

Faith in Tough Times: Shades of Gray

Sandy Reimer

October 12, 2008

Readings:

Defenseless under the night, our world in stupor lies;
Yet, dotted everywhere, ironic points of light
Flash out wherever the Just exchange their messages.
May I, composed like them, of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame. ~ *W. H. Auden*

The devil once went for a walk with a friend. They saw a man ahead of them stoop down and pick up something from the ground.

"What did the man find?," asked the friend.

A piece of the truth. said the devil.

"Doesn't that disturb you?," asked the friend.

No, said the devil, *I shall let him make a belief out of it.*

~ *Anthony de Mello, The Song of the Bird*

Sermon: Times are tough right now. That's the place where we begin this Sunday with this new worship theme. When we planned for this theme in May, Larry, Andy and I had no idea how much tougher things were going to get this fall. There's no one – no one sitting in this Sanctuary today – who is not impacted by the difficult events and developments in the economy this past month. So I ask you to turn to someone sitting near you, someone who is not part of your family, and take one minute to share with each other a specific example of how these tough economic times are impacting you.

Whether it's government, politics, economics, energy, global warming, foreign policy, health care, the job market, everywhere I turn my focus in the larger world, I too see tough times. The question we are addressing each Sunday this fall is how our faith holds up, and holds us up, in times like this.

When our visual arts team grappled with this question, what emerged for them was the theme of light. It is light that leads us through darkness, the very light of faith that the Gospel of John says the darkness has never overcome. And so, we sit here today, surrounded by mirrors which reflect the light back to us. The mirrors reflect our images as well for we too are the light that overcomes the darkness. I know that George HW Bush's phrase of "a thousand points of light" was politicized and over-used after his Inaugural Address in 1989, yet I am touched by Auden's original poem about those who, in tough times, exchange their messages of light, bidding us also to show our own affirming flame.

So, point one of this sermon: When we look in these mirrors over these next six weeks and see one another reflected in them, remember that we reflect to one another the light that we are, the light of God that we have within us. Part of that light is the understanding that faith comes to us not only in solitude, but also in relationship and in connection with one another. This past week, when I could not bear to open the envelope that came in the mail with the quarterly report on my pension fund, one place

of solace has been the conversations and connections with you – my friends and community – knowing that we are all going through this together – knowing that we do and will support one another. The larger picture is the growing consciousness that all life is interwoven, even the economy is globally connected. While the consciousness of this interconnection of all things is increasing, it also faces intense opposition from some of the world’s strongest political and religious forces. We see the collision of these forces, these points of view, all around us. Nowhere is it more obvious than on the current political scene.

We seem not to know how to talk with one another about issues where we disagree. It’s difficult for us to find common ground, partly because we have become so used to seeing everything in black and white (pun intended) that we’ve forgotten how to look for shades of gray, especially in our own beliefs. We’ve become a people trapped in parallel boxes composed of sound bites. If there is anything positive in the deadlock that emerged in Congress over the financial bailouts these past weeks, it is that people on opposing sides had to talk with one another. They had to awkwardly and tentatively inch toward the other side and find out what might bring them together. There was no clear liberal or conservative, Republican or Democratic solution to this catastrophic situation. So while it was frightening to experience this specter of economic collapse, it was affirming to see time taken for talking and thinking about acceptable solutions.

Point two of this sermon is about those shades of gray, times when we let go of our absolute certainty to instead explore a larger picture. Anthony de Mello’s story of the man who found a piece of the truth and the devil who said he would let the man make a belief out of it illustrates our human inclination to turn pieces of truth into rigid beliefs or codes.

Faith to me is not about such certainty; faith to me is always about possibilities. How do I bring that understanding of faith into the trigger-points of divisiveness of our times? As an example, I’ve invited Fred Gregory to share with us how he as a person of faith and a teacher of science, has grappled with the divisive issues of creationism, intelligent design and evolution. Fred is a husband, father and grandfather; a UCG member for 26 years; a teacher of extraordinary clarity and intelligence; a man of integrity and openness. He grew up in a fundamentalist Bible church, earned a seminary degree from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in Massachusetts, then a Masters at the University of Wisconsin and a PhD from Harvard in the History of Science, which he now teaches at UF. Fred has recently contributed a series of 24 lectures for the Teaching Company “The Darwinian Revolution” that will be released in 2009. Fred, it is a pleasure to have you share with us this morning.

