



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

Why Church? Because we see God in science.

SCRIPTURE:
Romans 12:1-2

June 25, 2023 – Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

I have my favorites. I imagine many of you do, too. I don't have them ranked and they have changed over my life. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Philippians 4:13. "For my grace is sufficient for you for power is made perfect in weakness." 2nd Corinthians 12:9. Then there's Romans 8:28: "All things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to God's purpose." When I was growing up and my pastor father encouraged us to choose a Bible verse to commit to memory, I chose John 11:35: "Jesus wept." But Romans 12:1-2 has long been one of my favorites. These are the words of the Apostle Paul writing to the Christians in Rome.

He starts off saying, "I appeal to you brothers and sisters." When he uses 'appeal' language, he is talking about rhetoric. Paul knows that Romans love the art and craft of speech-making. This comes from Greek culture. Rome is filled with philosophers and teachers who will stand in the marketplace and begin speaking and the more eloquent they are, the more they are heard and even rewarded. Paul starts, "I appeal to you brothers and sisters by the mercies of God," a reminder that this is not our doing. God is the one who grants all this to us. We live moment by moment by God's mercies.

"To present your bodies." There was an ongoing debate in the ancient world if bodies were good or valued or simply some crude contraptions. Some of the more popular religions of the day said only the spirit mattered and the body did not. Paul says, "present your bodies as a living sacrifice." As this new fledgling belief system called "The Way" (as early Christianity was known) was growing more popular, people had heard about a secret ritual where they gathered to eat a man's body and drink his blood and rumors were circulating that they were cannibals. Paul says "a living sacrifice" not a dead one, "holy and acceptable to God which is your spiritual worship." This is so beautifully crafted. Here Paul brings in the spirit. We have bodies and now

we have spirit in "spiritual worship." "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed," be changed, "through the renewing of your mind." There it is. Bodies. Spirit. Mind. "So, you may prove what is the will of God. What is good and acceptable and perfect." Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

I worry when someone tells me not to think. I get that I can overthink things. But I get worried when someone tells me I don't have to think. Before Sirius xm and before our phones carried our music libraries, I had rented a car that only had AM/FM radio. It was night and I was driving through the mountains of east Tennessee to get to some Episcopal conference center. There were no FM stations and all I could catch on that Friday night was either football or preaching. I was about to turn the radio off when I heard a preacher say, "That's right. Leave your brain at the door. You don't need your brain in here to worship. God only wants your soul." I smiled because just that spring I had been the baccalaureate preacher for Austin College and the senior slogan was: "God gave us brains and expects us to use them."

That is why it is so troubling to me that so many folks view the church as anti-science. But then when you look at our history, you can begin to understand it. Look at one of probably our more infamous cases: Galileo di Vincenzo Bonaiuti d'Galilei. Born in Pisa in 1564. Physicist, engineer, astronomer.

It was his claim of heliocentrism—that the Earth moves around the sun—that brought Galileo to Rome for trial before the Pope. Galileo's inquisition began in April and ended in June 1633. The inquisitors found Galileo vehemently suspect of heresy and forced him to recant his views, which he did. Then the Pope ordered that all of his writings be banned and he be imprisoned, forbidden to ever teach or speak or write about his theory for the remainder of his life. He was sentenced to remain under house-arrest where only close family could be with him. Nine years later he died in 1642.

And recently, we have many churches—mostly white, evangelical churches—denying that climate change is real and saying that the COVID vaccines are some kind of government conspiracy. All right. So, I can understand how some might say the church is anti-science. But many of us are not.

So, I talked with two people last week about the criticism that the church is anti-science. One of them is a member at Village on Antioch. She sings alto in the choir every Sunday. Jenni Pittman is married to Trent Pittman and they have a daughter Lily. The second person I talked with I met at a Denver presbytery meeting where I spoke last year. Rob Habiger is ruling elder at Central Presbyterian Church in downtown Denver and a leader in the presbytery. I asked them both to introduce themselves and tell us what they do.

“I’m Jenny Pittman. I’m the science and operations officer at the National Weather Service in Topeka, Kansas. So that means that I’m responsible for science and technology integration into our local office, transitioning the latest research into our daily operations and then mostly training new and existing employees.”

“I’m Rob Habiger. I grew up on a central Kansas farm fascinated by machinery and nature and just trying to understand how things work. I decided in high school that I wanted to be a physicist. I went on to earn bachelor’s, masters and PhD degrees in physics. My dissertation was using lasers to study solid-state physics. I’m an experimentalist at heart, which just means I like to physically handle and study something to understand how it works. But for more practical reasons, I ended up in a career of geophysics, and for me, this meant being involved in the physical measurements of the Earth to provide a better understanding of things that we cannot see—in the interior of the Earth. For example, from measuring the propagation of sound waves or electrical properties in a borehole or radio activity of the Earth, we can often infer its potential for producing things like hydrocarbons, water and minerals. I’m retired now, but the last part of my career was studying earthquakes that are induced by human activities.”

Then I asked them: As Christians and as scientists, do you experience a tension between your faith and science? Here is what they said.

