

LOVER'S QUARREL

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on Sunday, October 25, 2015
At First United Methodist Church, Schenectady, N.Y.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Don't Awaken Your Fish from the Dark

When I was about five or six years old, a kindergarten kid, my dad had a 20-gallon fish tank, or what you would call a community tank, with lots of different kinds of fish in it. One morning we both got up unusually early, before dawn. I went to the tank, which had a roller-type thumb switch for the lights, and turned them on while it was still dark outside.

I remember the fluorescent tubes flickered for a moment, and then **BAM!** The light suddenly came on bright.

As I was looking at the fish, they were jerking around and some of them swam hard into the glass. In a sort of formative moment for me a long time ago, I turned to my dad and asked, "Why'd they do that?" He answered, "Because you scared the **BEJESUS** out of them." He liked the word bejesus.

Not understanding, I said, "What do you mean?" Then he explained, "Pretend that you're lying in your bed, and somebody comes in and turns on the light. Would you like that?"

It had never before dawned on me. It was one of those early moments of feeling empathy for creation. I wanted to apologize to the fish. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare the bejesus out of you, and I won't do it again. I'll wait for dawn to come before I turn the light on from now on."

St. Mark Arrives Buried under Pork; Reburied Under Glass and Gold

I'm going to try to preach this morning about science and religion and about God. It's a bit of a tall order, but I'll do my best. To begin, I'd like to convey a short story that is very meaningful to me. It's by John Barrow, a Cambridge professor of math and physics, a superbrainiac kind of guy. He received the Templeton prize for progress in religion in 2006, and so at his awards dinner in March, he began his acceptance speech with this story:

"A little over a year ago, I [Barrow] was in a great church, the Basilica of St. Mark in Venice. Its predecessor was raised in the year 832 to house the mortal remains of St. Mark the Evangelist, which had supposedly been brought to Venice from Alexandria four years earlier by two merchants. They are alleged to have hidden the remains of the martyred saint under layers of pork to avoid the attentions of the Muslim customs officials.

"The present Byzantine Basilica, a distinctive cluster of low domes, was begun in the year 1063 and consecrated in 1089.

"I arrived at the church in the early evening with a small group of other

scientists for a guided tour after it had closed to visitors for the day. When we entered, it was almost in total darkness. There are few windows, and those are small and far from transparent. We were asked to sit in the center, allowing just a few faint floor lights and electric candles to guide us to our seats. Above us, only darkness.

“And then, very slowly, the light levels rose. Above us, around us, the interior began to be illuminated by a discreet system of hidden sodium lights. The darkness around us gave way to this spectacular golden light. The arching ceilings above us were covered in a spectacular, gleaming mosaic of glass and gold. Between the 11th and the 15th Centuries, nearly 11,000 square feet of gold mosaic was made, square by square.

[AMS: To give you a feeling for it, 11,000 square feet is about four times the square footage of our sanctuary. The artisans mixed gold with glass to produce a sparkling, golden feeling by a delicate process that’s still not fully understood. But then Barrow begins to think about it.

“On reflection,” he writes, “what was more striking to me was the realization that the hundreds of master craftsmen who had worked for four centuries to create this fabulous site had never seen it in its full glory. They worked in the gloomy interior by candlelight and smoky oil lamps to illuminate the small area on which they worked, but not one of them had ever seen the full glory of the golden ceiling. For them, like us 500 years later, appearances can be deceptive. The universe is a bit like that too.”

Turning up the Lights To Illuminate Your Path

The advantage of turning up the lights is that one can see more and can see more clearly. But an issue arises with better illumination upon one’s path: The issue is that one needs to integrate what is now seen that wasn’t seen before. Let me speak plainly. I feel that the lights have been coming on in the world especially brightly in this last century.

On the following page are some of the incredible developments that have come to light – I use that phrase intentionally – in this century:

☞ It was about a century ago that Einstein published the four papers that made him famous, on the subjects of relativism; relativity, general and specific; and quantum mechanics, the insights of which have been filtering down into the population of the world over this last century. The process is not complete; it is still happening.

☞ In addition, even though Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* was published in the 1850's, it was mostly during the last century that the ideas of deep time; evolution; and natural selection ("red in tooth and claw" — a quote from Tennyson) have found their way into the imagination of the average person on the street.

☞ In the last couple of decades alone, the incredible insight born of string theory is that basically it seems as though there are eleven dimensions in which we exist. The mathematics behind this theory are well beyond the scope of the sermon. But eleven dimensions! We live in four of them, three spatial and one time, and there are a fifth, a sixth, a seventh, and so on.

