

“Love Makes the World Go ‘Round”

sermon digest

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John 15:1-17

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The song “Love Makes the World Go ‘Round” is from the 1961 Broadway musical drama “Carnival” and was later recorded by big name entertainers like Perry Como and Johnny Mathis. If it seems like just the right place to begin a sermon on Valentine Day week end, we need to put on the brakes. Before you drift off into romantic memories of wine and roses, I would like to suggest another direction that normally does not cause starry-eyed, romantic fantasy but goes to the very center of the phenomenon in human existence we call love. Evolutionary science has inspired a movement in Christian faith that has caused a radical readjustment for people who believe that the truth of God and the truth of science must be compatible. Process theologians like Norman Pittenger, John Cobb, and Daniel Day Williams have identified the power of love to be the engine that drives evolution and that inspires hope in people of faith.

Evolutionary science and biblical Christianity share common ground. A few years ago, Carolyn and I signed on with Michael Zimmerman’s “Clergy Letter Project.” Devoted to environmental ecology, Michael Zimmerman is a professor of philosophy at Colorado University in Boulder. In light of the ongoing battle over the supposed threat to faith, Zimmerman has worked to find friends of evolutionary biology among the clergy. This is the tenth annual Evolution Weekend directed at affirming the role of modern biology in religion, and we are one of the congregations from fifty states and ten countries signed on to support science teachers and to bless the science of nature. You might think that a city devoted to science like Oak Ridge would not need to be reminded of the importance of an evolutionary understanding our world, but we learned a couple of years ago in the Forum on Religion and Science from some of our high school teachers that even here teachers face resistance to the truth of science with the mistaken notion that evolution is a threat to faith.

Some twenty years ago, two distinguished Oak Ridge physicists, members of our church, Sam Hurst and Rufus Ritchie initiated the Forum on Religion and Science to discuss issues like evolution, and people like biologist Bruce Jacobsen have worked diligently to defend the validity of evolutionary science against the continued onslaught of anti-science Christians. In FRS, we heard from a panel of science teachers in our high school that century-old denunciations of Darwin’s findings and the mentality of the Scopes trial sixty-five miles and nine decades from here continue to plague education.

One of my heros, Mother’s older brother Noel, was a public school science teacher and school administrator in Oklahoma. The oldest of nine children, he managed to continue his education against difficult economic odds. In college he learned that the evidence for evolutionary science was overwhelming and chose to devote his life to teaching science with integrity. He found that teaching science in the Bible Belt was not easy. People were not ready to rethink traditional interpretations of the Bible, set views of God, or their notions about science. But in spite of being ostracized by his church and family because of his refusal to denounce Darwin, Noel stayed the course. I suspect that he moved to school administration because of the difficulty of teaching science in that context. He eventually wrote a book on the evidence for evolution in nature, and in retirement he traveled around Oklahoma and Arkansas doing lectures on evolutionary science. Especially in recent years, I have fantasized about crossing over the barrier of time to affirm Noel’s integrity, to reassure him that his devotion to the truth was not in conflict with the teachings of Jesus or the Bible, and to identify my own views of the creation with his love for evolutionary science. I would like to say to my well-meaning but misguided family, that the Bible itself is loaded with evidence of the evolutionary development of faith. I have learned to live with some embarrassing passages in the Bible in conflict with my view of God in Christ with the understanding that the Bible evolves forward toward the God we meet in Christ and points us on to the time when God is all and in all.

“God is Love.” Twice in the epistle (1 John 4:7, 12) John makes the astounding statement “God is love.” He calls for disciples to “love one another, because love is from God.” The author of 1 John could be the same person who wrote the Fourth Gospel, which later Christians attributed to the Apostle John. The author of 1 John certainly appears to be familiar with the farewell discourse of Jesus we have read today. Jesus was preparing his disciples for his own death and for the life of the church in the power of the Spirit. The metaphor of the vine and the branches, “I am the vine, you are

the branches,” suggests an organic tie between Jesus and his disciples; but like a lot of biblical material, it is a metaphor not intended as a literal claim to a physical tie between Jesus and the disciples. But the bond Jesus is suggesting may well be more integral to the life of his friends than sharing the same DNA. First, the very word for friends (“you are my friends”) is based on the most common word for love *philos*. Friends are “beloved.”

In the metaphor he calls the disciples to “Abide in me as I abide in you.” Since he was not speaking literally about organic connections, how is this supposed to happen? I suspect that the author intends us to see an interpretation of the metaphor: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.” Raymond Brown calls it a “chain of love.” The Father loves Jesus. Jesus loves the disciples. The disciples must love one another “as I have loved you.”

Norman Pittenger, *The Lure of Divine Love* (p. 33), notes that there was a time in the mid-nineteenth century when science viewed the world as a giant machine, relentlessly and meaninglessly grinding along. The significant place of humanity in the development of the cosmos along with numerous indications of meaning in nature have called the old machine into question. The theologians of Process, along with 1 John, believe that God is love.

That raises significant challenges to the old theologies that viewed God as the immutable “God up there” who addresses the creation with power and control. In the worst sense of this all-powerful God, the Stoics influenced early Christians to believe that God is impassive, that is, unfeeling. This immutable God with neither feeling for the creation nor any genuine passion for the well-being of the earth rides above it all and is unaffected by human suffering or need. Of course, this all-powerful God contradicts many biblical reflections on the grace and love of God. Jews as well as Christians found in God the essential content of mercy and grace.

John Cobb was born in Kobe, Japan, the son of Methodist missionaries. At the age of fifteen, in 1940, he moved to Georgia to finish high school and was appalled at the racism of the time as well as the demonization of the Japanese that came with the war. He joined the army in 1943 and was immediately put into Japanese language service because of his background. With deep roots in Christian faith, Cobb became disillusioned with the narrow parochial quality of Christianity he found in the US and began a quest for the God who created the whole universe, the strange along with the familiar. Through the study of science and philosophy, Cobb reached for a broader base for his faith than traditional Christian theology tended to accept.

Cobb found in A.N. Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne an evolutionary faith that began to connect to his Christian roots. What if God is not the grand puppeteer pulling the strings on history and riding above all of the pain in the world? What if God is in this with us, growing and changing as the world evolves toward its destiny? If we take the word in John as Gospel, then God is at work through the power of love moving in the process of finishing the new creation. God is loving the world toward fulfillment, and love is the powerful engine that is driving evolution forward.

If God is love, then the most powerful thing we can do for each other is embrace one another in the abiding love of God. If God is love, then we are created with meaning in life and purpose for our existence that should ever drive us toward finding the way to love one another as Christ has loved us.

It’s an evolutionary faith. The love of God revealed in people like you makes the world go ‘round.