

THE MODE AND TEMPO OF CHURCH EVOLUTION

Sermon by Robert M. Thorson given at Channing Memorial Church on October 17, 2010 for service coordinated by Eleanor Dumato.

READING

Placing Darwin in the tradition of Moses and Jesus may seem heresy from both the Judeo-Christian and scientific viewpoints, but I think the roles played by the three figures have been similar. They wrenched their respective cultures out of a complacency that amounted to self-worship and thrust them in new directions that (if not always entirely beneficial) enlarged the human perspective. Moses forced his society to accept a unifying law; Jesus forced his to accept the unity of all humanity; Darwin forced his to accept the unity of all life. I doubt whether any of the three would have been able to influence his society so strongly if he had not been fortified by a season in the wilderness.

David Rains Wallace, "Tracks in the Wilderness," *The Klamath Knot*, San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1983, page 8.

SERMON

Good Morning. And thanks for being here.

Most of you were here when I asked the children: "Which came first? The chicken or the Egg? Perhaps you saw what I saw... a look of bewilderment on their faces as they tried to get their young brains around a new idea...that **chickens** are biological devices that eggs use to make more eggs.

Well... Now I've got a question for you adults. But before I ask it, I want to you look up above me to my **favorite** stained glass window in the world, the Sower. Try to take it all in....

And now my question:

Which came first? The Sower or the Seeds?

I repeat.

Which came first? The Sower of the Seeds?

You look a bit confused. So was I when the question popped into my head during preparation of this sermon. This is because the obvious answer – that seeds came first – has nothing to do with the main message of the parable...as allegedly told by Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, here abbreviated from the *King James Bible*.

"Behold, there went out a sower to sow: And it came to pass, as he sowed, some fell by the way side, and the birds of the air came and devoured it up. And some fell on stony ground, and... was scorched; because it had no root... And some fell

among thorns, ...[which]... choked it.... And other [SEED] fell on good ground...[and] did yield fruit that sprang up and increased; and brought forth, some thirty, and some sixty, some a hundred. ...He said unto them, He that has ears to hear, let him hear.

The metaphorical message from Jesus is clear: “Those of you who are ready to accept my religion will understand it and thrive. Those who are not ready will fall by the wayside and die, at least spiritually.”

The corrupted version of this message is the standard dogma of all old time religions, regardless of its denominational flavor. “We’re right. Accept us or else.”

But this isn’t the way evolution works. It works in the opposite direction, not from the top down, but from the bottom up...and by means of Darwinian natural selection.

Listen again to the parable: “And ... as he sowed, some fell by the way side...some among the thorns, some among the stones, and so forth.”

Note that the sower isn’t deciding where to sow the seeds. Rather, he is mindlessly scattering them about, letting them fall where they may, distributing seeds randomly the way a dandelion or milkweed does. As with organic evolution, it is the **receiving** environment that selects which seeds shall live and which shall die, not the mindless machine that spreads them over the land.

Now please look up again: When I look up at this wonderful image, my attention rivets not to the sower, but to the **seeds**, for they are the **true** source of creative biological expression. Metaphorically, each seed is one of you...an individual **member** of a large congregation now numbering over 220 souls. Each seed is one of you, a discrete **consciousness** brimming with ideas ...,a unique **attitude** of commitment for making the world a better place.

Keep looking: If each of you is a seed, then the collection of seeds in his bag is our congregation. His physical bag is our physical church, composed not of coarse cloth, but of pink granite.

Keep looking: Think of the sower as the energized mechanism that gathers from the granary seed from the previous fall harvest and then scatters them back out into the fields each spring. Likewise, our institutional church is the energized mechanism that gathers us together each week with services and programs, and then sends us back out into the world to do our religious work.

Keep looking: Now, I must ask...

- Where in this picture are the **thorns** that might choke us? I don’t see them.
- Where is the **wayside** where we might be picked off by the birds? I don’t see one.
- And where is the **stony soil** that might deny penetration by our roots? I see none of that.

What I see instead is the idealized perfect world with excellent soil everywhere...the warmth of the sun on the hills...and life-giving moisture within the clouds. In a place such as this, where there is a perfect fit between seed and place, evolution grinds to a halt.

At this point, I must digress to a few technicalities about the link between a chicken's **eggs**, a sower's **seeds** and a church's **ideas**.

