

"God's New Physics"
[Col. 1:11-20/Lk. 23:35-43]
1st Congregational Church of Wauwatosa
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Several years ago cartoonist Berke Breathed drew a strip called "Bloom County." It was a slightly off-center version of our world populated by Binkley (who had a closet of anxieties), Opus the penguin, and Oliver Wendell Jones the boy genius. When Cambridge University physicist Stephen Hawking's book, A Brief History of Time, appeared the citizens of Bloom County had a comment or two. Hawking wanted to get to the "grand unification theory" -- which explained the origin of the universe and everything in it -- so did young Oliver Wendell Jones.

The strip showed Oliver coming to the conclusion of his research; with Opus the penguin observing, ice cream cone in hand. As Oliver declared the goal achieved, an explanation for everything -- except flightless waterfowl -- Opus disappeared, leaving his ice cream cone behind. Our little scientist then discovers he's forgotten to carry a two and "pop" -- Opus is with us again, protesting "Cut that out!"

Why should Bloom County concern us this morning? Because Hawking and other practitioners of the "new physics" are trying to do to God what Oliver did to Opus. Their theories fit everyone, save a God; so he can't possibly exist except as some point of comfort for the less enlightened. I would counter, however, that God has a new physics of his own and it is all inclusive.

Before we look at God's new physics we need to explore some of what is going on in the world of physics. When Sir Isaac Newton advanced his theory of gravity and laws of motion back in the seventeenth century, he set the stage for the development of 'pure science.' His Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica was the result of objective observation and calculation. Though he was a pious man, Newton saw God as a dispassionate initiator of a great clockwork of laws, principles, causes and effects. Separated, as it were, by the great glass of objectivity, the scientist could observe the world as an engineer would a machine. The tragedy is that this objectivity which was to place humanity at the center of things actually served to reduce it to one more cog in the machine!

Over the last hundred years or so, there has been a gradual move away from this essentially naive positivism/physicalism. Scientists are discovering that "seeing is believing" is no longer the case and that even objectivity is not really possible, as Walter

Heisenberg's 'uncertainty principle' has demonstrated. The work of men like Thomas Kuhn and Frederick Suppe in the field of history and philosophy of science has shown us that even our understanding of how theories develop is not the smooth evolution from one theory to another we were taught. Rather, Kuhn talks about the "structures of scientific revolutions," positing the overthrow of one theoretical paradigm (best case example) by another. With the advance of relativity and quantum theories (which are mutually exclusive, by the way) it is becoming clear that the "new physics" (as opposed to Newton's mechanistic understanding) has more in common with philosophy, theology and even rhetoric (the art of persuasion) than one ever thought possible. Since the questions all revolve around how did it begin, where did it come from, and how do we describe it?

Sociologist of knowledge Peter Berger wrote about the existence of "socially agreed upon reality." In other words, what we agree is real, is. How is that different from what Princeton physicist John Wheeler wrote:

May the universe in some strange sense be "brought into being" by the participation of those who participate? . . . The vital act is the act of participation. "Participator" is the incontrovertible new concept given by quantum mechanics. It strikes down the term "observer" of classical theory, the man who stands safely behind the thick glass wall and watches what goes on without taking part. It can't be done, quantum mechanics says." [in Gary Zukav The Dancing Wu Li Masters, NY: Morrow & Co., 1979, p. 54]

When you add to this Stephen Hawking's theory of an infinitely expanding universe, no beginning and no end, the need for a Creator declines even more. As he wrote, "So long as the universe had a beginning, we could suppose it had a Creator. But if the universe is completely self-contained, what place then for a Creator?" [Stephen Hawking's A Brief History of Time: A Reader's Companion, NY: Bantam, 1992, p. 140]

What place indeed? Here we come back to the original problem -- almost from the beginning the creature has tried to be the Creator. This is what English apologist and literature scholar C. S. Lewis identifies as the original sin in his wonderful science fiction allegory Out of the Silent Planet. Lewis takes off from the Hebrew understanding of sin as being "bent," not quite right, and is right on-target. The desire we have to set our own parameters of existence and operation, thus granting ourselves freedom to act in any way we choose is certainly bent. When we try to put ourselves in the place of the Creator we throw things out-of-whack; which is why human beings experience a sense of alienation from God, from one another and from creation itself. As Saint Paul wrote to the Romans, "....for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will

be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now. . . ." [Romans 8:20-22]

When God created the world heaven and earth, the spiritual and material existed in harmony. Humanity sounded the discordant note by desiring not to be creature, but creator. Here is where God introduced his new physics; I think we'll find his grand unification theory a bit different from the attempts our current physicists, however.

