

Either / Or - Sept. 25, 2011

Matthew 21:23-32

One of my favorite classes when I was in Seminary was the class Judaism and Early Christianity. I know I've talked about the class before, and that one of the things I loved most about the class was that there were no books, no curriculum. We were just expected to come to class with questions. The teacher of the class was the Rabbi Schaalman said, "if we didn't have questions, then we obviously didn't want to learn." This was a very traditional Jewish way of teaching, asking questions of the teacher, of the Rabbi.

Now the danger of this method from a teacher's standpoint is "what happens if they ask me a question to which I don't know the answer?" Or even worse, "What if I get a question for which I am not prepared, and I give a stupid answer?" And it was that kind of trap that the chief priests and the scribes were trying to once again put before Jesus in today's reading from Matthew. They were trying to trip him up. But you would think by now they would have learned that asking questions like that of Jesus rarely worked out well for the asker. Jesus turns the tables on them and says, "I'll give you an answer for an answer. Was John's baptism from Heaven or of human origin?" So the chief priests go into a huddle to try and figure out what to say. They were in a rough spot. The people saw John as

a prophet, but the established church didn't back him. So if they say that John's power came from Heaven, then people will say, "Why didn't you support him?" But if they say John's power was only of human origin, then they will alienate the voters, so to speak. While the chief priests weren't elected officials, they still wanted to keep their constituents happy, so they dodge the question saying, "We don't know." rather than what they actually believed.

There were also lots of questions thrown out in our Old Testament reading today. The slaves have been freed from Egypt and are following Moses into the desert. They are hot and tired, and quite frankly, they are cranky. Reading about Moses dealing with the people for the years after they left Egypt is a lot like hearing someone tell you about the awful family vacation they took driving cross country with a small car, two sick kids and no air-conditioning. You get a lot of squables, a lot of "are we there yet?" and a lot of people saying "why did we take this trip?"

See life hadn't exactly turned out the way the Israelites thought it would. They thought once they were out of Egypt it would be all milk and honey and sitting back letting other people do the work for a change. Instead, they had to walk. A Lot. Through the desert, and now, there was no water near where they'd camped. You would think that a people who were led out of slavery by a pillar of fire across a parted sea and who were fed daily by manna from heaven might have

a little faith that God wasn't suddenly going to let them die of thirst, but like I said, they were cranky, and so the arguing and the questions began. Things had not turned out as they thought, and their experiences were teaching them that the world wasn't the way they expected it to be, so the question rang out, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

The people of the Exodus were probably not the first, and definitely not the last to be faced with this question, this dilemma, this crisis of faith. Think about it, we build our faith and our beliefs around what we know about God and the world and the church, and how we believe they should all interact. When something happens that throws all of that out of whack, when something occurs to disrupt the framework we've built, it can make us question all we believe. Often this can stem from a moment of disillusionment, depression or loss. I think of John Wesley, who had gone off to the American colonies convinced that he was going to bring the Word of God to the natives and the people of the colony, and yet when he returned home to England, having failed utterly in his mission, he questioned whether or not he should even continue in the ministry. His faith was shaken.

Other times, a crisis of faith can stem simply from finding out that your own preconceived notions, simply were not true. In fact this problem has been the basis of pretty much every major clash between Science and Religion all through history. Every time that scientists say, "What we thought we knew about the world

may not be entirely right." People begin to question what it means. Where does it end? If this isn't true, then what about that? "Is God with us or not?" "Is this from Heaven or just of Human origin?" But what we need to ask is, "does it have to be either/or?"

In the late sixteenth, early seventeenth centuries, scientists such as Galileo began to put forth the idea that perhaps the Earth was not indeed the center of the universe. Rather, they said, it seems the Sun is the center, and Earth is simply the third planet that orbits the Sun. They said that it was the turning of the Earth that made the Sun appear to rise and set in the sky. And yet, Psalm 93:1 says, "God has established the world; it shall never be moved." and Ecclesiastes 1:5 says, "The sun rises and the sun goes down, and hurries to the place where it rises." This was enough for the church to set loose the Inquisition on Galileo. After he defended his research, the officials of the church decided that his theories were fine for math, and could be verified as a counting device, but not as a literal model of the universe. It was a long, long time before the church ever admitted that the Earth was not the center of the universe.

In our society today, we are often being pushed to the either/or. We are being told we have to take a side, and once we do, we can never, ever, agree with the opposition. We are seeing it in the constantly widening gap between the political parties, we see it in Coke or Pepsi, Star Wars or Star Trek, Bears or

Packers (although that last one is actually understandable), and of course, Science or Religion. We often hear it has to be one or the other, either/or. We increasingly hear "you can't have both."