Fred Gregory’s Remarks:

2009 will be the 200th anniversary of Darwin's birth and the 150th of *The Origin of Species*, so we'll all be hearing a lot about Charles Darwin next year. Any discussion of evolution and creationism begins with the work of Darwin, but bringing him up is a little bit like talking about politics in an election year –politics these days is such a polarizing subject that when you express approval of a particular political position to

someone you don't know well, you hold your breath waiting to see if you get a smile or a frown.

Well, talking about Darwin and his legacy is a lot like that. It's not really possible to be neutral about Darwin. I'm speaking, of course, about the Darwin people know. That, in fact, means that we have *many* Darwins on our hands, because everyone, including me, has his or her *own* view about who Darwin was, what he said, and what it means. These views range all the way from those who are certain that Darwin had a deathbed conversion to Christianity to the British zoologist Richard Dawkins, who argues in his latest book, *The God Delusion*, that if you understand Darwin properly you can't possibly remain religious, even, incidentally, a religious liberal. Here's another set of extremes. The late Jerry Falwell, founder of the Moral Majority, regarded Darwin as a partner of Satan in undermining truth, while the co-discoverer of DNA's structure, scientist James Watson, once said that Charles Darwin is "the most important person who ever lived on earth."

Clearly people feel very strongly about Darwin and his message. In fact, individuals can be so divided about the subject that there is just no common ground for discussion. But is that true? Do we all really divide up into creationists or Darwinists? Yes and no.

First of all, let me assure you that I don't underestimate the divide. I think that the question Darwin raises is a very basic one - it has to do with the question of purpose. A lot of folks think they can have Darwin's natural selection and purpose too. I happen to agree with the atheist Dawkins that a whole hearted acceptance of natural selection makes it very hard to hold onto the idea of God - however known. Let me explain.

Darwin had an American supporter, a scientist named Asa Gray. Gray argued that the variations that appear in nature and that natural selection acts on were not random - they were put there by God, so one could easily be a Darwinian and a Christian. But Darwin thought that solution amounted to *supernatural* selection, not natural selection. The variations in modern Darwinism are genuinely random - and that means they are not put there by God. And if they are truly random, they can't even be *known* in advance - not even by a perfect intelligence! So true natural selection operates without any role for any kind of God to play.

Now I have this need that the universe be a purposeful place. I'm not talking here just about the meaning you and I create. I have a need for all of existence, including the physical universe, to have a larger meaning into which I plug. And I need the reality that is bigger than I am to be more than just the world of meaning we humans create. I need the whole thing to be more than an accident. The crux of the issue that Darwin's theory forced and continues to force concerns this question of a larger purpose behind the world of living things, or, for that matter, behind the universe itself. That's it in a nutshell. His present-day followers say that the whole of the living world can be explained as a giant accident. As Stephen Jay Gould says, run back the evolutionary tape and start it over again and you'll get a very different result - with the extremely high probability, incidentally, that homo sapiens won't be part of the new scenario.

That's why physicist David Susskind says - yes, I said physicist, not biologist - Susskind says about cosmology - the study of the origin and structure of the universe - and I quote, "Modern cosmology really began with Darwin and Wallace. Unlike anyone before them, they provided explanations of our existence that completely rejected supernatural agents." The implication is clear: if you really understand Darwin and science, you will be an atheist.

So I have a problem. Why? Because I don't see myself as an atheist, but clearly I do have enormous respect for science and our scientific heritage. And that is humbling.

And it's also why I don't just dismiss every reference to intelligent design that comes along. Like many of you, I do dismiss some of them - the ones so sure of their answer that they see the world in black and white. But there are plenty of advocates of intelligent design who see a bigger problem than any easy answer solves. And that's the problem of whether you choose to see the world as a place ruled by chance or a place in which the unfolding of the cosmos is intentional - not purely accidental.

I regret very deeply that this subject gets confused with issues of evolution vs creation, as if they are mutually exclusive, and that as a result things quickly get polarized and politicized. It's too bad, because the real issue is much deeper than that. And at that level I want to learn from the life experience of other people who see themselves as religious and, in fact, I want to hear more from people who don't share my need to have the cosmos make sense but are content to keep the focus only on their lives as they live them.

So even if I acknowledge that the division here is so deep that it might not leave common ground for agreement, there is something this problem has made clear to me that does unite me with those who fundamentally disagree with me. No one in fact *knows* if the cosmos has been designed in some fashion or another. Listen to the scientist Jacob Bronowski's characterization of the world quantum physics describes: It is not, he says,

a fixed, solid array of objects. It shifts under our gaze and must be interpreted by us, by an act of judgment. The entire experience of life is more delicate, more fragile, more fugitive and startling than we can ever catch in the butterfly net of our senses.

