Thank you, Creator, for all that is possible and your abundant gifts.
Thank you, Nature, for the forces that formed us and shape our reality.
Thank you, Science, for the path and the tools we use to explore and understand both nature and the divine.
Thank *you*, friends and fellow humans, for choosing to walk this path.

Hello, seekers. Welcome back and thank you for being here.

Today we'll talk more about challenges in seeking things that escape perception. I talked in an earlier sermon about optical illusions, especially "holusion" images, which are digitally printed stereoscopes that appear three-dimensional only when you unfocus your eyes. Turning away from what appears clear—surrendering focus as a conscious choice—can be a doorway to revealing something in plain sight. That's worth contemplating.

The Creator is generally thought to be beyond human conception or reasoning yet would be revealed throughout the creation just as a painting suggests the presence of the artist and offers a small window into his or her mind. In seeking the Creator, we in the Church of Inquiry add the methods and practice of science: recently developed tools we consider as gifts from the divine. We employ those tools because, with them, we believe we can create a direct, verifiable, repeatable experience of the Creator.

Historically, the methods and practice of science *have* revealed things both beyond perception and challenging to the imagination. We've seen things considered impossibly small, from microorganisms to atoms and smaller still. We've seen once invisible things whose presence we only felt, like electromagnetism. We've seen things incredibly far away and unfathomably big and still wrestle with the immensity of the creation.

We seek the Creator. As we look for the not-yet-visible things we must be aware of impediments or shackles that limit us. We've talked about expectations and how they can supersede experience. We've talked about how the brain can be tricked and mentioned the "invisible gorilla" experiment that causes inattention blindness. We'll keep all of this as context today as we pursue a particular invisible thing that limits us: word-prisons. Word-prisons are tied in with seeing and expectation and are a direct result of how we think.

Remember that we must be mindful and examine anything that would keep us from our pursuit. Understanding can be subordinated by expectation. How a question is asked influences the answer. How you think about a problem shapes how you attempt to solve it. It's important to maintain an awareness that life is highly nuanced and requires curiosity, effort, patience, persistence, flexibility, and some faith if real learning is to be achieved. Some things are not intuitive and rarely are things simply black or white.

My grandmother liked to say "you can't *possibly* do that" instead of just saying "no." Think about that construct of language. She added a value judgment. What I can't possibly do, I won't or shouldn't try. To do otherwise could make me look strange, even crazy if everyone else shared that belief. This gives words tremendous power. The concepts that cluster around words form a set that can limit meaning and application. These self-imposed limitations—ones we don't realize we've created or accepted—are

what I like to call word-prisons and language prisons. These are structures that lock one away from understanding and possibility.

Using the scientific frame, these idea clusters are data sets. The data set "food" includes fruit and vegetables but obviously not trees nor shoes. Whether animals are included depends on learned associations and beliefs. Beliefs say something is or isn't part of a set so, in this respect, word-prisons are binary in construct: things or ideas are locked inside or outside of the definition. Knowing what's included or excluded, and perhaps the reason why, is key. When you amend a word's associated ideas you shift underlying meaning, which impedes understanding.

Activating and adding scientific thinking is like holding up a lens or filter that reveals new things. Picture the three lenses on a microscope and you can consider that each time we change magnification—which changes the resolution—we change our relationship to that thing and reveal hidden layers, as in the movie *Powers of Ten.* That film illustrates how what we think we see is incomplete and sometimes incorrect depending on the level at which we engage—our level of resolution—which is the degree of detail with which we experience a thing.

Word-prisons are also a reflection of what psychologists call implicit bias, which is bias that results from our tendency to process information based on unconscious associations and feelings, even when they are contrary to one's conscious or declared beliefs.

At this point, I'll remind you that part of our path is to maintain a baseline posture of malleability, to seek not to be right but simply the truth.

So think of the color blue. It seems simple enough, yet as one of the primary colors of light, colorless when blended with red and green, it actually exists as a range of expression. The lower end of its wavelength at 450 nanometers has just shifted from violet and the upper end at 495 nanometers is where it transitions to green. What we hold in our thoughts as a single thing is actually a gradient, a range of possible expressions. The word/label/data set "blue" is both one thing or many depending on the question, the application, and the resolution or level of observation. Our relationship to the thing we're observing and the level at which we engage can shift our perceived reality, so let's remember to remain malleable. We may yet have to shift.

