



Faith and Darwin

Sermon by Rev. Alan Taylor
delivered September 18, 2005

First Reading:
from Proverbs 3 of the Hebrew Scriptures

Happy is the one who finds wisdom,
and the one who gets understanding,
"for the gain from wisdom is better than gain from silver
and its profit better than gold.
She is more precious than jewels,
and nothing you desire can compare with her.
Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor.
Her ways are ways of pleasantness,
and all her paths are peace.
She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her;
those who hold her fast are called happy.

Second Reading:
from The Descent of Man by Charles Darwin

The belief in God has often been advanced as not only the greatest, but the most complete of all the distinctions between man and the lower animals. It is, however, impossible, as we have seen, to maintain that this belief is innate or instinctive in man. On the other hand a belief in all-pervading spiritual agencies seems to be universal; and apparently follows from a considerable advance in the reasoning powers of man, and from a still greater advance in his faculties of imagination, curiosity and wonder.

Third Reading:
Judith Walker-Riggs, as quoted by Forrest Church in A Chosen Faith

Long, long ago, it seemed so simple. The universe was a three-storied apartment house, with heaven on the top floor, full of gods and stars; earth in the middle, full of

people and animals and plants; and hell in the basement, full of terrible and scary things. God had nothing else to do but sit up there watching us. We were the center of attention. We were his people.

Then came Copernicus. He said that the sun did not move around the earth at all, but was a fixed star. He said it was the earth and us on it that did the moving, and, worse, that the earth was just one of the planets that so moved, one among many, and not at the center of anything at all....

In the last few decades we have been entering a new vision of the universe as radical and revolutionary as the Copernican changeover, and we still have not worked out what it all means, either in theology or in our view of what humanity is and what we ought to do with our lives.

Sermon:

Eighty years ago, in 1925, John Scopes, a biology teacher, was taken to court for teaching evolution in the classroom. The state of Tennessee had recently passed a law forbidding evolution education, and a group of Dayton progressives wanted some publicity for their town. They got it. Journalists swarmed to the trial. For years tension had mounted between traditionalists and modernists, and now a showdown erupted. The great Unitarian lawyer, Clarence Darrow, provided the defense, proclaiming, "Scopes isn't on trial. Civilization is on trial." William Jennings Bryan, the three-time Democratic presidential candidate, served as prosecutor, declaring, "If evolution wins, Christianity goes." Jennings was a populist who led a fundamentalist assault to banish Darwin's theory of evolution from the classroom. The beloved prosecutor used a fascinating line of inquiry that basically went: "These are simple people. They work hard. They want to believe something beautiful in life. Why do you want to take that away from them?" What became known as the famous monkey trial did, only after appeal, succeed in throwing out the Tennessee law banning evolution, but it persuaded textbook publishers and state boards of education to stop teaching evolution altogether. Not until the 1960s would evolution become standard curriculum. It took the Russian-launched Sputnik to scare Americans into beefing up science education. Interestingly, that era had their own "equal-time" laws which required the genesis narrative to be taught alongside evolution, but they were struck down by the courts in 1968 for violating the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.

Here in the 21st century, along with many other educated folks, I assumed that Darwin's theory of evolution was a battle won decades ago by science and the enlightenment mindset of western civilization. I thought controversies over evolution theory were passé and only the focus of religious zealots. But a recent pew forum poll found that 42 percent agreed that "living things have existed in their present form since the beginning of time." Nearly two-thirds of Americans currently believe "intelligent design" ought to be taught alongside evolution in public schools in science classes.

The way some people talk about Charles Darwin, you'd think he must have been a monster. House Majority Leader Tom Delay, the most powerful lawmaker in the land, said awhile back that the Columbine High School shootings happened "because our school systems teach our people that they are nothing but glorified apes who have evolutionized out of some primordial mud. Guns don't kill people," he argued, and I quote, "Charles Darwin kills people."

Charles Darwin happens to be one of my favorite historical figures, and I am compelled to address the truth about Darwin the man, his famous theory, and the implications it has on authentic religious faith. Charles Darwin, in his day, was known to be one of the most respectful, sensitive men in his society. A number of people claimed he was overly sensitive, always refraining from offending anyone, and often anguished about the suffering of others, even when he didn't know them. He grew up in a Unitarian home and was encouraged to study with an open mind. Yes, Charles Darwin was raised a Unitarian, until his mother died and he was put in an Anglican boarding school. He pursued studies to be an Episcopal priest, not so he could be a clergyman, but so that he could study nature, for some priests back then dedicated themselves to natural theology. Darwin never donned the cloth, for he got a remarkable opportunity—to be the naturalist aboard a ship that would take a five-year voyage. By the end of the second of those five years, Darwin saw how evolution works. It was very simple, the theory of natural selection. When organisms reproduce, they never reproduce exact replicas of themselves, instead there are always variations in hereditary characteristics. Those organisms that have characteristics most suitable to survival and reproduction live and their characteristics become more widespread in a population while the others fade out. That's it. Darwin summed up this most influential idea in western thought in ten words: "[M]ultiply, vary, let the strongest live and the weakest die." He knew that 'strongest' didn't mean 'brawniest.' but rather an organism's ability to have offspring that could survive, whether that meant having stripes, or an elongated neck, a bigger brain, more perceptive ears, a heartier digestive system.

