



# The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC  
Aurora Illinois

Finding Faith in a Chaotic World

October 8, 2017

Judeo-Christian  
Psalm 130

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.  
Lord, hear my voice?  
Let your ears be attentive  
to the voice of my supplications!

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,  
and in his word I hope;  
my soul waits for the Lord  
more than those who watch for the morning,  
more than those who watch for the morning.

Psalm 140

Deliver me, O Lord, from evildoers;  
protect me from those who are violent,  
who plan evil things in their minds,  
and stir up wars continually.  
Protect me, O Lord, from the violent  
who have planned my downfall.

Every tragedy bring us to a new understanding of the fragility of life. We know it, but we forget it. Life has a way of going on after tragedies—both large and small—and we fall back into our usual routines until another tragedy strikes. That is both good and bad; good in that we couldn't live in the constant shock of a tragedy and bad in that we forget too easily the remembrance of life's precarious nature. After the Holocaust, the byword was "always remember." But we forget after those who went through it move from this life to the next, and the tragic event is but someone else's story. The tragedy of 9/11 fades all too quickly from the collective memory and life goes on, even for the survivors, even as their lives are changed forever.

The senseless murder of 59 people in Las Vegas weighs heavy on our hearts; we come here to find sanctuary from such events, but we cannot escape its power. We come to find some semblance of hope for change but are careful to avoid glib truisms in our attempt to make sense out of the senseless.

I received a birthday card yesterday that said: "Science has finally discovered the secret to longevity." On the inside it said: "keep breathing."

When I was dabbling in the precarious frontier of faith and science a few weeks ago, Eric McLaren brought me a book that was most helpful in exploring the new sciences that seek to discover the relationship of chaos and order. I am no scientist, but I am intrigued by the relationship between faith and science, realizing that the way we see our world is directly related to the way we see God and our relationship to God.

If we see the world as Isaac Newton saw it, a vast machine made up of many parts each of which plays a part in the function of the machine, we tend to expect God to function as a machine. We expect God to perform miracles, to extricate us from chaos and save us from harm. We expect God to fix what we think is broken and we ourselves tend to think that if we correct the things that are wrong, we can live in utopia. If we get rid of disease, life will be great. If we get rid of war, life will be perfect. If we can find the secret to longevity, we can keep breathing forever. And these become our goal.

If, however, we see the world through the eyes of the new sciences that emerge from a quantum understanding of the world, we begin to see the world not as a machine, but as an intricate symbiosis that breathes and acts in tandem. The universe is one vast system of relationships that network and play off one another, a system that is wildly chaotic and paradoxically orderly. It is a paradox that continues to baffle and astound those who explore the outer reaches of our universe. Meteorologist Edward Lorenz drew public attention to this with his familiar "butterfly effect." Does the flap of a butterfly wing in Tokyo affect a tornado in Texas or a thunderstorm in New York? His answer was "yes."

This has profound implications for faith, I think, for we realize that we are more in relationship than in control. We are more co-creators with God than the objects of God's good will or miraculous rescue. We are co-redeemers with God in life and faith, and in the midst of our chaos there is a divine order we don't often see. We want answers and solutions; what we are given is courage and

faith to weather the storm. We want to be free of chaos; what we are given is a world where chaos and order are partners in creation.

Chaos theory explores the relationship between chaos and order whereby these two forces are understood as mirror images, two states that contain the other. A system can descend into chaos and unpredictability, yet within that state of chaos the system is held within boundaries that are well-ordered and predictable. Without the partnering of these two great forces, no change or progress is possible. Chaos is necessary to new creative ordering.

(Margaret Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science*)

Science becomes a parable of faith, revealing in new ways the ongoing story of our life with our Creator and with one another. We live in a chaotic world in which one cannot predict how many years one will keep breathing or where the next hurricane will strike or where the next terrorist will attack. In this chaotic world, however, we have learned that it isn't the number of years we breathe but the joy and fulfillment we find in the years we have. When we can't prevent the hurricane, we can respond to those who have been devastated by one; when we can't understand the religious extremists, we can work diligently to foster dialogue between the religions of the world. Partnered with chaos is a certain order that prompts people of faith to creative activity and creativity.

