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Lakeshore Chapel Sermon, delivered on August 13, 1989

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LAKESHORE CHAPEL SERMON AUGUST 13, 1989

Since the dawn of civilization, people have not been content to see events as unconnected and inexplicable. As their lives were affected by events, they insisted on knowing the causes. And their gods to whom they assigned the responsibility for initial and ultimate cause reflected the environment in which they lived and the degree of knowledge they had acquired. Originating in their concept of a divine intercessor or intercessors came the systems, some primitive, others evolving into complex theologies, that provided the explanations that connected events and experiences into meaningful life.

For primitive tribes the gods were locked in the animals and plants that gave them life, and totally comprised their environment and occupied their minds. Throughout history God made the rain fall, and gave food in abundance or withheld it. The strong arm of God gave victory or, by assisting the enemy, brought defeat. Before the age of science, the sacrifice of lambs, fatted calves, and young unspoiled youths placated the Gods and brought the desired effect. We have all seen rerun movies where some high priest stands with a knife or sword poised to slaughter, in the name of his religion, some beautiful young virgin, only to have the more civilized warrior, who obviously came from a society with better theological understanding, snatch her from imminent death, carry her away with the implication that she too will share his more enlightened understanding, as well as their marital bed.

Our own Judeo-Christian faith is rooted in the same traditions, the same kind of explanations of the human condition. When Abraham, to satisfy his God, Jehovah, was about to sacrifice his son Isaac, Isaac was snatched from the jaws of death, not by some swashbuckling adventurer, but by the voice of God. When the experience of civilized humanity reached a point

of understanding, the futility of blood sacrifice, and that the forces for good and evil existed within men and women neither aided or abetted by the blood of animals or their own blood, they postulated that God was willing to be the sacrifice and by so doing forever meet the need that all previous blood offerings had fulfilled. And by overcoming death through resurrection, allay that overriding fear of death more successfully than humankind had done through all manner of belief and practice heretofore.

Built on the ancient Judaic perception of life, the new Christian understandings captured the mind of western man, and for more than 1500 years dominated the frame of reference in which people found explanations and meaning for their lives. By the 17th century the drive to discover and know had led to the firm establishment of those physical and natural theories that led mankind into the scientific age. The new science had and continues to have a profound influence on how we think about the explanations Christian theology has given over the centuries about the nature of God and the meaning of life.

Humankind's elemental drive to know and explain has a contradictory aspect. One of the most noted novels by Joseph Heller, written in 1961, was Catch 22 about a U.S. airbase in Italy during the 2nd World War and an airman, Captain Yossarian, who found himself in innumerable impossible situations. What he was ordered to achieve always undermined the achievement. Sometimes it appears that the species' drive to know and explain is humankind's Catch 22. Scientific knowledge provides information that often undermines the current explanation that has been offered as "the truth" in explaining the nature of God, the nature of man, and the nature of the universe. A new ultimate truth is formulated until the drive to know and explain offers up more information that tends to undermine aspects of

it. So our compulsion to know has led theologians, philosophers, and common people to systems of belief explaining all phenomena relating to life and death, and then that drive to know, in a generation or more, pushes them, not all at the same time, to question the systems that were constructed. We fear the unknown, yet we tend to plunge into it, and by so doing come to know more.

The compulsion to know has lead Christian scholars and leaders throughout our religious history to explain in detail every aspect of human life and death, the world of nature, and the nature of the God who is behind it all. Let's examine some of the areas of explanation that have been unsuccessful and those that continue to serve us well.

During many years of reflection I am not sure I have found a satisfactory answer to the question, "Why in our Christian tradition do so many believers and theologians feel compelled to explain phenomena in terms of what they want to believe, and then defend their explanations when there is reason to re-examine them? It is only 500 years ago that Copernicus put forth the theory that the earth was round, a concept that went back in history as far as Aristotle, but had not seen the light during the dark ages and the Christianizing of the west. That concept, along with the removal of the sun and the earth as the center of the universe, was so vigorously opposed by the church in the 16th century that its most celebrated proponent at the time, Galileo, had to recant in order to remain alive. No matter how much the keepers of truth or the vicar of Christ on earth proclaimed that Galileo was wrong, he was in fact right. I believe the "big bang" theory of the origin of the universe causes difficulties for some people because it makes their perception of God the creator antiquated. In his book, "A Brief History of Time," Steven Hawking, the noted British

physicist, and a genius of our time, helps those of us who are laymen attempt to understand where the discoveries in physics and astronomy are leading us. The possibilities of the universe he describes transcends the earth-centered universe of former Christian theologies, and the understanding of modern day scientists. Yet these new paths to the future are often blocked by people who say, "Don't mess with my God!" Maybe that's the problem. We like to claim God. We want to know what we think God does, he does; what we think he is, he is; the need to know and explain is impatient.

In my home city of Grand Rapids, controversy over the Biblical story of creation is causing a stir, and has spread throughout a conservative denomination. The battle is fought over whether or not the earth was created in six days. People are being attacked and maligned over the issue. I see nothing enobling or enlightening about the controversy. To me it is unimportant, except that the passion with which a really scientifically untenable position is held leads to the deterioration of personal relationships and deals a blow to those who espouse good will.