A classic example of evolution in action occurred in an England forest among butterflies. The population of pale white butterflies increased because, sitting on pale tree branches, birds could not spot them easily. When a factory was built nearby and the smoke pollution darkened the tree branches, the near white butterflies stood out against the branches and were easy targets by the birds. But mutations occurred among the population, as Darwin's theory hypothesizes, and as those light colored butterflies reproduced, most of them were born the same color, while a few, by chance, were even whiter—easy food. Other butterflies, also by chance, were born greyer than their parents, and these young butterflies blended into the polluted tree branches and lived long enough to have plenty of offspring. Within a few years, almost every butterfly in that forest was grey.

Darwin's simple theory reverberated through western society, calling upon people to reassess their religion and morality. The implications of his theory were devastating for traditional religious belief. And because of this need for reassessment, evolutionary theory threatens a lot of people who see themselves as the center of the universe and

insist on affirming fallacies that science demonstrates as implausible as the sun revolving around the earth.

There's no way getting around it, Darwin's idea undermines traditional notions of God. The best argument of his time for the existence of God suddenly was called into question. It is called Paley's argument. If you come across a stone, you need think nothing of it. If you come across a finely crafted watch with all of its intricacies, you know it must have had a creator. It just didn't materialize out of nothing, but it took time and attention to put it together. Similarly with plants, animals, and humans. All of these are so well put together with an amazing amount of diversity, that clearly there must be a creator, and so God must exist. Darwin's theory of natural selection, later supported by the discovery and research of genes and DNA replication, offers a far less mysterious explanation for the development of life than biblical stories.

For our faith tradition, critical inquiry is a core religious value. Science makes use of critical inquiry as a lens to better understand our world through testing hypotheses. Good theories are simply stories, stories that work. As our understanding about the world deepens with scientific discovery, the story sometimes changes and sometimes gets longer. But it will never reach finality, just as faith cannot reach finality.

You may say "what about the story of intelligent design—isn't that a story that works?" Actually, no, it's a nice idea, but it is not a scientific theory. It's a faith stance. Intelligent design theory isn't really a theory at all because it can't be tested. There's nothing to show that it works. Instead intelligent design theory is speculation, not science. Anybody who says so fails to understand the basic fundamentals of science. Faith stances won't ever be science and should never be a part of science classes. Blurring faith and science leads to poor science, which then ultimately weakens authentic faith. I don't understand why many Americans have difficulty with this. One way or another, most Christian denominations throughout the world have managed to reconcile belief in God with belief in the mechanisms of natural selection. Stephen Jay Gould notes that if a French, German or Scandinavian politician who called for students to entertain as a reasonable deduction from existing evidence the proposition that Earth is at most 10,000 years old, the politician would be bundled off to a mental hospital. As he says, "No one looking at the physical record would determine that dinosaurs and humans coexisted, that fossils represent the creatures drowned in Noah's flood and so on. The only way those notions would even occur to you is if you considered the Bible an unerring historical document." There's the problem.

Some people claim that the theory of evolution negates religion. Actually, for religious liberals it clarifies -- and makes urgent -- a liberal religious perspective. Gould puts it beautifully in *A Glorious Accident*: "Through no fault of our own, and by dint of no cosmic plan or conscious purpose, we have become, by the grace of a glorious evolutionary accident called intelligence, the stewards of life's continuity on earth. We have not asked for that role, but we cannot abjure it. We may not be suited to it, but here we are." We need not only science but also a faith informed by our faculties of imagination, curiosity, and wonder.

Science and faith are not mutually exclusive. Science can be used to complement and hone faith rather than contradict it. Biology professor, Kenneth Miller of Brown defends his own faith in God. When students ask what kind of God, he struggled answering until he responded with what has become the name of his book, Darwin's God.

So let's reflect some on what evolutionary theory teaches about faith, the faith of a Darwinist. As for the morality or values exemplified by nature, the process of natural selection is ruthless. Evolution occurs with the extinction of creatures with less adaptive traits. Darwin, himself, suffered interminably with the implications of his theory. Life is harsh.

