

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
6<sup>th</sup> February 2022

John 5:1-13

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*A Scientific Faith*

“Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.” That quote is often attributed to Albert Einstein, though it seems its origin was actually from mystery novelist Rita Mae Brown in her 1983 novel “Sudden Death.” But the sentiment of the quote serves as a good kickoff for these next few weeks when we will be exploring the intersection of science and faith, even if one of the greatest scientists of our era didn’t actually say it.

In our Adult Forum, Julie Wade will be spending a few Sundays helping us understand some of the hidden

ways that plant life communicates through mycelium. Next Sunday we will officially celebrate Evolution Sunday in church. We try to do that on the Sunday closest to the birth date of Charles Darwin, born 12 February 1809. But this Sunday I want to talk a little about how an interest in science has deepened my own experience of God.

First, though, let’s take a look at our reading this morning. Jesus has traveled to Jerusalem and stops by a place that was frequented by people in search of cures for various physical ailments. The place was called Bethza-

tha and there were five porticoes around the pool, and, according to John, all the “blind, lame, and paralyzed” would gather around the pool. It was a place where people came to look for healing and wholeness.

The folklore of the day was that from time to time the waters in the pool would be stirred up, and the first person to step into the waters once that happened would experience healing. One of the people at the pool that day was a man who had been unable to walk for 38 years. Jesus approaches the man and asks if he wants to be healed. The man responds that he can't walk. There is no one to put him in the water when it gets stirred up, and even when he tries, someone gets there ahead of him.

Jesus instructs the man to do something different. Rather than wait for the

waters to heal him, Jesus tells the man to pick up his mat and walk. The man does. He's healed. He did the same thing for 38 years and never found healing. He tried something new and found what he was looking for. Hallelujah.

Except that not everyone is happy about this healing. The religious officials find out that the man's healing was done on the Sabbath, thereby violating the law. The tension in the story comes not from the man's inability to find healing, but from the conflict between his experience of healing and the religious expectations of his day.

You've perhaps heard the statistic that the fastest growing religious category is those who identify as “spiritual, but not religious.” Emile Durkheim noted three primary functions of religion in society:

1. Social solidarity through a set of shared rituals and beliefs

2. Social control to maintain a set of morals and cultural norms

3. Meaning and purpose to answer existential questions.

That's a helpful distinction in some ways, I think. Religion can be a path toward spiritual growth, helping us search for answers to those existential questions by connecting us with the wisdom of those who have gone before us in ancient texts and with a supportive community of people who are also seeking a deeper spiritual experience. But religion can also serve as a creator and keeper of social boundaries, a means of social control.

The man seeking healing found spiritual and physical wholeness that he had been seeking for 38 years, but he found it in a way that violat-

ed religious boundaries. He's not alone. History is full of examples of people seeking answers to existential questions, seeking wholeness, and running afoul of religious boundaries—Copernicus, Galileo, Darwin...

When religion functions as a gatekeeper, as a way of maintaining social boundaries, then it can easily become a barrier to our quest for wholeness. "Keep searching for wholeness, for healing, for answers, but only within this set of parameters. Experiences outside of these religious guidelines are rejected because they don't conform to what we already believe to be established truth."

Many of us learned about the scientific method in grade school:

- Note a question or curiosity or observation.
- Think of a way to explore that question.
- Make note of the

data, the experience, make note of what you learn.

- Then follow the data to refine your hypothesis and test again.

That process of experimentation, of rejecting things that don't follow the evidence, that process has helped lead humanity toward deeper understanding and knowledge, including understanding in our pursuit of existential questions, for centuries.

But part of that scientific process means letting go of what we think we know, even if it doesn't seem to be working. And that can be a frightening proposition, especially when we're talking about a relationship with God—more so when that God holds the power to affect our lives, punish us for our misdeeds, or condemn us to hell.

Ten years ago, on 3 March 2012, this church sent an

overture to Holston Presbytery asking to designate the second Sunday of February as Evolution Sunday. I was Moderator of the Presbytery at that time, and still remember quite vividly the impassioned discussion around that overture before it was defeated. Two commissioners left that meeting in tears during the course of that discussion.

The fear of embracing new ideas, new ways of learning, new insights that might lead us to a deeper knowledge of those existential questions, to a deeper experience of the Divine, those fears of breaking religious boundaries are still hauntingly present in so many churches and religious institutions.

One of the reasons I was drawn to this congregation was because of that Presbytery meeting. And it's still one of the reasons that I love this church and what we do

here. Because we don't see our embrace of science, or of wisdom from any religious traditions, we don't see that as a threat to our faith or our church, but as a pursuit of deeper knowledge and truth.

That doesn't mean everything we try will always lead us in the right direction. And sometimes trying something new, testing a new idea or hypothesis, sometimes that doesn't work out. One of the comforts that religion offers is that set of boundaries that, we believe, are time-tested and reliable. Being willing to let go of that certainty in pursuit of deeper knowledge can be a terrifying process. It can leave us feeling ungrounded.

I shared a wise quote from a friend of mine a few weeks ago that bears repeating, though. He said that "growing faith often feels like losing faith." In order to

gain new knowledge, new insights, in order to grow a deeper faith, sometimes we do have to let go of what isn't working. Stepping out of the familiar religious forms of yesterday and into the post-religious freedom of tomorrow is never easy. It takes courage and a willingness to think outside religious boundaries.

But the payoff can be the very thing we are seeking... a deeper connection to the existential questions we ask, a deeper experience of the Divine, of God, of the unifying love that flows through creation, through the universe, through us and this community.

I'll offer one example of this in my own time here. When I showed up for my first Sunday 5-1/2 years ago, I did not do something that I had done pretty much every single Sunday for the previous 16 years. I did not

offer a pastoral prayer—the one where the preacher kind of packs everything and everyone we need to remember into a petition to God. I'm not dismissing those prayers, and some of the most meaningful times in worship for me were those same kinds of prayers offered by a pastor I looked up to who would spend 10-20 minutes in worship each Sunday inviting people to share their joys and concerns, and then he would pray for every single one of those, from memory, with an eloquence I still envy.

But what we did here instead was a meditation. A time of silence. A time of listening to our thoughts, our bodies, of being attentive to others and to our world. And to be honest, I was kind of uncomfortable with that my first Sunday. I had learned the way worship was supposed to go. I knew

the rules and boundaries for how to offer prayers, and that was not it.

But within a few weeks, it turned out that meditation was a practice that I grew not only to appreciate, but one that helped me connect with something deeper, and one that helped me to feel more fully present in worship. Even though I still squirm in my seat, and my mind wanders, and I'm pretty sure I'm not always meditating on the thing I'm supposed to be meditating on, I love that meditation is a part of our worship. And I can feel a very palpable difference in myself when I stand up to preach after meditation in a way that I notice on those rare occasions I lead a worship service that doesn't include it. What began as an uncomfortable moment for me of letting go of a religious practice ended up helping to connect

me with something I didn't know I had been missing.

Growing faith can often feel like losing faith. That's just one example, but it encapsulates one of the reasons why my faith has continued to grow during my time here. As we celebrate the contributions of science to the life of faith this month, I hope we can recognize in this place a safe space to test new ideas, try new hypotheses, and join with one another in the pursuit of a deeper, richer experience of the Divine. Blessed be.

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