more to life
CHRISTCHURCH
Fort Lauderdale & Pompano Beach

Psalm 8:1-8

"Faith & Science"
7th in our "*The Truth About…"* message series

This message was preached on February 11/12, 2012, Fort Lauderdale and Pompano Beach, by Pastor Heather Collver.

"We recognize science as a legitimate interpretation of God's natural world. We affirm the validity of the claims of science in describing the natural world and in determining what is scientific. We preclude science from making authoritative claims about theological issues and theology from making authoritative claims about scientific issues. We find that science's descriptions of cosmological, geological, and biological evolution are not in conflict with theology. We recognize medical, technical, and scientific technologies as legitimate uses of God's natural world when such use enhances human life and enables all of God's children to develop their God-given creative potential without violating our ethical convictions about the relationship of humanity to the natural world. We reexamine our ethical convictions as our understanding of the natural world increases. We find that as science expands human understanding of the natural world, our understanding of the mysteries of God's creation and word are enhanced. In acknowledging the important roles of science and technology, however, we also believe that theological understandings of human experience are crucial to a full understanding of the place of humanity in the universe. Science and theology are complementary rather than mutually incompatible. We therefore encourage dialogue between the scientific and theological communities and seek the kind of participation that will enable humanity to sustain life on earth an, by God's grace, increase the quality of our common lives together." (¶160.F.)

Okay, got that? Good! We're done here then. Just kidding! I actually broke one of my own rules just now, by reading to you from a book few non-clergy people ever open: the *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*. It's kind of the rulebook of our denomination, and it is revised every four years—this is the 2008 version. A new edition will be created at General Conference this year. The section I was reading from today is the "Social Principles." It is a long statement about all sorts of issues, from science and technology, which I read, rights of children, sustainable agriculture, divorce, health care, church and state relations, and on and on. It is a comprehensive document, and it's one of the reasons I fell in love with The United Methodist Church. Not because I 100% agree with every word in the Social Principles, but because I was so impressed that a church would take the time to consider a God-honoring response to each of the issues raised.

We're in the seventh week of our "The Truth About…" message series, and today's topic is "Faith and Science." It probably doesn't surprise you that Phil gave this topic to the resident nerd. After all, he knows I'm fascinated by science, by the progression of knowledge. I have pop-ups set in my calendar to notify me when the International Space Station is making a pass overhead, so I can go outside and wave to the astronauts as they fly by. (Yes, I know they can't see me.) I read books about the multiverse theory, and watch videos explaining black holes. I have a deep love for well-written science fiction books.

We're told in Genesis that we were created in the image of God. I firmly believe that God's image includes the ability to think, the drive of curiosity, and the capacity to accumulate and evaluate new data. The folks who come to my Tuesday small group have heard me say many times that God gave us brains so that we could use them.

So why is today's subject of "faith and science" even an issue? Where is the conflict?

It wasn't always viewed as a conflict. In the 1200s and 1300s, theology was referred to as "the queen of the sciences," because it was believed that the study of science was directly linked to the understanding of God. Many of our country's top universities were founded by churches, including Harvard in 1636, Yale, Princeton, and Columbia.

So where did the break occur? I would argue that the moment that started the divide happened in 1633. An astronomer named Galileo Galilei was called to Rome to defend his writings on the structure of our universe. At that time, it was believed that the Earth was the center of the universe, and that the sun, planets and stars revolved around us. Galileo (and many other astronomers) had come to understand that the movements they tracked in the heavens didn't make sense with the Earth at the center, but those paths did make sense if the Sun was the center, with everything else—including us—rotating around it.

Well, this flew in the face of the teachings of the church. At his trial, Galileo was forced to recant his findings, and was placed under house arrest—for the rest of his life. This began a deep distrust of scientists for the established church, and of people of faith for the pursuits of pure science.

This rift deepened during the Enlightenment in the 1700s. This movement sought to reform society based on the use of reason alone. The intellectuals who ascribed to this movement promoted science, and opposed religion.

Then, in 1859, Charles Darwin published his book *The Origin of Species*, advancing a radical new understanding of how the world as we know it came to be: evolution. That theory became the generally accepted scientific understanding of how our world came to hold such diversity of life.

We're not going to be talking in depth today about the Creation versus Evolution debate. But it is an excellent example of the tension between science and faith. On one side of the debate are the Evolutionists, who believe that the universe began without supernatural intervention, and over the span of billions of years, slowly evolved into its current state. On the other side are Creationists, who believe that the biblical account of creation in Genesis is historically accurate: God created the world in seven literal 24-hour days. Could God have done this? This is God we're talking about! There are intelligent, devoted Christ-followers on both those sides of this debate, and everywhere in between. How do we negotiate these tricky waters?

