

Jerry was a young pediatrician whose course of study led to a new field of medicine, genetic counseling, and to the faculty of the Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis where I was a pastor. Jerry had grown up in Oklahoma Baptist churches; his father was a minister of music. So the family joined our congregation.

I don't recall the sermon in detail, but it wasn't so unusual. One Sunday morning I mentioned that evolutionary science is not an enemy but a friend, complementary to a Christian faith. Jerry was shocked. He had never heard such a thing in church. He had managed to stay with medicine and church through a schizophrenic lifestyle, leaving his work, but not his head, at the door of the sanctuary. He sort of expected the pulpit either to ignore or attack his science. After worship, Jerry expressed his surprise and blessed the word that he had never before heard in church. In our conversation he noted that evolution was not a controversial theory for him; it was a fact that he observed daily in his work. Genetic research was a child of evolutionary biology, and evolutionary science was the very ground on which he stood to provide families with guidance about their genetic health and the health of their children. He was elated with a church that did not demonize his work.

In case you need to be reminded, we live in the shadow of the 1925 Scopes Trial in Dayton, Tennessee. The law under which John Scopes was convicted and fined \$100 was not repealed in this state until 1967.

A few years ago, Carolyn and I signed on with Michael Zimmerman's "Clergy Letter Project." Zimmerman is a professor of philosophy at Colorado University in Boulder devoted to environmental ecology. In light of the battle raging in schools over the supposed threat to faith in evolutionary biology, Zimmerman has worked to get clergy endorsement of evolution as a friend of faith. This is the seventh annual Evolution Weekend directed at affirming the role of modern biology in religion, and we are one of 563 listed congregations from fifty states and ten countries signed on to support our teachers and to bless the nature of nature.

I make no claim of expertise in any field of science including biology. I recall a biology professor at Baylor University gently telling my class that we do not have to throw out our Bibles to study biology and that we should not throw out our biology books because of our faith. Before I walked into the biology class, my religion professor had encouraged an open mind toward science. James Wood opened doors and windows to the study of the Bible for me that I had never thought possible. He noted that as Christians we are devoted to truth wherever it may emerge; he affirmed evolutionary science as a complement to the creation. In the opening classes on the Old Testament, Wood called to our attention an evolutionary progression in the Bible. Even in the pre-scientific poem to creation, life emerged in stages on the same order of Darwin's *Origin of Species* from water to air to land.

My closest encounter with evolution, however, came later in seminary graduate study. I still hold dear the process theology of Eric Rust and Dale Moody's affirmation of evolution as a clue to understanding our faith. Even the Bible leaves room for choice about how we are to understand the world we live in and the meaning of time in the process of creation. Creation was enlarged from the message about beginnings, cosmogony, to the undergirding framework of history. Once you accept the meaning of time as creation in process, all of life and even the most ambiguous facets of our experience begin to fit into God's good work.

**The creation is a work in progress.** I do not claim a biblical proof text for evolution any more than I expect to find a geocentric world, atoms, TV, cellphones, or black holes in the ancient texts of Judeo-Christian religion. But, in spite of the primitive nature of biblical religion, I am amazed at the moments of reflection on the real world that I live in. The Bible itself is a work in progress, an evolution of the understanding of God. The Jews discovered the importance of history as a mirror to the presence of God in the world. God was not outside the process looking down but inside of history acting in the events of Jewish life. God's Word was never separate from God's acts.

Romans 8 has long held ground at the center of my faith largely because Paul gets real in this Epistle addressed to Christians living in the Imperial City where life was always tenuous. Under Rome, life was cheap, death a constant companion, and hope was not to be found in daily existence.

Paul does not attempt to hide from Roman Christians the real corruption and suffering of their world. There is no theodicy here, no attempt to defend God for the existence evil. The creation, the real world, has been subjected to futility and exists in bondage to decay. The creation is corrupt, constantly groaning with unfathomable suffering, in the grasp of unexplainable evil. I tend to value being advised of reality even when I don't like it. I don't always like what Paul says or always agree with his conclusions, but I can't accuse the apostle-come-lately of ignoring the big questions of life.

Paul did not need to argue for a Creator, as he might in our situation; but the nature of nature demanded some accounting from God for the pain and suffering in the created order. For Paul, the creation groans like a woman giving birth. The suffering of childbirth is meaningful, purposeful pain.

I recall the birth of our granddaughter in Japan. Keith chided his wife for scaring her younger sister with a play-by-play, detailed description of unbearable, unbelievable pain. How can we laugh at such stories? Once the child is born, even the mother can say that the pain was the means, not the end. Because of the new life born into our world, the pain becomes acceptable and sometimes even a cause for boasting.

As a child I questioned the bad stuff in creation. I was about five years old when a hurricane tore through our community dropping a tall pine tree from our front yard across the street. Why does God allow hurricanes? Why do we have rattlesnakes and mosquitoes? Why do children die of hunger, while nations beat their plowshares into swords?

I was sometimes told that we aren't supposed to ask such questions. Faith means trusting that "Father knows best," and we sang, "we'll understand it better by and by." Long before I dared to ask the question, the classical drama of Job dared to challenge the accepted wisdom that justice reigns: only the good get rich, have beautiful, healthy children, and live long happy lives. Bless Job for daring to question God! But it was not God that needed to be challenged so much as the commonly held idea of God.

Process theologian Robert Measle (*Process Theology*, p. 45ff) views the traditional idea of the creation like the process of stamping a phonograph recording. When we listen to the music, it plays in sequence just like it is being performed for the first time; but we know that the whole album was recorded in advance, stamped into the grooves of the disc at one time, and will always sound exactly the same every time it is played. For ages, theologians thought of the creation just like that. God is sitting somewhere up there above it all, and the world is playing out the preordained sequence of events. No wonder we tend to blame God for the bad stuff that screams in our ears.

**Creation evolves toward hope.** The problem was time; it eventually runs out. But what if God is in this with us? What if the next note is not already fixed on the surface of time? What if the world is more like the innovations of a jazz band and every improvised note is produced out of the creative genius of the musicians on the spot? What if there is no certainty about the next sound or the composition as a whole until it is finished? What if God suffers with us? What if God is also affected by the bad stuff? Is that not the message of the incarnation? According to Paul, God was in Christ suffering not only *for* us but *with* us. If I am reading correctly, Paul observed the creation as a work in progress and God, who subjected the creation to the slow, steady process of time, subjected it "in hope" that the whole mess will eventually come to "the freedom of the glory of the children of God."

In Romans 8, Paul's word in verse 28 has been my anchor. For years I have clung to the promise, "all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." When everything in life has not turned out to be good, I have had to go back to the well to determine if I was pulling up the wrong bucket. The Revised translators made a subtle shift. It is not "all things" at the helm, but "in everything God works together for good." God is in the process of time working out the creation even when things do not go our way or worse, when things seem to deny any intelligence in the created order. In the worst of times, your love for God and your sense of God's purpose for the creation gives meaning to life and makes the intolerable moments bearable.

If God is not finished with creation, there is hope. If the whole has not been worked out in advance, there is hope. If God is love, in spite of the pain, suffering, and hate-filled evil in this world, there is hope. Thanks be to God.