

"Living the Dream"

a Sermon Delivered by Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, Senior Minister
at All Souls Unitarian Church, Sunday, January 16, 2011

Shorty Long had a song; it was called "Function at the Junction." If you're from the Motown generation you might remember it, "Function at the Junction," 1966. Do you remember:

*I'm getting ready for the function at the junction
And baby you'd better come on right now
Because everybody's gonna be there
We got people comin' from everywhere*

*We got Ling Ting Tong from China
Long Tall Sally from Carolina*

*We serving egg foo yung and barbecue
having chicken dumplings and kidney stew*

*Oh the soul brothers, Jitterbugs
Hip cats and fancy hats and
Pretty girls with pretty smiles
All decked out in the latest styles*

*and Farmer Jim and Guitar Slim and
Betty Boop and ooo-boop-e-doop
and Mohair Sam from Alabam
and Minnesota Fats from Hobo Flats*

*They all be gathering here, from far and near
To Function at the Junction*

That's what this church is, every Sunday morning... it's a function at the junction. The junctions of our lives; the cross roads of religious understanding; the intersection of ideas and worldviews. It's a border church. A junction is where different roads meet and come together. Our nation is a border nation – a junction – and so we need to develop a border consciousness.

My father was a Jew who married an Italian Catholic. I married a German, Dutch, Danish, English and Italian woman. That's just one woman, but that's one hell of a woman, and there's a lot of Italian in there. And I'm raising a son who is a mixture of all of that; and a daughter who's African American. My brother is married to a woman from Brazil and they live in Guatemala. Our President has a German, English, Irish American mother, a Kenyan dad, and he grew up in Indonesia and Hawaii. We are all constantly crossing borders of culture, religion and much more. But often where there are junctions there are lots of dysfunctions.

This weekend we commemorate Martin Luther King Jr. because of his leadership in helping us learn how to function in the junction of racial understanding and equality. Martin Luther King Jr. was a border walker: born and raised in the segregated South, but educated at elite schools in the North. He lived in two worlds. Moses was a border walker: he was a Jew who was raised in the Pharaoh's palace. He lived in two worlds. Paul, from the New Testament, was a border walker: he was both a Jew and a Christian. You are a border walker too.

That's what I want to talk about today. How do we "function at the junction between cultures, between world views, and religious ideologies?" One of the resources we have... believe it or not... is the theory of evolution. Evolution is the universal creation story. Of course, I'm a preacher and not a science teacher, but I want to take a few minutes to explain a bit about Evolution so I can show how it gives us tools and knowledge to live on the border, and can help usher in a new level of human consciousness.

First of all, evolution teaches us that "it all began in the stars," and that we are all made of star-stuff... Have you seen the movie *The Lion King*? There's a great scene in which Simba, the boy lion, is wrestling with his dad, the king of the jungle. Simba says to his dad, "We will always be together right dad?" His dad says, "Well, Simba, let me tell you something that my father told me. Look at the stars. The great kings of the past look down on us from those stars. Someday you'll be the king and I'll look down on you." Then later in the movie – when Simba is older and he's off on his own with his two friends Timon the Meerkat and Pumbaa the warthog – one night they're looking at the stars and wondering what they are. And they ask Simba, "What do you think?" And he says, "Someone once told me they are the great kings of the past looking down on us." Timon says, "Really, you mean a bunch of royal dead guys are watching us?" And they all start laughing at what a crazy idea that is. And then Pumbaa the warthog says, "I always figured they were just giant flaming balls of hydrogen gas," and Timon looks at the warthog and says, "Ah, Pumbaa, with you everything's gas."

In a way, both ideas are true. The stars are giant flaming balls of gas. And they are our ancestors. All the hydrogen that exists in the world came from the stars. And you and I are filled with hydrogen... it's in water (H₂O). We are literally made of star-stuff. And as my colleague Rev. Michael Dowd explains it, every time we breathe we are communing with our ancestors – the stars. The giant red stars are made of carbon, nitrogen and oxygen. We breathe in oxygen and nitrogen and we breathe out carbon. You and I have common ancestors no matter what ethnicity we come from. Lesson Number

One of Evolution: We are one family... and that's a fact. You don't have to believe in Adam and Eve to know we all have common parents.