Soon after I had become a member of The United Methodist Church, my husband and I had dinner with our new pastor and his wife. As the evening went on, we learned that she was a high school biology teacher. I don't honestly remember how the topic of evolution came up, but I do remember that she said she had fun teaching it, especially when one of her students made fun of the "Creationists." She would then pull out her Bible, and skim through the events of creation, as recorded in Genesis. Creation of the universe, of the stars, then the waters on the Earth. The dry land appearing, creatures in the water, plants on land, followed by animals and birds. Then, last, humanity.

I had never before considered how closely that description mirrored what science has told us about the process and events of evolution. But this is what amazed me as she spoke—Genesis was written by a pre-scientific, ancient civilization! They didn't have access to the record of fossils dug up by archeologists. They didn't know about DNA testing and radiometric carbon dating. I was still so new to the faith, and it hit me as I listened that this kind of knowledge could only have come through God to the author of Genesis. How amazing!

But… the debate between science and faith rages on. One author writes: "Will we turn our backs on science because it is perceived as a threat to God, abandoning all of the promise of advancing our understanding of nature and applying that to the alleviation of suffering and betterment of humankind? Alternatively, will we turn our backs on faith, concluding that science has rendered the spiritual life no longer necessary…?" (211).

That author, Dr. Francis Collins, was the lead researcher for the Human Genome Project, an incredible undertaking involving thousands of scientists. In 2000, he stood with the President on the White House lawn as it was announced that these dedicated scientists had succeeded in mapping the over 20,000 genes in the human body. A monumental achievement.

In his book *The Language of God*, he writes: "For me, there is not a shred of disappointment or disillusionment in these discoveries about the nature of life—quite the contrary! How marvelous and intricate life turns out to be! How deeply satisfying is the digital elegance of DNA! How aesthetically appealing and artistically sublime are the components of living things…" (107).

I want to share with you two of my favorite scripture passages. First is Psalm 8, verses 3-4: *"When I look at the night sky and see the work of your fingers—the moon and the stars that you set in place—what are mere mortals that you should think about them, human beings that you should care about them?"* The very first time I remember thinking about God was lying in my parents' backyard at night, watching the stars move past me, and thinking, "God made all of this! And I get to enjoy it!"

And the Psalm 139, verses 13 and 14: *"You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body and knit me together in my mother's womb. Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex! Your workmanship is marvelous—how well I know it."* Just as I am in awe of God's majesty in our universe, I am equally in awe of God's majesty in the tiny, the small. A few years ago while Chuck and I were visiting New York City, I went to *Bodies: The Exhibit*. This is an exhibition of preserved, dissected human bodies, showing the underlying structures of the human body: skeletal, circulatory, respiratory, nervous, etc. I know, it probably sounds really gross to some of you, but it was fascinating to me. I remember standing in front of one exhibit of the circulatory system, and being completely and utterly amazed with the intricate, lacy patterns of our blood vessels. Nearby me was a group of young medical students, being lectured to by their professor, who was speaking in a droning monotone. I wanted to jump into the group, and say, "Don't you see how *amazing* this all is? Can't you see how miraculous it is that all these systems work together? Can't you see the care and love that went into this design? Aren't you just floored by the fact that you've got all this inside you right now?"

Science and religion have at their core great similarities. Both want to understand the deep truths of our world. Both want to understand how to help people who are suffering and to make our world a better, healthier place. But they come from very different perspectives, and that makes all the difference.

If I was a mechanical scientist, I would tell you that you're able to hear beautiful music from a sing because the air passing through a singer's larynx vibrates the vocal folds, creating a sound wave that moves from where they are to where you are.

If I was an audiologist or a neuroscientist, I would tell you that when those sound waves reach your ears, they vibrate your eardrum, and those vibrations are picked up by the malleus, incus and stapes (three tiny little bones in your inner ear), amplifying the vibrations and passing them through to the fluid-filled cochlea, to make electrical impulses that shoot up your auditory nerve to the brain for interpretation.

Those descriptions only tell us how you're able to hear. But they don't tell us why! The "why" isn't science's domain. That's ours.

Galileo, that 17th century astronomer, famously said: "Faith teaches us how to go to heaven. Science teaches us how the heavens go." Modern geologist Steven Gould puts it this way: "Faith is about the Rock of Ages, and geology is about the ages of rocks."