Some people claim that Darwin's theory abolishes the meaning of life. Actually, Darwin's theory puts an extraordinary amount of meaning into life. For it saddles human beings with the responsibility of what we do or do not do with this life. My colleague Mark Belletini puts it poetically: "Ginkgo trees don't express a sense of fairness. Human beings do. Perch do not write love sonnets, storks do not express compassion, eels do not wriggle in tenderness when their children laugh. The natural world outside humankind has instinct, and the higher mammals even express elementary forms of love, but the grand ideas of justice and compassion evolved for the first time with clarity within the human heart." In other words, humanity has developed a moral compass and honed that compass over millennia, even if it isn't consistently followed, it is there.

Darwin's theory illuminates the truth that everything alive is changing. Everything is evolving. With Darwin, we cannot live under the illusion that there is anything living that is unchanging. The same goes for knowledge and understanding, including religious knowledge and understanding. In science, ever new insights emerge. And in religion, revelation is never sealed, ever new insights emerge. More than that, we can't know in what way things are changing or exactly where we are going. Some religious worldviews believe that something specific will happen in the end times, but Darwinian theory calls upon a faith that discounts any claim of finality.

Evolutionary theory even posits something like original sin. Each and everyone of us has the propensity for greed, lust, envy, hatred, jealousy, and prejudice. According to evolutionary theory, these selfish proclivities run deep in us, so deep that we often are aware neither of how self-serving our behaviors are, nor how useless or destructive they are. We are designed to think that we are the most special person in the world. To come to believe that you are not the center of the universe takes some maturity. To behave as if you are not the most special person in the universe, takes a great deal more maturity.

Charles Darwin believed that life evolved for the greater good—the "good of the group" and that also goes for human beings, that human morality has evolved. In 1882, he said, "As man advances in civilization, and small tribes are united into larger communities, the simplest reason would tell each individual that he ought to extend his social instincts and sympathies to all the members of the same nation, though

personally unknown to him. This point being once reached there is only an artificial barrier to prevent his sympathies extending to the men of all nations and races.”

I want to believe with Darwin that it takes mere reason to be good and that there is only an artificial barrier that prevents us from being compassionate towards all people the world over, but research done in the field of evolutionary psychology strongly suggests this barrier is far from artificial. (Not to mention how many peoples of the world treat other peoples). Instead this barrier is very real, caused, according to evolutionary psychology, by our instinctual desire to pass on our genes. We are hardwired to be selfish, self-serving, and self-absorbed. But this stamp from nature isn't the end of the story. The genetic mandate, that inner macho bugle call to move in the interest of the survival of the fittest into war and brutality gets challenged time and again by the prophetic call of peacemakers who serve the larger interest of the common good. To transcend the effects of the selfish gene, we have an inner call and capacity to develop and adhere to a moral code, to have it awakened, even fully operational. This takes self-examination, personal scrutiny, and self-honesty. It is our basic, or should I say base, human nature that prevents us from being sympathetic to people who are different, and it is a part of our human nature that we have the capacity to transcend our self-centeredness.

In this time of providing relief to those displaced by Hurricane Katrina, we are witnessing a cultural battle between those who believe in responding to the call to love and those who believe the public should not be expected to sacrifice for others.

Another way liberal religion has been shaped and transformed by Darwin and his theory of evolution is by affirming the priority of justice over doctrine. As moral animals, doing what is right is more important than thinking what is right. In theological language, orthopraxy, ethical action, is far more vital than orthodoxy, having the right beliefs. Love trumps opinions for Darwinians. As hurricane survivors fan out across the country, and as people's lives have been destroyed by this catastrophe, what matters so much more than what you think about it is what you will do about it. And that goes for us as a congregation. What shall we do? We've already collected over \$8300. A few of you have expressed a desire for our congregation to do more. Do we want to do more? It's our call. Let me or a board member know. We're meeting tonight, so its good timing.

As we become aware that happiness does not come from constant striving for pleasure, constant striving for wealth, or constant striving for status, we can forge our own moral knowing—and that knowing comes from the peace that comes with taking steps to right livelihood. Those steps are best taken in the company of others who share the same dedication to free ourselves for the sake of love.

Here at Unity Temple, we are gathered as children of the Enlightenment, as inheritors of Darwin's faith; while we recognize that we are hardwired for selfishness, we come together to nourish those values that make us uniquely moral animals who can transcend our baser desires.

May our religion be to walk through the door of profound love, so as to live according to the best of our human nature. To answer William Jennings Bryan's plea to John Scopes, "why do you want to take something beautiful away from those who believe in a literal reading of the biblical account?" I respond, as human beings we are called to a profound love, we are called to our nobility as a truly moral animal, there is great beauty and joy that comes with transcending our animal nature, and doing so opens up a door to the brilliant possibilities we have as human beings. Why would anyone want to take away or dilute the gems of authentic faith, a faith worthy of Darwin's intellect and love of people?

Blessed be. Amen