Consider the fractious nature of today's news. Obviously, a shift in a word's definition or how a concept is framed changes how we can have conversation. There is an ancient parable in Sufi, Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain texts of the blind men and an elephant, an animal unknown to them. One encounters the trunk, another a leg and a third the ear, each describing the elephant with authority based on their limited experience. It is a parable of warning that humans have a tendency to claim absolute truth based on their limited, subjective experience as they ignore other people's limited, subjective experiences which are equally true.

Word-prisons are especially challenging with the polarizing and emotional nature of many of today's conversations. If you're a lifelong Republican yet have aged into a belief

in universal healthcare, are you now a socialist? The label or frame placed around a thing changes how it's seen and how it affects us emotionally. So what do we do with things that exist in multiple systems simultaneously? We too often think of ideas the way we think of tribes we are defended against.

When a new framework—which is a data set—is activated, there are associated things that get activated with it which may set up conflict within us. How do we reconcile having two ideas that seem to be opposed by their system's viewpoint yet are revealed as common characteristics in both? Can you be conservative and liberal simultaneously?

The question presents a false dichotomy, another trap of the word-prisons. The answer, of course, is yes. However, it turns out that you can't be both at the same time.[1]

Consider what happens when morality is overlaid as a value judgment, creating those things you "can't possibly do." Conflict is born. What some consider food others consider sin, making the same object oppositional in different contexts. I grew up with my parents sending me to the drug store, where I knew the pharmacist by name and trusted him to help us feel better even when a doctor wasn't consulted. Now we add the morality of an emotionally charged *war on drugs,* which is a war on a thing that gave me comfort growing up. We obscure both the problem and the solution when we drain the meaning from words or redefine how words can be used. This sets up what psychologists call "cognitive dissonance" and an ability to tune out one data set or frame while activating another, like being both conservative and liberal—just not simultaneously. Consider people who claim they don't use drugs while having coffee, a cigarette, and alcohol: all highly addictive drugs!

In an earlier sermon I talked about three recurring pathways of language confusion based on words having multiple meanings, different emotional polarities, and differing metaphor frames. Clearly, a word like "drugs" is different for a doctor than for an addict. Critical judgments are objective: this is a molecule; this is its function. Value judgments are subjective: this molecule is dangerous; it should be illegal. The trick is to become aware of the frame into which you place the idea, and therefore, the conversation that is or isn't possible.

Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche understood a couple of key ideas regarding words. He said, "Words are but symbols for the relations of things to one another and to us; nowhere do they touch upon absolute truth." He also realized, "To use the same words is not a sufficient guarantee of understanding; one must use the same words for the same genus of inward experience; ultimately one must have one's experiences in common."

There's a wonderful book called *Metaphors We Live By*, written by the linguistics professor George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, who claim, "Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities."[2]

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[1] The term is called *biconceptualism* and is described by Professor of Cognitive Science and Linguistics at UC Berkeley, George Lakoff in his book, *Don't Think of an Elephant.*
[2] *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, p. 3

That's a powerful statement and one that we should remember as we walk our path.

Consider that when we say things like we're "crazy" about someone, we're using a metaphor and adding the condition of madness into the data set of love. We're also changing with limitation the definition of love. If love is madness, as Shakespeare suggested, it would be normal that a person would drive you wild or that you'd be out of your mind. In that frame, rationality would neither be expected nor necessarily accepted as proof of love. "I don't believe you love me because you're not acting crazy" would be a reasonable observation in that frame. The challenge is that metaphors can acquire the status of truth, in which case we might give up expecting sanity or reason altogether. Is it valid if a male friend shrugs in surrender and claims "women are just crazy" when faced with an inability to decipher a relationship? No.

If you don't have a word for a thing, you can't hold it in your mind, so it doesn't really exist. If you drain meaning from a word, you begin to exclude the possibilities it already engenders. You limit expression. You also limit discovery by locking away possibility. You stop asking questions because you believe there is no other answer to choose from. You invalidate the answers that exist outside your frame without asking if they actually could work.

This is the power of words.

