

Oregon City United Methodist Church
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Series: The Wesleyan Path

Sermon: Quadrilateral - Vivified by Experience

Romans 12:1-8

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. 2 Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

3 For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. 4 For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, 5 so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. 6 We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; 7 if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; 8 if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

Sermon

How many of you enjoy learning about science? Anybody have science their favorite subject in school? I like the story told about a teacher who was giving her second-grade students a lesson in science. She explained all about magnets and showed how they would pick up nails and other pieces of metal with iron in it. She then asked a question to see if they understood, she asked: "My name begins with the letter 'M' and I pick up things. What am I?" A little boy proudly answered, "You're a mother!"

This cute story illustrates that sometimes there are several correct answers to a question. The word magnet begins with "M" and magnets pick up things. But the word mother also begins with "M" and mothers also pick up things. Sometimes there are multiple correct answers. Of course, Dads should pick up things too, but now I'm getting into miracles.

This morning, we are finishing up our sermon series on the Quadrilateral, how Methodists do Theology. As we examine how we experience the divine, we look through four different lenses. We explore the Scriptures, we remember our traditions, we inquire of our experiences, and today, we'll look at the fourth lense, Reason. Does our faith pass the smell test? Does it make sense? God gave us brains to use, lets use them and not throw them out when we walk in the door. Wesley said it like this: "Is it not reason (assisted by the Holy Ghost) which enables us to understand what the Holy Scriptures declare concerning the being and attributes of God? – concerning his eternity and immensity; his power, wisdom, and holiness? It is by reason that God enables us in some measure to comprehend his method of dealing with the children of men; the nature of his various dispensations, of the old and new covenant, of the law and the gospel." What Wesley is saying is that God gave us a brain, use it.

So why does science and faith butt heads so many times? Why can't people of science and people of faith be on the same page with God?

Do science and faith conflict? The answer that I want us to wrestle with and come to an understanding about is this: Science and faith do not have to be in conflict with each other. When there is conflict, it is either because of bad science or bad religion, or both. Let's begin by realizing that the Christian faith birthed modern science and that almost all of the earliest scientists were Christians. The Christian faith has done much to make scientific investigation possible. Christians taught that nature is good, but it is not a god – it is God's creation. Christians taught that nature is not sacred, but it is to be used as a gift from a good and loving God. We understood that nature can be studied without fear. People like Copernicus, Galileo, Isaac Newton, Kepler and many others were men of deep personal faith and conviction. These saints of great faith paved the way for modern scientific thinking. They understood that at the center of the universe was a divine intelligence. They understood that life is not random and chaotic, but is rational and ordered. They understood that the world is not subject to the whims of thousands of gods, but that there is one God who is good and who has built the universe and life with design and purpose. Of course, the church of the time thought some of these folk were heretics, but it was because of bad theology. Issac Newton wrote one of the early studies on the Book of Daniel. And a lot of theologians were scientists. We can look at John Wesley for this, the founder of the Methodist Church. He did a lot of work with electricity that Ben Franklin used. He also wrote a home medical book for the general population - its actually where he made most of his money - bringing in general medical information to the masses.

Let's spend a few minutes talking about what we mean by science and religion and how that each of them have their own realms and limits. Conflict results when either of them attempt to go beyond their realms and limits. Science is a means to discover the underlying laws which govern the natural world using empirically-generated data as well as theories and models to explain that data. So science is a process, not a series of facts. Scientific inquiry works is like this: someone comes up with a hypothesis or theory by which they can explain natural phenomena, and then by repeating experiments the hypothesis is tested. If the hypothesis is supported by a certain result enough times, then it is considered "proven." But any scientific theory is only one experiment away from falsification. Science provides us with physical explanations of physical phenomena. Science, by its very nature, is limited in the kinds of knowledge it can give us. It is very good at answering certain questions and very bad at answering others. Science is really quite effective in answering questions like: Where? When? How? How many? But science is completely unable to answer one important question: Why? Science cannot answer questions like: "What is the value of human life?" "Is that the right thing to do?" "Am I here for a reason?"

Humans find themselves asking these kinds of questions about meaning, justice, and purpose, but science is not able to help in this area. That does not mean that science has no value – through science we have cured diseases, and understood the working of nature so I don't have to freak out when there's an eclipse.

Religion, on the other hand, is the means of understanding the "whys" of life – why are we here, why are some things right and wrong? Whereas science seeks tentative explanation and rejects authority, religion is the opposite. Religious truth and knowledge are based on authority - what God has revealed. Scientific knowledge changes and grows. God is the same yesterday, today and forever.