In the political realm as well, the drive to know and to be right is used to cover man's aggressive side and his drive to power. Wars in the name of truth are as familiar to us as the daily soap operas - Protestants against Catholics in Northern Ireland, Muslims versus Jews and Christians in the Middle East, and a few years ago Catholics fighting Buddhists in Viet Nam, the thirty years war on the continent in the 16th century where Catholics and Protestants started what continues today in Northern Ireland, Cromwell and his pious round hats against the Church of England, and the Catholics in Ireland. The litany is endless. I am sure when you are involved the reasons seem justified. But to the outside observer they appear to be a miscarriage of what religion ought to be.

During my many years of reflection I have come to some conclusions. First, one should not confuse religious truth with his or her views and understanding of the universe. This understanding should always be open to new discoveries. Second, one should not believe absolutely anything that has not been observed. That does not preclude holding positions on subjects that do not lend themselves to observable verification. Those positions should be intelligently put forth and just as intelligently altered or set aside if observable evidence leads in that direction. My conclusion is that most of the positions we take should be held with humility. Our minds are awesome in their ability to think, reason, understand, and give us our consciousness. That awesome ability brings new discoveries in science and reasoning that transcends and changes the level of knowledge previously attained by the human brain. Therefore, the very mind with which we believe has the capacity to provide new insight and enlarge the belief. That is the reason for holding what we believe in humility. If we do so we are not at sea in intellectual chaos, yet we are open to ideas and thoughts of others that may enrich our lives. This is easier to do for some than for others. The ancient force from within to know and explain in certain terms is part of our condition. Often it leads to intolerance and an intellectualized ignorance. If laced through with humility and a gracious willingness to understand that our knowledge is only a step to knowing more, the primal drive to know and explain serves the species by increasing insight and understanding in the nature of life and death, and avoids the pitfalls of round after round of energy sapping argument and strife. At best the argument and strife is verbal and unrelenting. At worst it takes its toll in human life.

The vigor with which some of the theologians, rulers, and populace at large intertwined their views of the universe, using what is now discredited science, with their religious views of the nature of God was not in most instances a useful exercise. A little more humility and tentatively held beliefs would have meant less blood spilled in the name of religion. Furthermore, it would have carried with it less exclusivity that each religion claims for itself, and encouraged more sharing and less killing.

While religion has been an inadequate guide to scientific truth, and often made to look ridiculous when insisting on views that are not consistent with proven scientific theories, it has been successful in identifying and developing beliefs about human relationships that give purpose and understanding for human life. Our Christian faith, for instance, has some profound insights that do not ensnare us in battles over scientific discoveries.

We begin with the concept that God enters man through Christ. That the spirit of God is available to everyone. There is no need to appease God with the sacrifice of life. There is the opportunity that the spirit and power of God can move in and through every individual. Christ speaks of the God within you. "I am in the Father, the Father in me and I in you." Over centuries of experience people came to understand the power of love, and that to live in a state of love, acceptance, and forgiveness with those around you was to live in harmony with the spirit of God. It was the highest human fulfillment, and not in conflict with scientific discoveries or practical human achievements. The New Testament specifically states that God is synonymous with the spirit of love. Those that shut

themselves off from it are weakened, even lost, in their ability to find and understand what the essence of fulfilled human life really is. The worst human condition is the incapacity to love. Without the capacity to love, the individual is shut off from the spirit of God within. With it the spirit of God dwells in a person, and generates the power to improve human life and make it worth living.

Our religion speaks of all life in reverent tones. The animals, the trees and plants, the grains of the fields, all of nature has value and dignity. In furthering respect for nature, religion has never come into conflict with science. Nor has this insight been altered when other strongly held beliefs have finally given way to overwhelming scientific evidence. Where religion has succeeded, the drive to know and explain has been in play. We have thousands of years of experience with the effectiveness of love and the ineffectiveness of hate. We have observed what love does to lives. The Christian religion and other religions are based on that experience and observation. We can believe it with certainty. We know it and we even explain it.

We have always been a part of nature. Our stories of creation speak to that fact. Though we have not always lived in harmony with our natural surroundings, and at times have suffered because of nature's forces, we are aware that the natural environment and we are part of the same creation. We are aware that there is a harmony to be found in man's relationship with nature. This we are learning with greater intensity and insight, but the concept has always been central to religious understanding. And in our need to know and explain, people have continued to examine the natural order of life and the universe. In our search, whether looking out beyond the stars or into the smallest particles of matter, we find order, cause

and effect, a meaningful unfolding. The scientist is awed by the vastness of what appears to be nature's plan and the student of religion is reaffirmed in his or her faith that life has meaning.

In our need to know and explain, let us be scrupulously honest. We do not need to appropriate a claim to all knowledge as if we were God. We are better served to admit to an honest uncertainty, to qualify what we are inclined to believe with the possibility that we may discover more. What is learned about the universe, and much is being postulated, will add to or change our concepts of our creator. What we learn about matter and energy may alter our views about the human species and its relationship to nature. This exploration is part of our drive to know and explain and will not threaten sacred cows if we don't keep the cows around. We may even find out how many angels can sit on the head of a pin, and end the fruitless arguments about the subject.

So much theological discussion seems to me like working out a puzzle - entertaining, but of little significance. We should be more discriminating in our religion about what we really know and what we only think. We know the power of love exists and that is the most God-like force in our lives, and we know that we are part of a natural order of life that has harmonies and explanations available to it. That is really enough to know absolutely. To open ourselves to discoveries that may bring in their wake new ways of viewing our religion will only add to the wonderment, spiritual growth and joy of our lives.