One thing that is known by virtually everybody about dimensions is that each is infinitely more in scope than the preceding one. So a plane is infinitely more than a line, and a volume is infinitely more than a plane. People get that. But there are yet an eighth, a ninth, a tenth, and even an eleventh in the magnificence of this world in which we live.

☞ As if that weren't enough, in the 1940's the Nag Hammadi texts and the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, and the religious world got rocked by an 8.0 earthquake. We realized that the Bible is what it is pretty much because so much was taken out as a result of really petty religious politics. What God had said — never mind what God is still saying — what God had said in holy writs of all kinds was also discovered in the last century.

☞ And how about the Internet? Ours is the first generation ever to be almost universally connected, such that I could e-mail somebody in China or Moscow or sub-Saharan Africa. And news of the death of a famous person goes around the globe in about a second or so.

☞ We now have a telescope, twenty-five years old, that has taken images of the universe that we formerly had no idea about, including what is named the Hubble Deep Field, which has now led astronomers to estimate the number of galaxies at 10^{13} (give or take a dozen or so).

It was in the 1920's, between the two World Wars, when we first realized that we live in a galaxy. We haven't known that for even a century yet. And it was only about four years later that the very first galaxy, Andromeda, named after a beautiful Ethiopian princess of Greek mythology, was discovered. And now it's 10^{13} galaxies of which we're aware. A billion is 10^9 , so now we have at least ten thousand billion galaxies. (I feel like Carl Sagan.) Also, a galaxy typically has in the neighborhood of 10^{11} stars, for an overall total of 10^{24} stars !

The Dimmer Switch Has Been Cranked Hard and Fast

Think about this list of incredible insights, which is by no means all-inclusive: relativism; relativity, general and specific; quantum mechanics; evolution; eleven dimensions; Nag Hammadi and the Dead Sea Scrolls; the internet; and the Hubble Deep Field; not to mention the Big Bang, the discovery and then decoding of DNA, the splitting and fusing of atoms, etc.

I challenge you to compare that list with any other century in the history of humanity. God apparently took the dimmer switch and cranked it hard and fast. And we're like little guppies banging into the glass, having the bejesus scared out of us.

How are we to think religiously in this context, with the light turned up so bright? For thousands of years, God has pretty much been made in the image of humanity. We take an idealized human being, we make him eternal, we make him superstrong, and that must be our God. But God is not a singular being, a superbeing living somewhere in the








universe, or maybe outside of it, having the same emotional needs and subject to the same emotional turmoil as humans. That which is God can't be hurt or damaged or disappointed and thus has no need to seek revenge or impose punishment.

Concepts of Divinity: Among Kindergartners

Does any of this impact our understanding of God? Our conception of divinity?

Now compare all that scientific, intellectual stuff with a more common, even childish, understanding of God. The way we think about God varies, of course, starting with kindergartners, as I was when I turned on that light in the fish tank. The following list is one of those things off the Internet that I have found hilarious. Teachers asked kindergartners to write God a letter, put it on a Post-it note, and then they put all the Post-its up for everyone to see.

Here are a few of them. As you read or hear these questions or statements about God, dig beneath the surface and imagine the children's conceptions of what divinity is:

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-  Dear God, I bet it's very hard for you to love all of everybody in the whole world. There's only four in our family, and I can't do it.
 -  Dear God, Please send Dennis Clark to a different camp this year.
 -  Dear God, Thank you for the baby brother, but what I prayed for was a puppy.
 -  Dear God, I went to this wedding, and they kissed right in church. Is that okay?
 -  Dear God, You don't have to worry about me. I always look both ways.
 -  Dear God, Did you really mean do unto others as they do unto you? Because if you did, then I'm going to fix my brother.
 -  Dear God, I'm doing the best I can. Really.

**Concepts of Divinity:
It's Time for an Upgrade**

When you get a feeling for kindergartners' perceptions of God like a superparent, and considering the vast number of achievements that have come to pass in the last century,

from Einstein all the way to the Hubble Deep Field, maybe it's time for us to download and upgrade our conception of God.

So what is God? I'm not exactly sure anymore. I used to think that I knew, but now I know that I don't.

