

**A SERMON GIVEN BY REV. PAUL J. KOTTKE
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Sunday, July 11, 2010

Title: How Did We Get Here? Who Are We? [Third in a series based on Dr. Timothy Johnson's book *Finding God in the Questions*]

Scripture: Leviticus 19:1-4 and Romans 8:14-19

Theme: How did we get here? – By the love of God. How are we? – A people guided by moral awareness, which leads us back to God, a divinely implanted honing device.

Bertrand Russell, famed English 20th Century philosopher, who was either an atheist or agnostic depending on your perspective, at least had little patience for the Christian Church as he experienced it. Supposedly, Dr. Russell was asked in the later part of his life, as death was imminent, what he would say if he discovered after death that in fact there was a God. His response, "I think I should say to him: Sir, it appears that my atheistic hypothesis was erroneous. Would you mind answering me one wee little question? Why didn't you give us more evidence?" [p. 57]

Or Norwood Russell Hanson, philosopher of science at Yale, when asked what it would take to make him believe in God. His response:

The conditions are these: Suppose, next Tuesday morning, just after breakfast, all of us in this one world are knocked to our knees by a percussive and ear-shattering thunderclap... The sky is ablaze with an eerie silvery light, and just then, as all the people of this world look up, the heavens open and the clouds pull apart, revealing an unbelievably radiant and immense Zeus-like figure towering over us like a hundred Everests. He frowns darkly as lighting plays over the features of his Michel-angeloid face, and then he points down at me, and explains for every man, woman, and child to hear, "I've had quite enough of your too-clever logic chopping and word-watching in matters of theology. Be assured, Norwood

Russell Hanson, that I do most certainly exist." [p.58]

Obviously both of these eminent thinkers were being tongue in cheek. But I find both responses to be fairly revealing. It would seem that those who question the reality of God and the divine purpose of our lives become very literalistic in their expectations, whereas in the realm of science they seem to be far more willing to trust intellectual assumptions. Or to say this another way, it seems paradoxical that for the skeptics, there seems to be a willingness to trust in the art of science but distrust in the art of faith. Indeed, the evidence of purposeful life is present all around us, if we are but willing to acknowledge its validity.

Dr. Johnson presents a few examples. Let me lift up three: [p.44 & 45]

- The initial explosive force of the big bang appears to be 'just right'. The most microscopic shift one way or another and the universe would have either collapsed back on itself or expanded too rapidly for stars to form. According to one expert, an accuracy of this magnitude can be compared to firing a bullet at a one-inch target on the other side of the observable universe, twenty billion light years away, and hitting the target.
- If the relationship between gravity and electromagnetism were ever so slightly different, the stars would burn a

million times faster, making it impossible to form the heavy metals necessary for the generation of life.

- If the relation of gravity to the energy of the molecules were ever so slightly different, then most of the hydrogen would have turned into helium with there being no water – the solution upon which life depends.

According to Dr. Paul Davies:

It is hard to resist the impression that the present structure of the universe, apparently so sensitive to minor alterations in the numbers, has been rather carefully thought out...The seemingly miraculous concurrence of numerical values that nature has assigned to her fundamental constants must remain the most compelling evidence of an element of cosmic design. [p.45]

In layman's terms, the basic foundational elements of the universe are so precisely set that a slight variance in either direction and life would not exist. It is simply beyond any reasonable position to declare that the existence of the universe is the result of chance.

Ever since the emergence of modern science going as far back as the 1500s, the Church as a religious authority has fought the emergence of new ideas. We are all familiar with Copernicus and his revolutionary understanding that the sun did not revolve around the earth but that the earth was but one of many planets in this solar system that revolved around the sun. What was at stake here was the notion that humanity was created by God for a special purpose. And so, the Church fought back. As has been demonstrated time and again throughout Christian history, the Church became more interested in protecting its institutional authority, even at the expense of further understanding an authentic faith relationship with God. The Church as an institution has lost much of its credibility in its continual

insistence of providing answers when what is more appropriate are the questions.

