

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Dan Krebill, Co-Pastor

February 15, 2009
6th Sunday of Ordinary Time
Mark 1:40-45

Compassionate Community

This past week were the 200th birthdays of two men—each who changed the course of history in one way or another. Both were born on February 12, 1809. One is an American, Abraham Lincoln, who became the 16th President of the United States and one of the greatest Presidents in history. Tomorrow our nation pauses with a national holiday that recognizes Lincoln and the other great Presidents of our nation.

The other whose birthday bicentennial we noted also on Thursday is Charles Darwin, an Englishman who with his book, *On the Origins of Species* published in 1859, introduced the world to a new explanation for the great diversity among the animals of the earth. It was his work that became the foundation for the theory of evolution in which the compelling case is made that life on Earth has evolved over the eons from a common starting point leading up to the multiple forms of life we see today, including human life. With this groundbreaking book, Darwin opened a Pandora's box of sorts that has itself evolved over time to the point that some Christians see his work as heretical and going against the scriptural accounts of all life having been created by God in a straightforward way as described in the first two chapters of Genesis, the first book in the Bible.

Somehow, over time, Darwin's work and the legacy that follows to this day have been seen by many as a threat or challenge or even alternative to the Christian religion. From this perspective it is an either-or. Either one believes in Darwin's theory of evolution, or one believes in God who is revealed in the Bible. This perspective does not allow for anything but one or the other points of view.

This unnecessary dichotomy is so unfortunate. Unnecessary because it mistakenly pits science and religion against each other and unfortunate because unfathomable amounts of time and energy have been expended by those on both sides speaking over and against the other across this divide.

Apparently this 200th anniversary of Darwin's birth has sparked a new round of conversation, debate and continued disagreement. However it is worth noting that a number of Christian churches, who have historically spoken out against Darwinian theories are today backing off from that stance and are now embracing the view that Christianity no longer needs see the theory of evolution as a threat to faith. They are coming to embrace an understanding, that Presbyterians by the way have embraced for some time now, that the scientific theories address different questions than the questions that are addressed by Christianity.

In a nutshell, science will always be limited to the questions of who, what, when and where. Scientific exploration and research is all about posing these questions and seeking answers to them. Who was involved? What happened? When did it happen? And where did it happen? What science is not very good at answering is the why—particularly the ultimate why question. And that's where religion comes in and in the case of Christianity, the answer that is behind the why is God. In the case of the origin of the universe, science will always come up short on the why. Christianity says that the origin of

the universe is God. God is the why behind the universe. More specifically it is God's love that is the why behind the universe.

For us the Bible has always been a book of faith in which we find answers to the whys of life. Whenever we have tried to make the Bible a book of logic or science to answer the whos, whats, whens and wheres we can find ourselves tripping all over it. For one thing the Bible was written in a pre-scientific era when the world was understood as flat with the sky as a dome not unlike an overturned bowl, and so describes events and natural phenomena from that perspective. So in pre-scientific times the Bible's answers sufficed.

The advancements made by scientists who are using their God-given abilities, have in effect freed up the Bible to do what it does best—inspire faith to believe in the God of the universe. So let us continue to embrace the scientific theories that document that the earth is hundreds of millions years old with human life evolving in the last few million years, while we at the same time embrace the Bible as a source of our faith that all creation ultimately comes from God who loves us.

With the events this week commemorating Darwin's birthday, I was reminded of this issue when I took up the passage from Mark's gospel in which Jesus cleanses and cures the leper who comes to him seeking intervention. For in the details of this situation it is possible for us to become distracted by issues around the man's disease and how it is that he came to be sick, as well as by the pre-scientific cultural and religious ways in which disease and sickness were handled in Jesus' time. And while some of the contextual details are helpful in understanding what this story is about, the story is included in Mark's gospel for reasons that are much more important than the medical and scientific elements in it. It is in the answer to why this story is here that we can come to a deeper faith in Jesus.

This is the third of three Sundays that we are focusing on an event in the first chapter of Mark. Within the very first chapter of this gospel we read of Jesus casting a demon out of a man, the curing of the mother-in-law of one of the disciples, and now this curing of the man afflicted with a skin disease. With the close of this action-packed chapter, the stage is set for the rest of Mark's gospel which is also filled with more stories of miracles performed by Jesus. In fact a full third of Mark is made up of accounts of the miracles of Jesus. Clearly the writer of Mark wants us to understand that a central part of Jesus' ministry was bringing about healing and wholeness.

There are two aspects of this story that I want to highlight today. The first is that the man who came to Jesus had a serious skin disease. Even in the pre-scientific time in which this took place, the community had observed that skin diseases like this were passed from person to person. This resulted in the religious community determining that those so afflicted with such diseases were considered to be unclean and therefore banished from the community so as to prevent the disease from being spread.

So when Jesus is not put off by this banished man coming toward him and furthermore that Jesus reached out his hand and actually touched the man was astonishing to those who observed it. Clearly Jesus was breaking with the convention that would keep him separated from such people to start with. But to drive the point even further that it wasn't a fluke that the man reached Jesus, Jesus makes physical contact

and reaches out and touches someone who hadn't felt the touch of another human for all the time he had been afflicted.

Clearly there was more than one miracle being witnessed that day. Not only was a diseased man cured, the cure came as the result of Jesus breaking with convention to make hand to hand contact with the man. The shock and awe of this series of events was truly amazing.

Adding to this amazement is the second aspect to be mentioned in this event. After the man is cured, Jesus instructs the man—in fact Jesus sternly warns the man—not to tell anyone about what has happened to him. Rather he is to go to the priest to follow the prescribed procedure for being declared clean again and therefore admissible back into the society and community. Clearly Jesus wants the man and those who have witnessed his healing to understand that what has happened is more than just a man being healed of his disease. He has been made whole to the point that he can be re-admitted to the community and resume his place there.

In Jesus' warning that the man should not tell anyone what has happened to him, Jesus, in this very first chapter of Mark, is attempting to communicate that it is God's desire that all people understand that it is God's intention that they be full and complete members of the household of God—something that he will strive to say all the way to the cross upon which he will die. Bible scholar Fred Craddock says it so well. “[Jesus] is not seeking to be a star, known for relieving people of burdens and difficulties. All the way to the cross Jesus will be trying to get those who think ‘where the Messiah is, there is no misery’ to accept a new perspective—‘where there is misery, there is the Messiah.’” (*Preaching the New Common Lectionary: Year B Advent, Christmas, Epiphany*. 1984, Abingdon Press, p. 160)

“Where there is misery, there is the Messiah.” This is a powerful assertion of the compassion that marks Jesus' ministry and that by extension is what should mark the community of faith to this day. To be a compassionate community is to be less concerned with the standing, the status and the correctness of its members, and to be more concerned with the welcome extended, the hospitality provided and the inclusion lived out of all seeking wholeness.

Isn't that a big part of what we are doing when we baptize as we did to Frances Jay Frye at the early service? With the physical touch of cleansing water extended by the community and by God through the hand of the baptizer, we compassionately welcome into our midst one who has been given to us by God.

It is our religious faith that gives meaning and purpose to our life in community. Science may be able to explain some aspects of our experience of that community, but it will never provide an explanation of the source of that community.

Thanks be to God for the faith instilled in us through Jesus that our understanding is made real in the faith we have been given.