

THE MARRIAGE / CIVIL UNION OF SCIENCE & RELIGION

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Shove Memorial Chapel, The Colorado College
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“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” - Matthew 5:31-32

I.

I want to admit, first thing, that I may have chosen an unwise path this morning. I may have stumbled into something today that I am not equipped to handle. My intention during this extended season of Epiphany, 9 Sundays this year, has been to follow the lectionary texts which follow Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount” found in Matthew’s gospel. But today is also our annual Evolution Sunday, part of a nationwide Evolution Weekend, in which hundreds of congregations of various faiths are participating.

In preparation for this sermon, my intention has been to draw upon a book called “Charles and Emma: The Darwins’ Leap of Faith.” Deborah Heiligman, a Yale Divinity School graduate and wife of a scientist, describes Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution through the story of Charles and Emma’s marriage. Consider my delight when this week’s lectionary passage referred to “marriage.” What synchronicity! What serendipity! What symmetry!

The problem is that this passage of scripture is more about divorce than it is about marriage. And, the reality is that half of those of us who have been married have also been divorced. And many have remarried. Some, more than once. Thus a strictly moralistic or legalistic interpretation of this passage will not do.

Furthermore, the passage presumes a heterosexual model, and we continue to live in a society that does not extend full marriage rights to all its citizens. On this eve of Valentine’s Day, I want to invite you to join me and 3 other pastors tomorrow at noon on the steps of our City Hall, as we provide a positive and pro-active witness to the possibility of civil unions for all Colorado citizens.

II.

My intention on this Evolution Sunday is to use the metaphor of marriage, or civil union, as a way of describing the relationship between science and religion. Before going there, I want to say a word about how these two verses from Jesus’ sermon might be considered good news in our modern day. Notice that the passage is addressed to men.

In Jesus' culture, as in our own, women are made more vulnerable by divorce than men. In the first century, a divorced woman was damaged goods and found herself in economic peril. The book of Deuteronomy permits divorce, but a man could use that permission to divorce and remarry without thought to the fate of the woman he divorced. In this passage, Jesus goes underneath the letter of the Deuteronomic law to reclaim the deep vision of marriage as lifelong and life-giving relationship.

This reminds me of an article I read a few years back called "Why Same-Sex Couples Could Save Marriage." Among other points, the author observes that gay and lesbian couples, in fighting for marriage equality, are reminding their heterosexual sisters and brothers that the basic meaning of marriage remains simply this: love. Committed love. A good thing to remember on February 13.

III.

But what does any of this have to do with Evolution Sunday and the relationship between science and religion? I have enjoyed reading about the marriage of Charles and Emma Darwin. Early on, Charles Darwin had studied theology, even considered training to become a vicar, or parish minister. But his travels on the HMS Beagle to South America as the ship's naturalist caused him to become intensely interested in the biological forms with which he came into contact. Eventually, he became convinced that he could describe and provide evidence for a theory of the transmutation of species over time. His theory did not rely upon reference to the God described in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures.

Meanwhile, his wife Emma, who was intelligent, well-read, and interested in a vast range of topics, found great comfort and truth in her Christian faith. Both Emma and Charles worried that their different ways of regarding religious faith could prove a deal-breaker in their marriage. Charles worried that Emma would not understand the importance of his work, which made no reference to God. Emma worried that Charles's lack of faith could make him bitter in this world and unwelcomed in the next. Their love and respect for each other overwhelmed these worries. They took a leap and were married on January 29, 1839.

As I read about the marriage of Charles and Emma, I considered their differences, and marveled at their ability to allow their marriage to change them, mutually. They rejoiced together when they moved into their first home, when their first child was born, when an illness was overcome, and when Charles's work came to fruition. And they mourned together when a parent passed away, when friends were critical, and when their eldest daughter, Annie, died at age 10. The Darwins, you may know, had 10 children, 3 of whom died at a very early age.

As I thought about their marriage, I thought about the concept of marriage as it is often described. How many times have you heard in wedding ceremony something like: these two are now one? But what is meant by this union of two people?

I know what I hope it does *not* mean. It hope that marriage does *not* mean that two people become the same person, or that they become scarcely discernible one from the other, or that the personality and values of one person prevail over that of the other, or that the roles prescribed by the society become so rigid as to provide no room for each person's growth. Instead, I think a healthy marriage is a partnership between two individuals. As Rainer Maria Rilke wrote: "Love consists in this, that two solitudes protect and touch and greet each other."

IV.

My question today is: Could "marriage," understood this way, be a helpful metaphor for the relationship between science and religion? For most of us who think about these things, there is a part of our thinking that is attracted to and in agreement with the assertions of modern science, including Charles Darwin's theory of the transmutation of species, now known as the theory of the evolution of species. We know that the grandparents of our grandparents were not apes, and we have learned that the origin of our species lies, in a strictly biological sense, with a common ancestor we share with our ape cousins. Pushed all the way back, we humans share a common ancestor with all life forms. Isn't that a beautiful and powerful thought?

Also, for most of us who think about these things, there is a part of our thinking that is attracted to and in agreement with the deep wisdom we have encountered in scriptures, in spiritual practices, in religious tradition, in communities of faith, and in our interactions with other human communities and with the natural world.

In other words, we are attracted to religion and we are attracted to science. The conflict between these two attractions may at times seem irreconcilable. How can both of these accounts of the world be true at the same time? For some, the answer has been to privilege one completely over the other.

Some say that science describes the way the world really is and religion is a pile of hoo-hah, outdated and obsolete. Others say that religion, my religion, is the only place where God is revealed and God, my God, is the ultimate truth. Therefore, anything in science that does not agree with scripture is wrong, so wrong it could be described as evil.

If this conflicted relationship thus described were a marriage, it would be doomed to fail, either because the relationship would not last or because both sides would endure undo suffering. But a marriage that does not fail, as in the marriage of Charles and Emma, is one in which each partner respects the other, not seeking to vanquish or subsume the other, but, in the course of the relationship, to become what neither could be on their own.

Perhaps "civil union" is as good a term, or better, than "marriage." Civil union, a union of co-existence, a commitment to grow in relationship with another, and a promise to remain civil, that is, respectful of the humanity of the other and always

cognizant of the wider realities of the world and universe. That is, we enter into marriage or civil union not to remain securely and forever the same. We enter into civil union or marriage to *change*.

And for those of us who are equally attracted to and convinced by the testimonies of science *and* religion, civil union and marriage are good metaphors. When it comes to the way Christians read their scriptures, to be in relationship with science, including evolutionary science, means to *change*. This doesn't mean that our *scriptures* change. As Ben Daniel, a Presbyterian minister, recently wrote: "We must not reject what we know from science, and we who are Christians cannot turn our back on the Bible. We can, however, change *how we read* the Bible."

This is as important with regard to evolutionary biology as it is to sexual orientation and gender expression. We cannot just read into the Bible whatever we want to believe. But, just as the authors of Genesis wrote in the language of their day and according to the worldview of their day, so do we read in the language of our day and interpret according to the worldview of our day.

V.

Even as God brooded over the face of those primordial waters, urging the world to be, so does God hover over the world as it continues to become, to evolve, to be revealed.

When Jesus uttered his words about divorce, he was warning men of his time not to disparage marriage by abusing their partners and ignoring their humanity. Today his word to all of us might be: Don't disparage the marriage of science and religion. Don't undo the communion of their civil union. Let them grow together and let them change. Don't try to uproot one and leave the other, because you'll end up with wheat and weeds in the same hand. And fear not, church, we hear Jesus say in the final verse of Matthew's gospel: "I am with you always, to the end of the age." Amen.