John Wesley, the man who led the spiritual movement that became The United Methodist Church, referred to himself as a "man of one book." That book being, of course, the Bible. The Bible is our foundational document, the manual for understanding how we are to live, and what eternal consequences there are for our decisions here on earth. It is an amazing gift from God, full of wisdom and warnings, guidance and truth.

But the Bible is not about science. At its core, it's about relationships. It is packed with stories about people just like us—fragile and flawed. It's about how the Creator of the universe nurtured humanity, entering into deep, intimate relationships with us out of his great love. It's about how that Creator entered into human history—as a human man, with heart, lungs, brain, bones and skin—and breathed our air, walked our roads, and died our death. It's about how that Creator continues to work within us through the Holy Spirit, an unquantifiable and very real force in our lives. It's about how we are commanded to show the people around us the same love and care that we have been shown by God.

Sometimes it seems to me that I quote Matthew 22:37-39 every time I preach. But I just can't help myself! Jesus said, *"'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"*

Love your God with all your heart, all your soul, and… yes!... all your mind.

I don't believe for a moment that God is threatened by our pursuit of knowledge. After all, God created everything that is, and the more we learn about God's creation, the more we can learn about God. And, the truth is, what we do manage to learn with our limited brains and short lifetimes will only scratch the surface of the magnificence of God's almost limitless creation. So, for the Christ-followers, what is the purpose of science?

Acts 17, verses 24 and 27: *"He is the God who made the world and everything in it. Since he is Lord of heaven and earth, he doesn't live in man-made temples, and human hands can't serve his needs—for he has no needs. He himself gives life and breath to everything, and he satisfies every need. … God's purpose was for the nations to seek after God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him—though he is not far from any one of us."*

God calls us to love him with all our mind, because it has the potential to lead us back to God: feeling our way toward him and finding him, the God who is waiting there for us.

I am profoundly grateful for science and technology for many personal reasons. As just one example, my 3-year old niece Emma was hospitalized on Thursday with pneumonia. It was scary. She had been having trouble breathing, and her heart rate was almost double the normal. Her little body was working so hard to get enough oxygen. Once in the hospital they were able to give her nebulizer treatments, medicine, and pure oxygen by mask, so that she could breathe easier.

Just a few generations ago, those treatments wouldn't have been available. She might not have been able to quickly get the medical attention that she needed. A relatively minor, but acute ailment caused by a tiny virus could have taken this darling, beautiful girl out of the world. But, because of the miracles of science, and the miracles of prayers of people in New York and Florida, yesterday morning she was back on room air at the hospital—no more oxygen mask—and had her favorite meal: a grilled cheese sandwich. And, last night she was discharged to continue her treatments at home.

Yes, we have much to gain from science. But science also has much to gain from faith! We live in a time of rapid scientific progress, and because science seeks to answer the "how" and "what" questions, it is not always equipped to answer the "why" question. Understanding how stem cells function, how to replicate DNA, how to manufacture new chemicals, how to use technology to sustain life—these are all good things. But when they are applied to issues such as genetic modifications, cloning, global warming, abortion, euthanasia, and so many others, faith needs to be involved. Just because we can, doesn't necessarily mean that we should.

Just as science can teach us, we can teach science. And we have an obligation to do so! What more direct way for us to show God our love by using our hearts, souls, and minds together to tackle some of the most important issues of our time? We can support our brothers and sisters in the scientific community by exploring with them the theological, ethical, and social implications of the discoveries they are making every day.

Francis Collins ends his book with these words: "Is the science of genetics and genomics beginning to allow us to "play God"? That phrase is the one most commonly used by those expressing concern about these advances, even when the speaker is a nonbeliever. Clearly the concern would be lessened if we could count on human beings to play God as God does, with infinite love and benevolence. Our track record is not so good. Difficult decisions arise when a conflict appears between the mandate to heal and the moral obligation to do no harm. But we have no alternative but to face those dilemmas head-on, attempt to understand all the nuances, include the perspectives of all the stakeholders, and try to reach a consensus. The need to succeed at these endeavors is just one more compelling reason why the current battles between the scientific and spiritual worldviews need to be resolved—we desperately need both voices to be at the table, and not to be shouting at each other." (272)

Psalm 8: *"When I look at the night sky and see the work of your fingers—the moon and the stars you set in place— what are mere mortals that you should think about them, human beings that you should care for them? Yet you made them only a little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honor. You gave them charge of everything you made, putting all things under their authority—the flocks and the herds and all the wild animals, the birds in the sky, the fish in the sea, and everything that swims the ocean currents. O Lord, our Lord, your majestic name fills the earth!"*