So, how does life evolve? It evolves from simple atoms, to more complex atoms...to molecules, to more complex molecules...to creatures, to more complex creatures...to societies, to more complex societies. Let's look at the evolution of societies: we start with families and clans grouped together, and then we develop tribes, and tribes develop into states and nations. And then nations begin to ally with other nations into more complex allegiances, and we've even created a United Nations and an International Criminal Court as we slowly move towards an understanding of a world community with common values and justice. And so as human beings we are a part of creation, and we are also influencing evolution. The biggest way we contribute is through language – it's what makes us unique among the creatures of the earth.

I want to say from the outset that I am indebted to Rev. Michael Dowd for a lot of what I'm saying this morning about evolution. I'm not going to keep referencing him, but you can find a lot of this information and more in his book *Thank God for Evolution*, and he has a website by that name. He and his wife Connie are currently hosting a free monthly web-seminar that includes some of the most advanced minds in religion and science today; I recommend it to you if you're interested in this topic, and they're both coming to speak here at All Souls in March. They'll go into much more detail, but stay with me for just another moment.

People evolved 2.5 million years ago; that's when we started walking up right and using stone tools. We domesticated fire 1.5 million years ago (so we could cook and keep warm,) but we've only had verbal speech for about 200-300 thousand years. That's less than 20 percent of human history. So, for more than 80 percent of our history, we were like other creatures...Until we developed language to communicate. Suddenly, if we wanted to point out a tree, we didn't need to have a tree to point to – we had a word or a symbol that represented the tree even if there were no trees around. By the time this happened, there were people spread throughout the earth. People living in various climates (in deserts, rain forests, mountains) so their languages reflected the things in their surroundings. And so, as the various cultures began to describe where we came from, and how and why, they created stories using the words that reflected what they could see around them. Certain plants and animals lived in some places and not in others. So if you lived in a place where there were no sheep, the idea of the Lamb of God would make absolutely no sense. If you lived in a place where there were no kings, the Kingdom of God would have no meaning. Instead you might use a lotus blossom as a

symbol of a harmonious world. Each religion's creation story makes sense based on the bioregion from which it emerged.

Dowd reminds us that Hinduism could not have emerged in the Middle East, and Judaism could not have emerged in India: wrong life experience, wrong metaphors, different surroundings, different realities. So each culture developed its own way to explain and express how we got here. Each found its own way to describe that we are all one family, even if they didn't have the Hubble Telescope to prove it. It's not that they are wrong, it's that they are metaphors for a greater truth.

Let me take it one step further. During much of the early agricultural age, we see lots of images of women for God – Goddesses. The Supreme Being as "The Great Mother." People in those times were attuned to fertility. Human beings literally came out of women, just as plants came out of mother earth. That the Creator would be likened to a woman makes perfect sense. But around five thousand ago we start to see feminine images being replaced by male images. Dowd traces it to technological inventions. For example, the invention of the plow for farming which required male strength. Now men were becoming more associated with and essential to cultivation, and images of God as a *father* became common, and the Goddesses began to die out in many places. Patriarchy takes over and that's why (for example) it's taken until 2011 for there to be a woman governor in Oklahoma! A milestone on this weekend when we celebrate civil rights that we *should* celebrate.

Around three hundred years ago, in certain places, people began to imagine the world more like a clock. The world, to them, seemed like an intricate machine that has been wound by its maker, and once wound it functions on its own. So, just as languages continue to change and evolve, the metaphors of religion change with time and place. The metaphors are just the maps – they're not the landscape. Scriptures, myths, parables...they're maps to describe what's real and true, but they are not themselves the truth. and each culture has developed these maps using words and symbols from their own language. But too often people confuse the maps for the landscape. They confuse the finger pointing at the moon for the moon itself. They begin to conflate their religion with the great mystery we call God. And they begin to make idols out of their religion.