By egg, I refer to the fertilized outcome of sexual reproduction from pair of animals... for example a chicken, a dinosaur, a fish, a clam, or even a mammal such as the duck-billed platypus. This outcome is called a **zygote**, a single cell bearing half its genes from a mother and half from a father. This is the original cell from which all embryos begin.

For most of the last one and half billion years, there were plenty of zygote-eggs around, but no animals to lay them. At that time, the egg and organism were one-in-the same thing, a one-celled entity with a nucleus called a **protist**... amoebas and paramecia being the most familiar examples. But in the last ninth of earth history some **very, very clever** protists evolved the habit of living in specialized colonies called animals, plants, and fungi. Each of these colonies consisted of teams of cells called tissues, each with a dedicated function. In the colony we know today as a chicken, one of the teams of tissues is in charge of reproduction. Their job is to make another zygote resembling the one from which the first chicken originated.

In amphibians the embryo developing from this zygote must be kept under water, for example, in a pond. In terrestrial animals, the embryo must also be kept in water, but this is accomplished within a water-tight membrane called the amnion... which is what holds amniotic fluid...and which is what "breaks" when a woman makes an omelet or delivers a baby. Ever since the late Jurassic, birds such as chickens have retained the older strategy of wrapping their portable water-worlds in durable package called a shell, and setting them out on dry land. Humans, however, evolved to carry their portable water-worlds inside their bodies, as do all placental mammals, including dolphins.

This way of talking -- of eggs using chickens to make other eggs -- is the essence of the evolutionary arguments of Richard Dawkins, author of "The Selfish Gene," and many other books on organic evolution. For him, the animal called the chicken is the zygote's way of making another zygote, using the amnion, yolk, white, and shell as ancillary equipment. Though this degree of **scientific reductionism** makes most modern evolutionists squirm, the essence of the argument remains valid.

Some of you may have heard a sermon I gave last year in honor of Darwin's 200th birthday. Today I continue that discussion of the "Miracle of Life" but move to level of organization higher than that of the birds and the bees...to the level of Channing Memorial Church and its future.

Biologically, **you all** ...that's "yaaahhhllll" in honor of Bill Peresta -- are a population of

colonies of cells designed to carry human genes forward into the future. Socially, **yaahhhlll** are a congregation, a colony of souls designed to carry our shared ideas forward into the future.

Functionally, our church consists of:

- Russ, our Zen master of handyman skills, replacing the rotted window trim of the sanctuary or the light fixtures.
- Tom and Terry, who carry the base line in the choir (or is that Tom and Jerry?)
- Susan and Deb recruiting artists for the gallery, and charitable enough to consider my stone pictures as art.
- Kathy and Kim recruiting teachers for religious education
- Jake and Alex counting our money, fortunately outside the temple.
- Bill working the light and sound,
- Kristine cataloging the library,
- Richard trading investments....and
- Everyone else I didn't name, those of you who do everything else... from sweeping the floor to holding the hands of our dying.

But is this functional colony of task-doers really a church? I don't think so. Here, I'm prompted by a question the Reverend Nichols asked board members during its annual fall retreat: What is the "church?" he asked. Though we answered many things, above all we agreed that we're a group of people who congregate for support each others ideas about spirituality and helping to make the world a better place.

The key word here is "Ideas." Note that it is plural.

Beneath everything you can see, this church is an energized communication network of ideas, something a physicist might call a "plasma." Our biggest single idea is the radical acceptance and appreciation of **every** person, provided they don't pretend to have all the answers for everyone. Other big ideas involve how to find meaning, how to support each other, and how to change our present imperfect world into a better imperfect world.

The functional church I referred to earlier – the church of heating bills, weekly calendars, budget shortfalls, and tedious meetings -- is the sower you see behind me, the machine of many working parts that keeps the real ideological church going, year after year. Each of you is a seed in his bag. And each hopeful idea in each of your heads is a gene on one of those seeds.