God's new physics operates on a different set of principles. Its first law is the centrality of personhood -- in other words we are never mere objects, cogs in a wheel, figures in an equation, faceless forms in the background. Each of us is unique, but all share our creation in the image and likeness of God himself -- ultimate personhood.

Its second law is relationship. When God created us he made us in such a way that we need to relate to the Other and to others, we are spiritual-corporeal beings. This is why we long for companionship and spiritual fulfillment. As Augustine wrote in his Confessions, "you have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you, O God."

When humanity found itself in a position of separation and alienation, God undertook his grand unification of heaven and earth, humanity and divinity in the person and work of Jesus Christ. As Paul wrote to the Colossians, "He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible. . . all things were created through him and for him. . . in him all things hold together. "Christ, then, is the reference and convergence point for the whole universe -- its grand unification theory, "the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (Rev. 22:13). Paul goes even further. He teaches that since the beginning, all of creation is under the sign of redemption. Everything was created by the Son who would become the Christ, the "Son made man."

"In him everything. . . was created. . . He is before all else that is. . . It is he who is the head of the body, the church." We can't apply these title of "redeemer" and "head of the church" in a purely metaphorical way to a new David, a human messiah. As one writer has put it, "Salvation is not a cloak thrown over our sins, a pardon that does not fundamentally transform the pardoned sinner. There is no break between the natural and supernatural, creation and redemption, that could prevent Christ's salvation from being extended to the whole universe, or the whole world from participating in the dynamism of the redemption" [Days of the Lord v.6, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1994, p. 323]

In short, God's new physics is not a reworking of an old theory, a band-aid for creation, the fixing of an accident. It is at once supernatural and gratuitous, but it is rooted in the very act of creation, for the Christ who has redeemed us and the one through whom everything was created are one and the same. To call Christ "head of the Church" and "king of the universe" is not to engage in metaphor. In this king and head, God 'recapitulates' (puts the head back on) creation and restores everything to its proper place. It is accomplished, the Fathers of the Church tell us, first by Christ's taking human flesh and then, as Paul so beautifully says, by his "making peace through the blood of his cross."

It's ironic, but God shows his grand unification to us in an act of ultimate self-giving. Christ is shown to be king not on a throne, but on the cross. It is there that we recognize him and there that we acknowledge his Lordship. It led Paulinus of Nola to hymn:

O Cross, mighty love of God and light of heaven!
 Cross, eternal salvation, Cross, terror of sinners,
 support of the just, light for Christians,
 O Cross by whom on earth the God made man became our servant,
 by you, the man of heaven has become king!
 The light of truth has sprung up, the evil night has been conquered!
 You are the peaceful link that unites man to Christ, his mediator.
 You have become the ladder by which man climbs to heaven.
 May you always be for the faithful a pillar and anchor:
 Hold up our dwelling-place, guide our ship!
 In the Cross, Lord, ground our faith, as it prepares our crown!
 [Chant 19 in *Corpus Scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum* 30, p. 143]

Thus our search for ultimate meaning, ultimate explanation is achieved when we look outside ourselves and outside the parameters we impose on reality.

The attempt to come to a grand unification theory rests, physicists tell us, in getting a handle on time. God, however, stands outside of time -- do away with all the silly conundrums like, "can God create a rock bigger than he can lift" and the like, they don't apply. The truth is, we exist because God remembers us. If God forgets us, we never were. He has chosen to remember us, to hold us not just in being, but in relationship. His new physics rests on our fostering that relationship with him through the one whom he sent to reveal him, Jesus Christ, and acknowledging his lordship. We do this by opening our hearts, our minds, our memories to Christ and then seeking to live as he did.

Christ reached out to others and opened himself to them. For us to do this we have to take a step in faith. Becoming vulnerable to the Other and others is risky

business, but no more risky than trying to prove the simplest scientific theorem. It begins for each of us when we say, as did the good thief, "Jesus, remember me."

God's new physics, then, has a place for everyone and everything. His plan for grand unification doesn't rest on a theorem or speculative equations, but on a person and a relationship. Our physicist friends may wonder if there is a need for a Creator, but if for a moment he forgot them they would be like Opus -- gone. Lord, remember us.