In a way that is filled with irony, it has fallen to theoretical science to come full circle in acknowledging the uniqueness of life and humankind:

As it turns out, it is no longer scientifically significant that the earth is not the astronomical center of the known universe. Because it is now clear that there is no spatial center in our cosmos. Our apparently insignificant place in the universe turns out to be quite ideal for the development of our species. In fact, contemporary science is telling us that it takes a universe as large and as long in the making as ours to allow for the development of the precise conditions necessary for life such as ours. [p.54]

But then we come back to the basic question of why does not God make the divine presence so well known that there can be no question, no doubt? Dr. Johnson relates the story told by the 19th Century philosopher Soren Kierkegaard of a king who fell in love with a peasant girl. How was he to convey his love without destroying the possibility of a freely chosen relationship on her part? His mere presence and authority would so overwhelm her that free choice would be impossible to make. And so he did the only thing he could, he completely set aside his rank and, in disguise, sought to establish a relationship of mutuality.

Dr. Johnson writes, "In other words, God could make it all obvious, but at a terrible price – the loss of what makes us human, the ability to choose freely rather than submit passively, the possibility of being wise rather than dumbstruck [by overwhelming power and authority]." [p.58]

How did we get here? We got here by the love of God, made manifested over billions of years. A love which invites an authentic relationship based upon human choice. In other words, out of this desire for love, God has given us the real

and viable choice to not love God. One could say that God is “betting the farm” on the belief that in the end, humanity [collectively and individually] will choose God, of our own free will.

The second question this morning relates to the issue of free will – Who are we? We are a people led by a moral awareness. You see, while God chooses for us to have free will, we are not left completely without guidance. To use a term that would only have made sense in the last ten years or so - God has placed within us an internal GPS navigational system. St. Augustine [4th Century] wrote “Lord, my soul is restless until it rests in Thee.” Immanuel Kant [18th Century] wrote, “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing wonder and awe...the starry heaven above me and the moral law within me.” [p.61]

Moral law can be explained by the concept of social evolution – that is, we learn a certain code because it enables us to get along together. But such an explanation begs the question of why are we relationally driven in the first place. Why do we care for others? Why are we willing to be guided by that which we think is the right thing to do, even if it is not beneficial for our own comfort or safety?

This drive for relationship, not just for sex, is a universal characteristic of human nature. We spend much of our lives consumed with desire for an intimate relationship that will satisfy all our needs, emotional as well as physical. If we are not anticipating something we don't have, we are critiquing what we do have. If we have lost a relationship through betrayal or conflict, it cost us enormous energy in anger and sadness. If the relationship has been ripped away from us by violence or death, we face debilitating grief and the difficult challenge of recovery. Many of us define our quality of life based on whether we have a fulfilling, intimate relationship... [p.66]

And then Dr. Johnson takes the issue of relationship one step further:

If there is no other reality than the material world, no other being than human beings and animals, then why is this sense of relationship to a transcendent force or entity so persistent? [p.67]

In an age when we are more attuned than ever to the terrible cost of broken relationships and of violence between persons, ethnic groups and nations, it is worth considering that we might have a common ground for human relationships that transcends all such divisions. The suggestion of a divine presence that has created us for relationship with itself and with one another offers hope of finding both authentic personal wholeness and social peace. [p.69]

In conclusion, I do believe there are ‘footprints’ of an intelligence in our universe that expresses itself in the mind-boggling complexity and ‘coincidences’ of our cosmos and in the very nature of what it means to be human – the conscience that so often calls us to do the unpopular or unexpected, the intense bonds of relationship that shape and direct our lives.... [p.71]

Two questions this morning that invite us into a deeper journey with God:

How did we get here? – By the love of God. The God of Creation who desires an intimate relationship, individually and collectively, has brought us into being.

Who are we that God would desire such a relationship? – We are a people guided by a moral awareness, an awareness that leads us back to God. In the words of Leviticus, “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” [Lev. 19. 2]