



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

A Change in Perspective

The Rev. Sharon Gracen

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In 2004, Butler University Biology professor, Michael Zimmerman was working with a group of clergy from Wisconsin to draft a response to the policies passed by a local school board that sought to impede the teaching of evolution. In a few short weeks, over 200 clergy had signed the statement and when it was presented to the school board, along with support from other educators and scientists, the Grantsburg School Board retracted its policies. Encouragement from clergy from all over the country convinced Prof. Zimmerman to take his initiative national. The Clergy Letter Project now has nearly 13,000 signatures. Then in 2006, 467 congregations took part in Evolution Sunday through sermons, forums and other activities. This year, nearly 650 congregations will take part in Evolution Weekend. Trinity Church is listed among them and my signature is on the letter as of this week. Copies of the letter are available in the narthex.

This embrace of evolutionary science by American Christianity is exemplified by Michael Dowd, who was raised Roman Catholic but became an evangelical in young adulthood. He says, "I was taught that evolution was of the devil and would seduce people away from godly thinking and living. I believed Darwinism was the root of most social problems, and I was deeply concerned for my friends and family—especially those caught in the snares of a secular humanistic worldview. I even distributed anti-evolution tracts and was eager to debate anyone who thought the world was more than six thousand years old...Eventually, things began to shift for me thanks to the inspiring, healing, and bridge-building work of Christian leaders and teachers who saw no conflict between evolution and their Christian faith"

The final shift happened suddenly for Michael, during the first session of a course he was taking, titled "The New Catholic Mysticism." He says, "the teacher began by telling the scientific story of the Universe in a way that I had never heard it told before—as a sacred epic. Less than an hour into the evening, with goose bumps up and down both arms and legs, ***I began to weep.*** I knew I would spend the rest of my life sharing this perspective as ***great news.***"



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Perspective is the important word here because as faithful people, we are frequently called to change our perspective and broaden our horizon, to go from the human perspective to God's. In the seminal instruction from this morning's reading from Deuteronomy, God says, "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life..." And similarly in 1 Corinthians, "I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready..." Moses and Paul were getting at the same thing – we need to understand what it is that God is calling us to and where we are on that path. Moses had a hard time getting people to trust and follow God even though they had been rescued from slavery, were fed every day, and had been given the symbols of their covenant with God, the tablets with God's laws. They were fractious, belligerent, angry and who could blame them. They had all been born into slavery, had had no control over their own lives; the Egyptian overseers had been cruel. Death dealing ways, life under the curse of slavery – that was all they knew. But here was Moses telling them that God wanted them to change their perspective from what they knew to what God was offering them.

Paul would have loved to be with people who already knew that they were spiritual beings, but his congregation in Corinth wasn't quite ready for that. He had to prepare them for the shift in perspective. In today's reading, he was trying to teach them the difference between aligning oneself with a human leader and giving oneself to Christ. The equivalent today would be the difference between thinking of yourself as an American who happens to be Christian and a Christian who happens to be an American. It's also the difference between staying at a church because you like the rector and then leaving when they are gone. Paul was saying, that it couldn't be about him, or about me, or Hank, it's about Christ. That's a very different perspective. And that's not the only way Paul was trying to open their minds. Paul understood that being in Christ obliterates distinctions and all become equal, male and female, slave and free. This is a shift of colossal proportions in human history and we're still not there. It is a part of our journey toward spiritual maturity, opening our hearts and minds from our small view to God's larger one.

And now we get to this Gospel, one that sends shudders through most preachers. I've never had any fun preaching on this, but today it makes more sense. Jesus was trying to help his followers understand that if what is in your heart and your thoughts is not in alignment with your actions, you are not whole. He was trying to take people from the human perspective – it's not good to kill people – to the spiritual perspective – it's not good to hate people. To Jesus, the action and the attitude are equally wrong. From a spiritual perspective, hating is as destructive as physical violence. Peace and wholeness must come from within. Behavior that is defined by rules and enforced with the threat of punishment may be necessary for a society to function, but for humanity to grow and thrive, love and fidelity and compassion must dwell inside of us.



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There's a very practical reason for learning what Jesus is teaching. What is in your heart and mind will eventually be expressed – either in the expression on your face, in your behavior or perhaps in your health. If you are angry and hostile, it will be apparent even if you don't punch someone in the nose. Anger is very strong energy and people just feel it and generally back away from it. If you hold onto anger or other negative emotions long enough, they will turn inward and make you sick. The new field of epi-genetics is studying emotions as one of the causes of genetic changes in the human body. There is a growing scientific appreciation for the wisdom found in Jesus' teachings about how anger affects both ourselves and others, but I am not sure that we have fully taken in the truth of Jesus' warnings. We are still children when it comes to understanding and accepting what Jesus is offering us.

Can you imagine what it would be like to live without anger, fear, resentment or worry? Is it even possible? We often fall back on "it's just the way I am" or "I don't know how to get over it – I can't stop my thoughts!" My question is, would you be willing to try? Can you embrace a new perspective that your thoughts are the one thing that you really can learn to control as the ultimate expression of free will?

A big, tough warrior once went to see a little monk. "Monk," he said, in a voice accustomed to instant obedience, "teach me about heaven and hell!" The monk looked up at this mighty warrior and replied with utter disdain, "Teach you about heaven and hell? I couldn't teach you about anything. You're a brainless brute, you're dirty and you smell. You are a disgrace to your uniform. Get out of here! I can't stand the sight of you." The soldier was furious. He shook, got all red in the face, was speechless with rage. He pulled out his gun and pointed it at the monk. "That's hell," said the monk softly. The warrior was overwhelmed. The compassion and surrender of this little man who had offered his life in order to teaching him about hell! He lowered his gun, filled with gratitude, and was suddenly peaceful. And the monk said, "And that's heaven."

Choose life, follow Christ, and love from the inside out.