

WGUMC March 3, 2019 Transfiguration Sunday/Evolution Sunday
“Christogenesis” Luke 9:28-43

At our Thursday morning study, Rev. Linda Holbrook was telling a story about a conversation she got into with someone at the car wash recently. While she was waiting in line reading a book, a man struck up a conversation with her and in the course of that conversation proceeded to tell her that the earth was flat, because if it were round, people in Australia would fall off. He also cited the Bible as proof that the earth isn't billions of years old and that all the dinosaur fossils are fake. Meanwhile, she's thinking, “Am I in Silicon Valley? Is this 2019?”

Stories like this are the reason that I am a member of a group of pastors who pledge to speak about the compatibility of religion and science, especially evolution, at least once a year. This year, I decided to celebrate Evolution Sunday on Transfiguration Sunday, and by the end of the sermon, you'll know why.

Someone who thought about evolution in the context of Christian faith more than just about anyone was a Jesuit priest and

geologist/paleontologist by the name of Teilhard de Chardin, who was born in France in 1881 and died in 1955. We know from high school (at least I hope we do) what evolution means for biology: that simple cells have evolved over time through a process of natural selection into organisms of greater and greater complexity. But have you ever thought of what evolution means for theology?

Teilhard did, and he believed that, along with the rest of the universe, human beings are evolving toward a greater and greater consciousness of God and unity with God. For Teilhard, evolution is the scientific fact that supports his religious faith that the universe is headed toward God and so are we. You could say that Teilhard had the mind of a scientist and the soul of a mystic, and that's what makes his spirituality very attractive to me and, I suspect, many others in Silicon Valley.

If this doesn't sound very biblical, listen to this description of Christ in the letter to the Colossians: "He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things in

heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible...all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” [Col 1:15-17]

Also, the Gospel of John says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and...all things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.” [John 1:1,3]

This is a new take on the old story of Creation found in Genesis. You might call it “Christogenesis”: all things began in Christ, came into being in Christ and hold together in Christ. But that’s not all. In the letter to the Ephesians, we learn that all things end in Christ as well. God’s plan for the fullness of time is to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth. [Eph 1:9-10]

Or as the Book of Revelation puts it, Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end of everything. [Rev 22:13]

I bet that you didn’t know that the New Testament could sound so New-Agey. But here in the Bible, both history and

humanity find their ultimate fulfillment in Christ. You might call that heaven. But Teilhard had a different name for our final destination. What he envisioned was a point at which the whole universe would be reunited with God. He called it the Omega Point, and we get a glimpse of it in our story about the Transfiguration.

Jesus goes up the mountain with Peter, James and John. Remember that God has a thing for mountains. God gives Moses the Law on a mountain. The Jerusalem temple is built on a mountain. Elijah sees God on a mountain. Jesus gives his Sermon on a mountain, and he will ascend into heaven from a mountain.

So we should expect some fireworks when Jesus starts praying on this mountain, and we are not disappointed. His face suddenly changes. His clothes become dazzling white. He shines with the glory of God. And right on cue, Moses and Elijah show up.

Now, you might ask what Moses and Elijah are doing up there and the usual answer is that Moses represents the Law and Elijah the

Prophets. And these two pillars of the Jewish religion, the Law and the Prophets, are both pointing to Jesus.

But Moses, Elijah and Jesus being together also tell us something about the evolution of our understanding of God. Moses and Elijah rejected the ancient world's belief in many gods in favor of a belief in the one and only God. That was a giant leap in our God consciousness, so to speak. And now they are standing with Jesus and a voice says, "This is my Son." We are ready to take another evolutionary leap in consciousness. Now the God who has always been *with* humanity, as Moses and Elijah have shown us, in Jesus enters *into* humanity. This is something radically new. God has become human so that we can catch a glimpse of what is in store for us when we humans become one with God.

Peter, James and John were sleepy, but they woke up just in time to catch a glimpse of a transfigured Jesus and to see what it will be like to reach the Omega Point, to become one with God. Down here, we can only imagine it. So we climb mountains in the

hopes that we will experience this oneness with God, even if the moment doesn't last for very long. That's what draws me to the Rockies and the Sierras. I know that some of you go to the ocean for that experience, but I'm with Jesus. I prefer mountains. Up there on Beartooth Pass, almost 11,000 feet up, I look over at Hell-Roaring Plateau and feel like I'm in heaven.

For a fleeting moment, what I feel is perfect love, and for me, that is the Omega Point, where "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them." [1 John 4:16] Like Peter, James and John, I want to capture it, build a container for it so I can live inside that moment forever. But we can't do that. We aren't there yet. So pretty soon, we have to go back down the mountain. As the disciples in our story remind us, before we can become perfect in love and live forever in God, we have some evolving to do.

Peter, James, and John go back down the mountain and a man begs them to heal his epileptic son. I have to say that this story always hits a little too close to home for me. For those of you who

are newcomers, you may not know that I had spinal meningitis as a toddler and from age 12 to 28, I had epilepsy. The seizures finally stopped when I had brain surgery. That's why I get a little sensitive when the Bible says that seizures are a sure sign of demon possession.

Unfortunately, the Church has a long history of using such Bible passages to demonize and marginalize different groups of people. For instance, in Matthew, Jesus says that those who divorce and remarry commit adultery. [Matthew 5:32] And if you are of a certain age, you probably know someone who left the church, even lost their faith, because they got a divorce. The Church has used Scripture to justify slavery and to condemn interracial marriage and to keep women out of the pulpit. But our understanding of the Bible evolved over time and now we think differently about divorce and slavery and the ordination of women.

When it comes to LGBTQ people, however, we are still evolving. The General Conference of the United Methodist Church was

nowhere near the Omega Point, nowhere near the mountaintop of perfect love when we gathered last week in Saint Louis. The delegates prayed and then they passed the Traditional Plan anyway that not only demonizes people for who they are and whom they love, but harshly penalizes bishops, clergy and churches who want to support them. At that moment, we fell off the mountain and we haven't hit bottom yet. I don't know that Jesus would call us, as he called his disciples, a "faithless and perverse generation." But I do know that we are a long way from knowing how to love LGBTQ persons and we may have lost the next generation that doesn't have the patience to wait for us to learn.

I wish the evolution of love happened a lot faster. And I wish those moments when we experience real communion with God would last a lot longer. Because our Methodist body is so broken right now, we'd better get up that mountain to pray. Who knows? By God's grace it is possible that this tragedy could somehow be transfigured

so that one day in the not-too-distant future, our Church will look more like Jesus.

It is significant that General Conference took place very close to the Gateway to the West Arch, because I believe that that is the direction our Church needs to be going. Out here in the Western Jurisdiction of the United Methodist Church, we intend to keep going on to perfection in love. We know that we need to evolve on this and many other matters and we want to do it together. [video]

Teilhard said that we have come to the point where evolution is a choice for us. If we choose to isolate ourselves and marginalize others, we won't be able to evolve. God's plan is to gather up all things in Christ. If we exclude anything or anyone, if we refuse to associate with them, if we aren't willing to evolve with them, we are getting in the way of God's plan.

If Teilhard were alive today, he would say that the UMC needs a Christogenesis, a new creation in Jesus Christ. We are never going to be one with Christ if we can't be one with each other. So, let's get

up to that mountain and pray. If we stand together, we will evolve together, and then by the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us and give light to those in the UMC who sit in darkness and comfort those who sit in the shadow of death, and will guide our feet into the way of peace. [Luke 1:78-79] So be it.