One of the big issues that keeps popping up is that of evolution vs. creationism. Again our society seems to be telling us that we have to choose. That what science tells us about the creation of the world and the evolution of life somehow disproves the existence of God, or that, if we believe in a divine power then we have to ignore the evidence of the scientific community and the world around us. To watch the news sometimes, it seems as if those are our only two options. Either Science or Religion. No inbetween. Too often, it seems, we see Christians, who, like the Israelites in the desert, are afraid because the world isn't turning out to be exactly the way they thought it was. Too often I hear of Christians faced with scientific evidence who begin crying out "Is the Lord among us or not?"

And yet, Galileo was both a Scientist and a Christian. An important note here, during his defense, Galileo never claimed that the Bible was wrong, merely that we should not take for scientific fact, passages that were meant to be poetical. He had no trouble reconciling his faith in either his work, or in his spiritual beliefs. So if he could pull it off so many centuries ago, why are we suddenly being told that the two are incompatible?

Is it so wrong to look at the findings of astronomers and physicists, and biologists, on something like the origin of the world and how life began and instead of focusing on the small differences between their theories and the Bible, instead look at all the ways the two accounts seem to line up? Is it so wrong to hear scientists talk of how the earth was a mess of chaos and the rains came down and covered the earth. How the waters dried up and life began in the seas and the air and then on land. Is it wrong to hear their accounts and also hear the creation story? Cause I'm sorry, when I hear all that, I don't focus on how many days it took or if the order was exactly 100% right. Instead I marvel that nomads sitting telling stories around a campfire many thousands of years ago were so amazingly close! That when God inspired them to tell their children how it all came to be, they were able to comprehend so much of the message.

I don't think that Science and Religion needs to be an either/or proposition. I think it can be a both/and. And I know that I am not alone in this. In fact, Pastor Bromleigh has been working with several members of the congregation on this exact issue. And I am proud to announce that through their hard work, Baker memorial is receiving a \$30,000 grant from the John Templeton Foundation, which has made it a part of its organizational mission to foster deeper conversations on science and religion, through the "Scientists in Congregations" grant program. Now, I am not going to go into many specifics on the types of things we will be

doing over the next 18 months, but I know there will be movie nights, field trips and a God and science lab for the Sunday School classes. I encourage you all to read Pastor Bromleigh's note in next month's Carillon.

This is important, because, you see science doesn't have to be a wedge between people and religion. A few years ago, I was fortunate enough to get to hear Dr. Francis Collins speak. He is the author of the book "The Language of God" and he was the head of the Human Genome Project, an initiative whose job it was to map out the exact sequence of human DNA. Dr. Collins admitted that he was an atheist before working on the project. He considered himself a scientist, and as such, beyond religious thought. But as he delved deeper and deeper into genetics and began to unravel the secrets of DNA, he became more and more aware of the wonders and the beauty and artistry inherent within it. He began to see that none of this could have happened by accident, that it was created. And the more he worked, the more convinced he was that God was real. It was from reading his book that I got the idea for the pictures on the cover of today's bulletin, the rose window seen in so many churches all over the world, and the cross section of human DNA.

Yes, politicians and the media seem to be telling us that it is an either / or issue. We cannot have both science and religion in our lives. That it all must, in the words of today's reading, either be from heaven or of human origin. But at the

end of our Gospel reading today, Jesus tells the confused priests and scribes a parable. He tells of two sons. Jesus says that the father went to the first son and said "Go, and work in the field" but the son tells him no. Then, after thinking about it, he goes and does as the father asks. And the father goes to the second son and says the same to him. This son says "Yes, I'll do it", but then he never did.

We are called to know God. To rejoice at the wonders of God's works and the wonders of the Lord's creation, but if we see new and more in depth ways of seeing that world, if we have the tools to more deeply explore the wonders of God's creation, and yet turn away from them, than we are no better than the son who says he will go work and does not.

God is looking into our hearts, into the hearts of each and every one of you here and saying, "Know me. Love me. Rejoice in my works in the world and in your lives." Which of the sons will you be? Will you be the one who says "yes, Lord" but in the end does nothing more than sit in the pew on Sunday? Or will you be the one who goes forth and uses every method, every tool, every discovery to learn more and more about God and all His Wonders?

I ask you to think on that and rise as you are able to join with me in professing our faith in what we believe through the words of the Apostles' Creed...