

Commentary on the Gospel for Thu, May 14th 2015

As an evolutionary biologist and Jesuit priest, I often hear the question, “How can you believe in evolution? How can you believe that life on Earth arose from random chance?” In reply, I take the time to unpack some of the hidden assumptions behind the question. First, evolution by natural selection is both random and predictable. Natural selection acts in a predictable manner when the environment selects for (or against) certain traits. At the same time, the environment changes randomly while random mutations generate the variation for selection to act upon. Evolution, like Catholicism, is a both/and viewpoint.

Second, God can act and create in randomness. We human beings, on the other hand, tend to carefully plan out our actions. If we want to create something, we draw up diagrams, we strategize and we organize our intricate designs. Carpenters know the importance of the adage: measure twice and cut once. Construction workers won’t break ground on a new building until every detail has been worked out. God, on the other hand, is not constrained by what limits humanity. And today’s reading serves as an important reminder of this fact.

When the time came to replace Judas, the disciples gather together. They do not engage in lengthy debates on who would make the best replacement. They do not draw up a strategic ten-year plan on how to replace their personnel. They do not even vote. Instead they draw lots! They entrust the future of the Church to what seems like random chance. However, it’s not completely random.

Recall that the disciples first pray that they may see which candidate God has chosen to replace Judas. Then they draw lots. Like evolution by natural selection, the process is both predictable and random. God acts through the chance process of drawing lots to show the disciples Matthias. The disciples, on their part, invoke God to guide their seemingly arbitrary selection process. Thus, the disciples trust that God acts in random chance. As Proverbs 16:33 nicely summarizes, “The lot is cast into the lap, but the decision is wholly from the Lord.”

I find this trust in God’s providence freeing. Trusting that the Spirit is active and alive in the world, I know that the Church is in God’s hands, not my hands. My life is in God’s hands, not mine. It’s not all about me. Jesus reminds us that, “it was not you who chose me, but I who chose you.” Guided by the Spirit, the random lot fell upon me. I was chosen to “bear fruit that will remain.” And my response to this seemingly chance selection by Jesus is to love one another.

Of course, anyone who has ever been in love knows that love is never planned out in advance. We

don't draw up diagrams, strategize or organize love. Love is typically messy, seemingly arbitrary and completely random!

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