When I decided to talk about church evolution, the first thing that popped into my mind was a book I read many years ago by George Gaylord Simpson, professor of paleontology at Columbia University, published in 1944 as the "Tempo and Mode of Evolution." Professor Simpson was famous to us geologists for having given us the basics of "horse" evolution on the North American high plains, from terrier-sized, three-toed *Eohippis* to the ox-sized, one-toed *Equus*, the modern horse. He was also the dissertation advisor for the late Stephen Jay Gould, a well-known evolutionary theorist

with whom I had a correspondence. Simpson used the factual evidence from fossils to develop quantitative models of how evolution actually worked across sweeps of time and space deeper and broader than could be conceived by geneticists and ecologists.

The **upshot** of Simpson's work was that the mode and tempo of evolution toggle back and forth between prolonged periods of gradual change under normal Darwinian conditions, and bursts of rapid change by a more complex form of natural selection here conveniently referred to as macroevolution.

The **upshot** of my sermon today is that Channing Memorial is experiencing a burst of macroevolution. As with the ancestral horse, our conservative body plan will remain. But the future beast will not be the same. It will have evolved.

Our church's **normal** circumstances were those of a settled minister who served the church well. During the four years of Amy's tenure I witnessed, there was a slow continuous bubbling up of novel ideas within the larger population of more conventional ideas. Members of the governing board then edited those ideas with their votes, subject to some oversight by the congregation.

Some **new** ideas were kept. Many others, including a few of my own, were not. Some **old** ideas were kept. Others were tossed away. The process was slow in tempo and gradual in mode, a persistent tweaking the status quo, even during planned programs such as our "year of decision," or the "steeple fund drive."

Those **normal** circumstances ended abruptly with the announcement that our settled minister was leaving. As if flipping a switch, we entered our present period of **transition**. Having an interim minister -- even a stable, un-flamboyant workhorse like the Reverend John Nichols -- is raising pressing questions about what kind of minister we need for the future. The pace of new idea-generation is picking up, largely because there's more communication going on. Ideas that might have made our previous minister uncomfortable are now suddenly on the table. Soon, a search committee will begin to "edit" the many candidates who come our way. Whoever is picked, that new person will likely cause some to leave, others to join, and many of us to rethink why we attend. It will not be business as usual.

During such times of transition, creativity comes to a **full boil**. The conservative element present in all of us clings to the past. The element in us all that seeks novelty reaches forth with open hands.

It was during such times that **orthodox** religions are born. They are the horseshoe crabs of religion, living fossils, successful for those who are resistant to change, and for whom tradition is more important than emergence.

It is also during such times that **new** religions are born. Even before being named, they bud off from the main branch of church history. The polytheistic animism of the Neolithic gave rise to Mesopotamian mythologies, then to Abrahamic monotheism, then

Judaism, then Christianity, then Roman Catholicism, then Protestantism, then Puritanism, then the liberal branch of Puritanism known as Congregationalism, and then simultaneously, Unitarianism and Universalism, which both placed enormous emphasis on rational thinking and what Ralph Waldo Emerson called self-culture.

During each of these bifurcations, some of the religious seeds falling the **wayside** were pre-adapted to evolve into **berries**, which, when eaten by birds, were dispersed, rather than consumed. Those falling amid **thorns** were pre-adapted to blossom early, like **daffodils** from bulbs. Those falling on **stony** soil evolved means of conserving moisture, and became those beautiful waxy plants such as **cacti**. Those falling on the **common good soil** of the past also grew, but for them it was business as usual. That's fine for a while, until the world changes such that the good soil is no longer good. All of these results came from one bag of seed brimming with possibilities, and waiting to be edited by natural selection.

Don't panic. Our church's **macroevolutionary** transition is not likely to create another sect or denomination. But neither will things remain even close to the same. Two years from now, we **will be** a different church, still recognizable, but significantly different.

At this stage, our task is to live bravely through this **up-tempo**, evolutionary mode... to accept what comes through macroevolution. Eventually, we will return to the **slow-tempo** mode of gradualism, and be a better church for having made the transition.

The point is to keep your eye on the **eggs** rather than the chicken...the **seed**, rather than on the sower, and the plasma of **ideas**, rather than the people who transmit them.

Amen.

BENEDICTION

The time has come for us to part. Please raise your eyes one last time to look at the sower. Look at his outstretched hand. Imagine yourself as a seed in that hand ready to be sown.

Now please close your eyes. Imagine the ideas in your consciousness being genes in that seed, flying outward toward the soil. Imagine the possibilities when the best of those ideas take root for us all.

Amen