

Welcome everyone to “God and Human Suffering: Conversations on 21st Century Genetics and our Shared Future.”

I am Pr. David Nichols and I serve with the people of Mount Tabor Lutheran Church here in Salt Lake, striving to live God’s love in the world.

The dialogue between the realms of faith and science is part of the DNA of Mount Tabor.

Many in our congregation are people of faith who are scientists as well. In an increasingly polarized society, where individuals are constantly presented with the message that they must be “either for or against” something,

at Mount Tabor we are embracing the fertile ground of community lived in the gray area of “both/and.”

We disagree with the notion that in order to live a life of faith we must reject the claims of science.

Instead, as people of faith who live the vocations of science, we are learning to share our experiences of what faith seen from the perspective of science, and science seen from the perspective of faith, looks like.

And as we do, we discover that there is a common ground between the two realms; a creative synergy where an increasing understanding of the nature of the cosmos and ourselves is leading us to a greater sense of our ultimate purpose as people of God. A purpose rooted in the care and stewardship of this amazing world.

The more science teaches us about the best way to care for creation and all its inter-connected ecosystems, the more able we are as people of faith to fulfill our calling to make God’s love known in the world.

And as people of faith and science in conversation, we are finding a common ground unfolding. A common ground of wonder and doubt.

I haven’t met a research scientist yet who has not been captured by the experience of wonder.

That sense of wonder has been the beginning of a life-long calling of finding out how things work, why they are the way they are, and how they interact.

And every answer is followed by yet another question, inspiring more wonder and curiosity.

This to me is an inherently spiritual journey, that often leans more upon the language of theology and mysticism to describe it, especially when the language of empirical evidence fails.

Wonder is common ground for the dialog between faith and science.

So is doubt. Without doubt, faith is nothing more than certainty. And certainty is nothing more than fanaticism.

Doubt is central to the scientific method. As Dr. Dana Carroll says, he enters his lab every morning with the intention of tearing down the solution of the day before. Doubt is essential to scientific inquiry, and for me, essential to a living faith.

If we are not willing to be surprised by the wonder of discovery, and have our assumptions challenged, we are not truly living as human beings who seem to be created by God with the ability to constantly evolve and adapt to a changing environment.

Mount Tabor is fertile ground for the dialog of faith and science, and it is blessed to begin to foster those conversations in the wider community, thanks to the partnership of the Episcopal Diocese of Utah, the Rocky Mountain Synod of the ELCA, the University of Utah Center for Excellence in Ethics, Legislation, and Social Implications, Education and Research, and our private sector partners at Lineagen.

What we have in the hours before us is a banquet of ideas, information, perspectives, and experiences. And I am thrilled to see so many of you, my colleagues in pastoral care, genetics counseling, research, ethics, and students at the U, willing to commit yourselves to the dialog between faith and science for the sake of a better world. For the sake of bringing hope to a suffering world. Even being a model of what “both/and” civil discourse looks like in a divided society, and the wisdom and guidance that can come from such dedicated conversations.

My friend, Dr. John Carey, is a professor and Vice Chair of the Department of Pediatrics at the University of Utah. He is a very smart man. He wrote the textbook on Modern Genetics that is used by every college campus worth its salt. But maybe the smartest thing he ever did was marry his wife Leslie! Leslie is the volunteer coordinator for our conference, an amazingly organized and gifted communicator with a sparkling zest for life that is unmatched. John and Leslie are active participants in the life and mission of Mount Tabor Lutheran.

When I was planning for my sabbatical, I asked Leslie to be on my planning team. When I shared with the team that I wanted to focus on faith and science dialogue, Leslie said “Why not host a conference back in Salt Lake when you return?” And here we are today!

John has helped me to host a monthly faith and science conversation at Tabor for the past two years. And when I asked him about the possibility of co-sponsoring an event like this with the University of Utah, John was more than happy to help.

We met in a local coffee shop in January 2016, to brainstorm some possible topics. I mentioned that I had been reading about an international meeting in Washington DC in December 2015 where Dr. Jennifer Doudna from UC Berkeley, and Dr. Dana Carroll from the U had called for a “pause”: a voluntary moratorium on the use of CRISPR Cas9 technology in human germline editing, in order to let public discourse and debate catch up to the research.

“Measure twice, cut once” as they say in farm country. I said “I think that’s it! That’s our topic.” John was excited as well, and we set out on the path to today.

I think what is unique about the opportunity we have in our time together, is that we have been intentional about bringing the perspective and expertise of the faith community to the same table as research science, bioethics, and academia.

One of our keynote speakers tomorrow, Dr. Hava Tirosh-Samuels, Professor of Jewish Studies at Arizona State University describes herself as one who seeks to “build bridges of understanding between disciplines”, for the sake of greater understanding and harmony in our world.

That’s exactly what John and I had in mind by bringing you all together to talk about one of the most important new technologies in the 21st century: CRISPR Cas9 and the ethical issues of human germ-line editing.

We now have a tool with the potential to alleviate human suffering like never before. We have a tool that can help us fulfill our calling to be compassionate stewards of each other, and of creation.

We are learning how best to use it, to maximize its best potential and limit its harm.

Like all sharp objects, we handle it with care and great respect, giving thanks to God for entrusting it to us.

Please give a warm welcome to my friend and colleague, Dr. John Carey.