So as cultures have come together, disagreements have emerged over who's got the right map, and about whose religion is superior, and whose language is superior, and whose music, and whose skin color and hair texture is superior. That's why we need to keep learning how to function at the junction. En la frontera...on the border...as they say in Spanish. It's not that one is right and all the rest are wrong. All of them are right, for their place and time, and evolution gives us a meta-narrative: a story

that helps encompass all of our stories. Evolution provides a meeting place – a junction – a worldview without borders.

We've only really known a lot of this for about fifty years or so, so the religions of the world have not yet caught up. That's why we need to promote this understanding purposefully, passionately, and prophetically! People are flying planes into buildings to prove that their scripture is the one and only true scripture. People are burning and blaspheming other people's scriptures because they have the only truth. We live in a state in which most people believe their scripture is the one and only true scripture. That kind of superior and literal thinking makes it hard to function at the junction between religions.

So the second lesson of evolution is that it shows us that all of the world's scriptures and religions can be appreciated, and that they are all right in their place and time. Another lesson from evolution is that what gives life in one era can be deadly in another era. Two million years ago life on earth required 2 percent oxygen, no more or less, but today anything less than 15 percent oxygen and we would die. So what was necessary for life to thrive at one time can become deadly at another time. When Michael Dowd talks about this, he explains how it is the same in our lives and with our religious symbols. In some cases they are words and symbols that meant something to people two thousand years ago, that today may be deadly. Here's an example: "Be fruitful and multiply." Five thousand years ago when that scripture was written in Genesis, the earth was relatively uninhabited. People needed to have lots of children to work the land, and they needed people for protection. Today, the earth is over populated and the growth is exponential. If we continue to follow the command to be fruitful and multiply it will be catastrophic to human life. That's why we not only need to thank God for evolution; we need to thank God for contraception! So we can be fruitful without multiplying!

We have to allow for our religious understand to evolve (just like everything else in life,) because when we fail to adapt and evolve we die. So an evolutionary consciousness is essential to learning to function at the junction. And we need to purposefully, passionately, and prophetically share this understanding.

Some people spend their life waiting for someone else to say what they know needs to be said...other people come right out and say it. Let's be those people. Some people wait until a new consciousness arrives before they rejoice. And other people rejoice because they know it's coming. Some people wait for the laws and culture to change before they say, "No sir, I'm not giving up this seat." And other people don't wait for laws to change, they keep sitting and singing "I shall not be

moved.” Some people wait for the dream to fully arrive, and other people start living as if it has, because they know it’s coming.

Some people want to wait to see if we *might* overcome, and other people already know deep in their hearts that we *shall* overcome someday. Overcome racial prejudice, overcome homophobia, overcome religious intolerance. We’re not gonna wait for it, we’re gonna live as if it has and rejoice because we know it’s coming.

Some people want to know, "How many roads must a man walk down before you will call him a man?" And other people say, "You’re the man."

Some people say, "Well, I’m just gonna hide this little light under a bushel." And other people say, "Forget that, I’m gonna let this little light shine... all the time....over the whole wide world... I’m gonna let it shine."

Border walkers don’t wait for the dream to come true, we just start living as if it has. We don’t wait to celebrate, we start rejoicing now, because we know it’s coming. We don’t wait for the Church or state to say it’s okay to be gay, we celebrate now, because we know it’s coming. We don’t wait for the whole world to change, we celebrate now... Why? Because we know... [it’s coming.]

We don’t need to dream it, or scheme it, we just need to be it and live it. Every Sunday morning, right here, we’re going to have functions at the junctions that connect our lives. We’re going to meet at the corner of Freedom St. & Understanding Ave. Right here, en la frontera. We’ll come together from all walks of life...And we’re going to teach on, preach on, pray on, work on, and march on until the whole world can say what the prophet said

Free at last, free at last, [say it with me] thank God almighty we’re free at last.

Because a dream we dream alone is only a dream. But a dream we live together becomes reality.

God bless you! Amen.