My last enterprise was building a not-for-profit called Platform with a brilliant old friend named Hank Williams, who has passed from this world. Hank was a black tech entrepreneur who wanted to increase the participation of blacks, Latinos, and women in the innovation economy, to add more minds to solving the problems of the future. He realized one of the first things we would have to do was to model success and solve what he called the if-you-can't-see-it-you-can't-be-it problem that faces many children who believe some careers are simply "not for people like them." When you remove meaning from a word, when you selectively limit its expression, you cancel out part of that thing's existence.

This leads us to the trickiest of the word-prisons: God. The historical lack of consensus regarding the form and disposition of the Creator makes our choice to integrate science with faith all the more important. Animism, pantheism, polytheism, and monotheism each have a differing notion of where we can look for the Creator. The half of the world who follow the God of Abraham tell us the words and intention of God are in books written by men, yet their books don't agree on what's revealed. The Bible, ostensibly inerrant, has multiple versions and multiple canons. Trapped within the current metaphor frame of religion there is no way to reconcile all of this.

My definition for the Creator includes a notion that the entity capable of creating all of time and space wouldn't get little things wrong, like creating children whose notions about worship, rituals, the Canon, and right and wrong are so at odds that war is a necessary result. The Creator I seek doesn't make mistakes. The one in the monotheist books does, so much so that He creates a flood, kills almost everything and starts over.

Here, again, the word-prisons reveal themselves. Why can't the all-powerful Creator simply fix or reconfigure the children of Adam and Eve instead of destroying them? And why would an all-powerful being that can create the universe be subject to human weaknesses, such as jealousy, as is said in the Bible? If that word's definition had a different meaning 2,000 years ago, then an all-knowing being would have built in correction for the conceptual drift. I say this because we can unequivocally read the astonishing manual of DNA, which we attribute to the Creator, back through *billions* of years. The language-prison of a creator who gets the little things wrong, like not realizing that words change meaning over time or that Adam and Eve would be tricked by a serpent, doesn't hold. I reject the notion that a Heavenly Father would condemn or destroy His children—especially for doing things they were created to do.

We believe the pursuit of the Creator is our biological purpose. We are learning to see with new eyes, give up old expectations, embrace malleability, and not accept a shadow experience of the Creator. In the name of science we observe, dream, hypothesize, and follow the data—even when it leads to something that might otherwise seem impossible. Is that unreasonable? An unreasonable quest for the impossible led us to flight and to the stars. We've reshaped this planet to suit our desires and held nature at bay. George Bernard Shaw said, "The reasonable man adapts himself to the world: the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man."

There's a tension between these two polarities, to be reasonable or not. That determination, being reasonable or not, may only be a function of definition, not of activity. By definition, an unreasonable person's choices are not guided by or based on good sense. The path we walk towards the Creator, to seek the thing others claim they've already found—despite their lack of evidence—only appears unreasonable to those who reject data. The stories we create or defend to understand our path, our world, and our choices have great significance. It is here that we create or dismantle word-prisons.

Remember that this takes mindfulness and practice. Ways of thinking form as neural structures in our brains. Neurologists say that neurons that fire together wire together. They create pathways that reinforce the likelihood of activation with a similar stimulus. This ties in with the notion of seeing because these language constructs, which exist in our brains as neural pathways, are conceptual filters. Like yellow sunglasses that make a blue sweater look black, they obscure parts of our reality. We must be mindful and occasionally remember to check for filters.

Moving between metaphor frames is like changing the lens or the filter color. New things are revealed. There's no judgment of right or wrong, just a consideration of how what's revealed adds to our toolbox and serves our path and purpose. Humans have yet to create a direct, verifiable, and repeatable experience of the Creator. As we use our new tools with the new eyes we're working towards, we should be as children: playful, open, and with wonder. Let's have faith, be good scientists, be malleable, and practice theory revision—which includes an ability to accept the gift of being wrong and to release old stories for the sake of new ones—as the data demands.

We remember again that one of the tools to aid us in this practice is what we refer to as the Four Questions:

- What do we know?
- How do we know what we know?
- What does it mean?
- How do we apply it?

Answering the second question in particular, "how do we know what we know," will aid with theory revision, which I'll remind you, is something that is done naturally by children. Next time I'd like to explore the recurring metaphor in holy texts of us as children of the Creator. We'll explore the biological unfolding of the human animal and consider what would comprise a divine parenting style. Until then, my friends, keep seeking.

Honor the Creator, honor the creation.