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- ☉ **I am not an atheist.** Not just because I believe in deity but also because I'm repulsed by the arrogance of atheists, not to mention their chronic bad attitude.
 - ☉ **I am not an agnostic either.** It's too lukewarm and Milquetoast for my taste. It's too easy. It poses as respectable but strikes me as just being lazy.
 - ☉ **I am not a theist.** What!? Perhaps this is most surprising for a clergyman. I can no longer conceive of God as being a separate entity "out there" somewhere, perhaps in heaven. And it most certainly was not the kind of divinity Jesus talked about.
 - ☉ **I am a spiritualist.** My belief is that spirit, the nonphysical realm, exists at a deeper level of reality than matter does.
 - ☉ **I am also a monist.** I believe in the oneness, the interconnectedness of all reality. When Jesus prayed that "they might all be one, even as the Father and I are one," I try to take that to the limit of what my mind can conceive.
 - ☉ **I am also a panentheist.** Please excuse the jargon. All, the whole shebang, what the Greeks called the pleuroma, all things physical and spiritual exist within God.

But it doesn't matter what I think or what I believe. What do *you* think? What do *you* believe?

Hopefully what I have said so far might motivate you at least to see if you want an upgrade or need a revision. Toward that end, I want to offer four verses: two from the Hebrew tradition (Deuteronomy 33:27 and

Ecclesiastes 3:11), one from the Christian tradition (Luke 17:21), and one from ancient Greek (Acts 17:28).

These verses are chronically overlooked, but actually can be very helpful as we bring our theology into conversation with science. (See page 6.)

📖 **Deuteronomy 33:27.** This passage has very often been awkwardly translated. I originally came across it in a Protestant funeral liturgy. “The eternal God is thy dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms.” **The Hebrew Tradition.** Olam means eternal, everlasting, cosmos, universe, world, infinite. Olam is not easily translated into English for it means all of these things. It is the ancient Hebrew concept of what we now call Einsteinian space-time. So the verse above, more literally, is: “The Olam God [or God of Olam] is thy house, and underneath [foundation, referring to the house] is the Olam plus strength.” This is one of the great promises or hidden gems in the Bible. The God of it all is where you live, and foundational to your dwelling is the strength of the universe!

📖 **Ecclesiastes 3:11.** “He has made everything beautiful in its time; also he has put eternity into man’s mind, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.” He has put Olam into our nephesh (translated as mind or heart in some versions but more literally as a person’s soul). Olam placed into our soul! Such that yes, it would be difficult to wrap our minds around such a concept.

📖 **Luke 17:21.** “...For behold, the Kingdom of God is in the midst of you.” This is almost exactly the same thing that Ecclesiastes is saying but here Jesus is using emphasis. “Entos” is the Greek word for an emphatic “in.” English doesn’t have such a word. But imagine using the word “in” with emphasis. The Kingdom of God is **in** you! Don’t look for it over there or over here. It is **in** you. Olam is **in** your soul.

📖 **Acts 17:28.** This one is great. Epimenides (philosopher, Crete, 6th or 7th C BCE) was upset with his fellow Cretans because their belief in and worshipful attitude toward Zeus was waning. Part of his poem reads: “They fashioned a tomb for you [Zeus], holy and high one, Cretans, always liars, evil hearts, idle bellies. But you are not dead; you live and abide forever, for in you we live and move and have our being.” Paul then used that same last sentence as part of his explanation of divinity to the Greeks.

However, note one thing about the last three verses. The Acts verse seems to be saying the opposite of the two preceding verses. Which is it? Is God (Kingdom, Olam) in us? Or are we in God? I would suggest to you that it is the interplay of both. It is the interplay, interbeing of God, humanity, creation that both science and technology are discerning.

Is God in Us or Are We in God? It Is the Interplay of Both

In preparation for today’s sermon and workshop, I’ve been reading on the internet

some of the sermons of Rev. Sara Baron, pastor of First United Methodist Church, Schenectady, New York.

There was one from a few weeks back, the context of which was addressing the question of Jesus: “Who do people say that I am?” She quotes Rev. Monty Brown, a United Methodist from West Virginia, who has answered the most important of the questions for all of us, Jesus included, I’d say. “Who does God think that I am?” God thinks that I am a “beloved child of God, precious and beautiful to behold.” Who does God think

that you are? God thinks that you are a “beloved child of God, precious and beautiful to behold.”

Yes, emphatic yes.

What I would ask of you is to expand your notion of child, for the entire creation is the offspring of God. And one thing that can be

said with assurance is that the parent and child are of the same species.

I feel like a guppy that has just banged its head really hard. It sort of smarts. But give me a minute, and I’ll acclimate to the light.

Amen.