For those of us who are Christian, the dance between chaos and order is seen in the central story of our faith. The black Friday we now call Good was chaos; a government gone mad with control and oppression went up against a single man whose passion for freedom for the oppressed and unconditional love for the world informed the very fibers of his being. Chaos reared its ugly head that day as it continues to do in our own day, but mirroring that chaos was a Sunday of hope and new life to which we cling during the dark night of our own souls. It was not something new as much as it was something made incarnate in a new way, and it has given us a new way of living.

It isn't easy living within chaos; it isn't necessarily comforting to think that the God of creation is the God of chaos. But God's ways are not our ways; God's thoughts are not our thoughts. God has never promised to conform to our way of thinking or our desired belief system. How do we know that life would be good without chaos? It is the ultimate dream in our finite minds, but how do we know that life wouldn't turn on itself and implode for lack of a cleansing chaos and an opportunity to start new in the aftermath? When Jesus calmed the storm while with the disciples in that boat, he didn't get rid of storms for all time. He wasn't afraid of the storm; he was asleep until the disciples in their fear woke him up. He did calm the storm, but there is a truth to be learned about sleeping like Jesus before the storm subsides.

The world has always been in chaos, as rich in the potential for disaster as for new possibility. How will we navigate through chaos? The answer is the same for us as it is for a quantum world: together. The new world of quantum physics has given us a paradigm for understanding our world. Instead of a machine that operates according to a plan, according to a straight line chain of command, we are learning that the smallest of nature's building blocks function in relationship in a chaotic universe that is neither linear nor logical nor predictable.

A 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE Chinese philosophy put it this way:

*She who wants to have right without wrong,  
Order without disorder,  
Does not understand the principles  
Of heaven and earth.  
She does not know how  
Things hang together.* (Chuang Tzu)

Margaret Wheatley says it this way:

Our dance partner insists that we put ourselves in motion, that we learn to live with instability, chaos, change and surprise. We can continue to stand immobilized on the shoreline, trying to protect ourselves from life's insistent gales, or we can begin moving. We can mourn the erosion of our plans, or we can set out to discover something new.

When Jesus was up against it, he set out to do something radical in a new way. People of faith are called to follow Jesus in finding faith in a chaotic world. At the core of our being is the dance of creation. We are called to dance, and to dance together in this strange chaotic world. It is the dance of faith. Amen.

--Gary L. McCann

(with appreciation to Margaret J. Wheatley for the ideas expressed in her book *Leadership and the New Science*, from which this sermon is derived).

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, before the mountains were brought forth, before the world was formed, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. Even as a thousand year span in your sight is but yesterday when it is gone, we are ever mindful that our peace is found in the everlasting nature of your being more than in the transient nature of our own.

Once again our hearts break and our spirits are overwhelmed by tragedy. It is all too common these days, not only the shootings and murders but floods and hurricanes, wars and violence threaten to numb our minds, risking apathy in the midst of such events.

As we gather once again to find sanctuary from disasters, we pray for a balance in our lives. Give us the wherewithal to find peace in the quiet moments that keep us centered on your grace while at the same time being incensed enough to do something about global warming that precipitates natural disasters and gun violence that comes from assault weapons too readily accessible and leaders that condone violence when the end justifies the means.

God of time and beyond time, wrap us in the warmth of your greatness and surround our restlessness, our fears, our grief and our disappointments with your abiding love. May we not be so obsessed with having our own way that we overlook the vitality of relationships; remind us when we are consumed with selfish desires that compromise and community are rewards unto themselves.

Grant us the peace that passes all human understanding amid the chaos of our world. Encourage us with the parables that science provides for us that out of disruption and change come the opportunities for growth and new life. Gird us with the truths we find in the natural order of an ever-evolving world that you have given to us to not only enjoy but as a laboratory for faith development.

Grant us the courage to be faithful to the dreams by which the chains of hatred and prejudice are broken. As Martin Luther King had a dream, may we have a dream of a world that looks more like the kingdom of God than the kingdom of principalities and governments, a world where liberty and justice for all is more than just a nice phrase but a way of life.

And to that end, grant us a day of living at the center of your love for the sake of others. In the name of the Christ, Amen.