So *however* we come down on the question of design, we do so by our *belief*. We like to think that we reason our way to our beliefs. I think that's backwards- the belief comes first and it make the reasons we cite persuasive. Some of you will, I know, balk at that - it's a subject for a seminar. But I hope I've persuaded you that, regardless of which belief you have, there is room for some humility. And that is sufficient common ground for me.

Thank you, Fred.

So what can we say today about faith in tough times?

Faith must have, along with its core beliefs, a sense of humility, and Fred gave us an example today of that balance of belief and humility. The facts that support our

beliefs, especially in areas like science, can and do change regularly as do our own life experiences.

So, our faith, especially in tough times, must have two strong components. And the poem by Perlberg that is printed in your bulletin illustrated those components for me. The poem speaks of *Cantus firmus*, a “fixed song” or melody that forms the base line of a musical composition. One component of my faith is that *cantus firmus*, those core values and beliefs that remain constant for me, what holds and what holds me up through the daily and the difficult times in my life. The other component of my faith is the openness to new understandings, new growth, and an appreciation for other perspectives. The poem refers to this strand as *polyphony* which is the rich diversity of many voices and sounds in counterpoint and harmonies that are woven around the fixed *cantus firmus* in a musical composition. So listen to Perlberg’s poem:

Your faith in the God whose eye is on the sparrow, and also me,
I find impossible to emulate, but perhaps I might be permitted
To learn something of your very human grace and
Your fortitude (unfashionable word), and I might then live faithfully,
Ceasing to whine about every dirty toss and turn of the cards,
But move along a *cantus firmus* of my own
And embrace the rich “polyphony of life.”

~ Mark Perlberg, *The Burning Field*

The poem touches me on one level, because it describes my own spiritual journey, moving away from the God of my childhood, to find that *cantus firmus* of my own, yet to be open to the many other names and ways of knowing the holy and living faithfully. There is much that we can learn from one another, including from people whose view of God is different from ours. It requires humility and openness, so we can appreciate the grace and resilience of other paths, so that we can work together, live together, reflect light to one another. Put a copy of this poem in a place where you will see it again in the tough times ahead, because embracing that rich polyphony of life is going to be essential to our nation and our world in tough times ahead.

Then, as individuals, our own *cantus firmus* provides the base line that grounds us. The bookmark you will receive as you leave the worship service today is a reminder of our faithful living through those six essential spiritual practices we identified in our last worship theme. Put this bookmark too in a place where you will see it again in the weeks ahead. let it be a reminder to you to explore your own base line of faith and core values, what faith means to you in this time when the very ground beneath our feet seems to be trembling.

Perhaps the best place to end today and to set the tone for the Sundays ahead is to remind us all of the words of our Compact, “We learn from our religious heritage and yet we grow by seeking new dimensions of truth” – and new dimensions of faith as well. In this light, Barbara Brown Taylor says that it may make more sense to understand God, not as the God of facts and deeds, but as the God of meaning, the God whose light does indeed shine in the darkness, not only around us, but also within us and through us.

As we join in prayer, I share this reading with you -

You have heard that there are three aspects to God:
the Creator, the Christ, and the Holy Spirit

I say to you also that each of us carries within us a fragment of God,
and that fragment has three aspects:
our faith in the work we do,
our love for one another,
and our hope for the future.

Let us pray together – O Holy One, God of many names, we open our breath, open our hearts and souls to your Spirit, praying for faith, the faith that we carry within us as our core values, as the center, the foundation that undergirds who we are and what we do. We pray for the work of our hands and of our minds, the ways we share our gifts and our faith through what we do, day by day, week by week.

We pray for Your love to fill us, that we may reflect that love to one another in these hard unsettled times. We pray now for the person we shared our struggles with just a few minutes ago. We hold this person in the light of your love. And through this prayer, may each of us feel a connection to this entire church community, a connection that eases our sense of isolation.

We pray for the future, to be filled with Your hope, a hope that is larger than the present moment, a hope that is broader than our single perspective, a hope in that light that shines in the darkness, that the darkness has never overcome.

Faith in the work we do, love for one another, hope for the future - three parts of your Spirit, O God, that we carry within us and that we pray to embody as a precious affirming spark, for ourselves, for our families and community, and for the sake of this world. Blessed be – Amen.