Think of it like this: as you know, boundaries are important. Humans are social beings, but we are individuals as well. Generally, in a social sphere, we will concede space to others; but in our own personal space, we will defend our territory vigorously.

I couldn't help but think of the violations of boundaries that occurred in our home when I was growing up – I was second of four kids and we would run to mom and say, "sister or brother went into my room without asking!" Going into someone else's bedroom without permission was a big "no, no"! In a general sense, science

and religion have their own separate spaces or “bedrooms.” As long as religion does not enter the “bedroom” of science and science does not enter the “bedroom” of religion, then there will be peace. But it should not surprise us that when religion invades the natural territory of science, it evokes a reaction and vice versa.

So the conflicts between science and faith come when either make pronouncements outside of their realm and do not respect the appropriate boundaries. One of the earliest conflicts between science and religion occurred back in 1500 A.D. when Nicolaus Copernicus, who was both a scientist and religious leader, concluded that the sun was the center of the universe.

This went against the church’s position at the time. The church believed that the Bible declared that the earth was stationary, and that the sun moved around it. The church based its’ belief on Psalm 104:1, 5 that says, “O Lord my God, Thou art great indeed...Thou fixed the earth upon its foundation, not to be moved forever.” Copernicus was forced to keep his views secret for 30 years for fear of persecution by church authorities. Galileo began where Copernicus left off, and claimed that the earth was not the center of the universe, but revolved around the sun.

Because Galileo held this belief, he came under intense criticism and persecution from the church. Pope Urban VIII personally gave the order in 1633 that Galileo, then an old man of 70, should be threatened with torture if he did not renounce the heresy that the earth revolved around the sun. In the face of mounting evidence, the church held to this one verse falsely interpreted – that’s what I mean by bad religion. Today we accept that the earth revolves around the sun without sacrificing our faith.

An example of bad science is when science says that evolution is not a theory, but is fact, even when there is little actual evidence that supports the theory of evolution. I really have no idea how it happened, I just know however it did, God was behind it.

Of course, science and religion can compliment each other. Science may solve the problem of how the universe began, but it cannot answer the question: why does the universe bother to exist? The Bible tells us God brought the world into being and why He did it, but the Bible does not give us much information about how God did it, other than the fact that He did it in an orderly way. Science can trace and explain the human biological process, but only the Bible can speak to our value and purpose and future.

Let’s consider the question of alcoholism and see how science and religion might work together. If we only listen to “science,” we will notice the genetic predisposition of some to alcoholism, but fail to give hope to the alcoholic. Science alone might even give the person an excuse not to change. On the other hand, if we only consider the “religious” aspect of alcoholism, declaring it a sin, but ignoring the science, we may miss a chance to use a chemical treatment to help the person overcome alcoholism. You’re faith shall make you well! And we might also fail to show compassion, not understanding that for some it really is harder than for others, for reasons not completely within their control. But if we allow science and religion to work together, especially in that limited number of questions on which they naturally overlap, much good can result.

Albert Einstein said, “Science without religion is lame, but religion without science is blind.” Dr. James Tour of Rice University has said, “I stand in awe of God because of what He has done through His creation. Only a rookie, who knows nothing about science, would say science takes away from faith. If you really study science, it will bring you closer to God.” I like what a Nebraskan scientist and author Leon Eisenley said: “At the core of the universe, the face of God wears a smile.”

So I guess my message to you today is this: Use reason as you do your theological work. Does your religion

pass the smell test? Meaning, does it make sense? I know we believe in the resurrection, and miracles and such - but by and large, God can use science to bring us closer to Him. We can get medical treatment without wondering if we have little faith. Get the medicine! Don't leave your kid without vaccination because God will heal the mumps. Get the shot! Or, I believe in this religion because they're so good with families - but when you read their scriptures or know how they started, it sounds a little wackadoodle. That's a theological term - wackadoodle. Would God send a hurricane to wipe out a sinful city? Would God want us to nuke another country? Is the earth getting warmer or is God hugging us just a little closer? Should we all wear black nikes, take poison and wait to get picked up by a passing asteroid? Should we drink the coolaid? I'm all about faith, but if my faith asks some pretty weird stuff or doesn't help the greater good . . . Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test-test-test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. Wesley not only brought faith to the people of England, but also science and new understandings of the world. Science tells us who, what, when, how, but faith tells us why and how to treat each other. As Einstein said, and Wesley might concur: "Science without religion is lame, but religion without science is blind." Lets not be blind or lame. And the family of God said: AMEN!