Jenni: “At Village I have never felt that. I really appreciate the way that the sermons look at scripture and talk about the ways that things were interpreted when it

was written versus how it’s interpreted now. The different ways that you can even interpret words. It’s not just this singular: This is how it is with scripture. I have seen that in churches that I’ve been a part of before. It really was a singular, very literal, interpretation of scripture. That’s a sticking point for a lot of people. As soon as you feel like you understand more about the physical mechanisms for creation of the Earth or evolution, you can feel like that disproves scripture. So if you’re taking scripture as this very literal, very singular translation, it becomes difficult as you understand more about science. But I have never really felt that at Village.”

Rob: “As a scientist, I approached my faith with a large element of systematic analysis. Some of my favorite courses in college were academic studies of the Bible. For example, in a life of Paul course, I started to understand the context in which Paul was writing to various churches. And these books started to make so much more sense to me and became much more interesting and revealing. I read the Bible with a view that the writers and assemblers were inspired by God for sure, but also influenced by their life experiences, by their culture, by their personalities and by the state of their scientific understanding at the time. And all of these things influenced their interpretation and their decisions. Approaching the Bible this way frees me to better understand the central message of the Bible, which for me, is love and humility.”

Then I asked them how they see God in their calling as scientists.

Jenni: “I see God in a lot of ways through meteorology. I see God most during severe weather. Our mission of safety seems really difficult and really important during severe weather. We do everything that we can; we issue warnings, we communicate hazards, we encourage people to shelter, but in the end, it’s ultimately in God’s hands. We’ve seen damage after storms that genuinely no one should have survived and the people who were sheltering inside were able to walk away. I also see it out in the field, just watching the awesome power and beauty of weather. I also see it in the aftermath of disasters. You’ll be out surveying damage and you see communities working together, supporting each other. The goodness of people really shines through after disasters.”

Rob: “God created these amazing universes and life in all forms. I see science as a way of getting just a small

glimpse of how that was done. It would be so boring for me to just shrug and accept that God made this unfathomable creation and for me not to ask any questions. So rather, I want to use science to understand, even if it's just a little bit, how it was done. And I think that's what drives me to science. I'm always asking questions, trying to understand. I always want to know how things work. And I look forward to the day that maybe I'll, at some time, fully understand."

Finally, I asked Jenni and Rob if they had any other wisdom they would like to share as people of faith who are scientists.

Jenni: "Any good scientist understands how little they really know. There's a quote that I like: 'Thoroughly conscious ignorance is the prelude to every real advance in science.' We can only learn by not knowing. That's really freeing because there are times that you get stuck—where God or the resurrection or some other aspect of Christianity doesn't make sense, but to know that there are things that you aren't capable of understanding, it's very helpful and it's very freeing. It doesn't mean that I don't sometimes panic trying to wrap my head around the concept of infinite time and life after death, but it's comforting to know that humanity is just this small part of the universe and so is our understanding. You don't have to get it all right now. You don't have to understand it all right now to be a faithful Christian."

Rob: "The people that do see church as anti-science, I would like to ask them to let go of trying to interpret the Bible so literally. What helped me a lot was Marcus Borg's book, 'The Heart of Christianity.' He covers this topic well and he talked about metaphorical truths. And I found this to be very helpful and appreciate the summary. Everything in the Bible is true and some of it actually happened."

Of course we have a history of being anti-science and for some, it is continuing but not for us all. In 1980, Pope John Paul II delivered a speech titled, "Deep Harmony Which Unites the Truths of Science with the Truths of Faith" in which he acknowledged openly that the Galileo had suffered and called for a new study of the church's treatment of Galileo. In October 1992, the Vatican commission issued its report on Galileo and 350

years after his death, Pope John Paul II formally cleared Galileo Galilei of any wrongdoing. The Los Angeles Times ran a headline the next day: "It's official: The Earth revolves around the sun, says the Vatican."

In June 2015 Pope Francis issued his first encyclical of his papacy to the world's 1.2 billion Catholics titled "Laudato Si" or "Praise be to you" and called on the church to recognize that climate change is real, our earth is in peril, humans are the major culprit and the poor will suffer the most. The Pope said science is showing us the way and we must follow.

The very notion that somehow science is a threat to God is absurd. Jenni and Rob approach their sciences with humility. Theologians must do the same because how dare we think for a moment that have a total understanding of the wonders, mysteries and creativity of God. So, yes, I know. There is much evidence to mark the church as judgmental hypocrites, as anti-gay, anti-women and anti-science. But there is even more evidence to say we are better than those criticisms.

So why church? Because whether you are in a suit and tie or jeans and a t-shirt, we see you ultimately as a child of God, that's why. So why church? Because when you are terrified and feel utterly alone, we will rain down the power of the holy casserole upon you and we will show you that you are not alone, that's why.

And why church? Because when others may say you love the wrong person or your journey to gender wholeness is unacceptable, we say love is always a gift and you deserve to be whole, that's why.

So why church? Because we follow Jesus of Nazareth who throughout his ministry loved, trusted, respected and learned from women and we as the church of Jesus Christ will do the same, that's why.

And why church? Because God wants us to be transformed through the renewing of our minds and when faith and science join together both faith and science are stronger, that's why.

And finally, why church? Because there will come a time in your life when the only thing that will save you is the sure and certain knowledge that you belong to God and we will help you know that. That's why.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.