Christianity claims Jesus as savior, but some scientists claim the same for science. There are some who claim that by science, by medicine, by technology, we will be saved from the catastrophic extinction toward which we are hurtling .

Abraham Heschel, a leading Jewish theologian of the 20th century, had a more skeptical view. Heschel wrote: “...the conviction that there exists only the laws of nature and the laws of technology” is the tragic hubris of our time. Science can have a hubris problem, but then, some expressions of religion have a hubris problem, too.

More questions to ponder:

Are science and religion, distinct and complementary ways of observing and knowing? In other words, are science and religion separate but equal?

Does science explain the “how of things” while religion explains “the why”?

Or, might it help to put it this way: Science tells stories with numbers. Religion tells stories with words and symbols.

Try this analogy:

Imagine religion as a baker and science as a butcher. They are two different entities, offering different products, perhaps mutually dependent, but not competing.

A better, more realistic analogy might look like this. Imagine two all-purpose delis, both located on the same street: one specializes in bread and the other in meat, but both are seeking to expand.

In this analogy, science and religion get into tangles because they don't always stay in their own lanes. They have fuzzy edges and creep over into each other's areas of expertise. They both vie for our attentions, our respect, and our resources.

Science, I suspect, hopes to know everything, reveal everything, and prove everything. Religion, as I know it, as I practice it, relishes mystery and suspects that at the end of the day, there is a limit to human knowing.

Religion, Christianity, as I know it, as I practice it, necessitates a measure of humility. In the presence of a God who is, by definition, beyond human understanding, I cannot but bow my head, bend my knees, shudder with wonder, feel insignificant, and be overwhelmed with awe.

Here is what I know about myself:

If I am interested in getting to the moon, give me science and technology, whirring computers and silicon chips.

But if I am over-the-moon in love, if I am to be married, it is the church I want, with its pageantry and solemnity. At my wedding, I don't want to hear about monogamous pair-bonding in hominins, although I get the biology. No, I want the church's words and rituals, vows and pronouncements, poetry and the potency of sacred space. I want candles and rings and the donning of costumes.

If I want to understand chemistry and photosynthesis, complex molecules and bacteria, I will turn to science.

But if I want to fathom the existential experience of being human, if I am contemplating my own mortality, I choose the ancient stories of the book of Genesis ... stories that are mythopoeic in scope and sweep, meaning-making stories, stories informed by the experience of living inside these mortal bodies on a fragile planet spinning in the dark of space.

If I am a prisoner, brown skinned or black skinned, innocent, and behind bars, give me forensic science and DNA. Give me a scientist whose quest for truth, provable, discoverable facts, is relentless and impartial.

But if I am guilty, if as a stupid kid I did terrible harm, if my conscience is wracked with shame, if I wish to God I could take back the awful thing I did, then give me a prison chaplain who lays out before me the anatomy of redemption. Give me a chaplain whose gentle presence conveys unconditional love, and who is conversant in the language of repentance, forgiveness and grace.

If I am Sojourner Truth, bought and sold, worked like a horse, give me real scientists to debunk *Scientific racism*, a pseudoscientific belief that empirical evidence exists to justify racism, racial inferiority and racial superiority.

If I am Sojourner Truth, nine-years old, sold into slavery with a flock of sheep; if, in the ensuing years, I have been beaten, raped, and my child sold into slavery, then, by God, give me the hope of heaven; the hope that this world is not the last or the best, but that the best is yet to come. Give me the story of a God who is keeping a tally; who is moved to righteous anger by human cruelty.

If I am ill, I am grateful for the prayers of the church—and the tender ministrations of cards, calls, visits, and casseroles – but I will make an appointment with a doctor, a person of science, and I will accept the ministrations of scientific testing, diagnosis, and treatment.

However, upon my death, I cherish the services of the church: the gifts and graces of sacred story, the ministry of music and liturgy, and the unscientific belief in the communion of the saints. I cherish the proposition of a love that transcends death, of a realm of mystery and majesty beyond biology. I cherish the hope of heaven, though it be unproved and unprovable.

I believe in science and I believe in God. I believe in knowledge. I believe in different kinds of knowledge and different ways of knowing.

I believe that both science and religion are only as good or as evil as their practitioners.

I believe both are capable of wielding enormous good and, in the wrong hands, horrific evil.

Despite the horrors and the sufferings at both the hands of science and of religion, neither is going away. Both have much to offer.

I believe, that in the right hands, there is power and potency, wisdom and grandeur, comfort and hope in the church's kind of knowledge.

Knowledge. The church can't claim all of it. But we have a piece of it.

This I believe.

SOURCES

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