

## **“Evolution Sunday - Happy Birthday Mr. Darwin”**

A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, Senior Minister  
At All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, on February 12, 2006

You’ve probably heard about the zookeeper at the Tulsa zoo, who came across an orangutan reading two books. It was pretty amazing. One was the Bible; the other was Darwin’s Origin of Species. Of course, the zookeeper wanted to know, “Why are you reading such opposite books?” The orangutan explained, “Well, I’m trying to figure out if I’m really supposed to be my brother’s keeper or my keeper’s brother.”

Unfortunately this debate in our larger society is not a laughing matter. Christian fundamentalists are using legislation and local school board elections in ways that could take our country back into the Dark Ages. They’re promoting an anti-scientific, anti-intellectual approach to education that threatens our country’s future.

Keep in mind that prior to the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment in Europe, the Western world was dominated by the Catholic Church, and was in a period of enforced and institutionalized ignorance. We refer to much of this time as the Dark Ages because religious dogma was allowed to trump any other way of knowing. It led to the banning of books and the burning of libraries. It led to the imprisonment of scientists.

If it weren’t for the Muslims, who preserved many of the classics of Western literature and philosophy, and who maintained the advancements in science and mathematics, the Church could have single-handedly destroyed our link to the ancient Greek writings and a good deal of the intellectual history of Western civilization.

By the 16<sup>th</sup> century, with the onset of the Protestant Reformation, followed by the Age of Enlightenment in Europe, we witnessed the Western world emerge from this period of ignorance. Literacy and education of the populace began to grow, and there was an affirmation of reason and the scientific ways of knowing.

One of the great reversals of human history occurred during this same period, when much of the Islamic world began to descend into a period of dogmatism, marked by the repression of reason – especially in matters of religion. The Islamic empires began to crumble and a period of Western world-dominance began. For centuries now, the Western world, buoyed by science, reason and technology, has advanced economically, as well as with regard to the realm of human rights and human freedom. Nevertheless, throughout American history there has always remained a tradition of anti-intellectualism. And its roots have been primarily Christian fundamentalism, defined by Biblical literalism. That is – those people who claim to take the Bible as the literal revealed truth of God.

There's still a significant segment of the American people who believe that you and I descended from Adam and Eve, who lived roughly 6,000 years ago in the Garden of Eden. Due to intense lobbying and pressure from Christian fundamentalist organizations, there's a book for sale in the science section of the National Park bookstore at the Grand Canyon titled: "The Grand Canyon: A Different View." This book presents the idea that the Grand Canyon was created 4,500 years ago by Noah's flood, rather than 6 million years ago as geologists explain it.

To make things worse, the current administration in Washington has cut funding for the National Science Foundation, has limited stem-cell research and the president himself has verbally endorsed teaching the concept of intelligent design in public schools, under the banner of "teaching the controversy." But the real controversy is that there *is* no controversy – at least not from a scientific point of view.

The Theory of Evolution is a well-established scientific theory. Scientific theories are different from theories as we use the word in everyday conversation. In everyday conversation we all have our 'theories' for why things happen. I had a friend in college who had a theory that eating steak for breakfast made him score better on tests. In common usage, the word theory includes assumptions, speculation and conjecture. However, in science, a theory is an established principle. A scientific hypothesis does not become a theory until it has been

corroborated through repeated tests, experimentation and examination. Like a theorem in Geometry, a theory in science works so consistently over time that it becomes like an established fact. And, if it is ever proven false, it is discarded.

In the past 150 years, since Darwin helped establish the Theory of Evolution, a few details of his theory have been refined with the discovery of new information. But Darwin was correct in almost every respect regarding his theory. Year after year more data is discovered and it has always supported the general theory. We can liken it to Atomic Theory which predicts that certain atoms will be radioactive. We design nuclear power plants on the basis of Atomic Theory. It's not "just a theory," as those who try to diminish the Theory of Evolution would have us think. Such people argue that since Evolution is "just a theory", other theories of how the world began deserve to be taught in schools as well.

Scientific theories however, must be able to be tested. If there is not enough data to support a hypothesis, it doesn't become a theory. You could have a hypothesis that little invisible green men jumping up and down created the world, but how would you test that? You can't!

The Intelligent Design movement begins with an un-testable assumption about an intelligent designer of creation. Therefore, it is not, nor could it ever be, a science. It does not belong in science classrooms. Intelligent Design is a religious perspective. If we are going to "teach the controversy" in schools, the only place to do it is in social studies classes – the debate is a social debate, not a scientific one.

Now I realize I'm preaching to the choir this morning. I hope I may be, at least, providing some talking points for future discussion. What I find interesting is that many of my clergy colleagues in other denominations will spend this morning making the case for how Evolution is consistent with the Bible and the Christian faith and religion. While in this church, perhaps my biggest task is to try and make the case for why the Bible and religion are relevant despite Evolution and other advances in science and knowledge.

First of all, it is important to keep in mind the entire realm of experience that is non-quantifiable and thus outside of the sphere of science. Science can discover and study atoms, protons and quarks, but science cannot tell us what to do with nuclear technology. Science cannot lead us in addressing questions of moral and ethical values. Science can someday discover the secrets of cloning, but it cannot tell us if we should clone. Science cannot teach us how to redeem ourselves when we've hurt someone. Science cannot teach us about forgiveness or compassion, mercy or justice or generosity.

There's a whole realm of social, psychological, emotional and spiritual experience that does not fall within the disciplines of science. Religion has an important role regardless of how various life forms came into being. The "golden rule" holds true no matter how we got here. In other words, we are still our brother's keepers, even if we now know that we are kin with the animals. With new discoveries in DNA we've come to find out that we're not only related to orangutans, we're related to cabbage. And this shouldn't diminish our ethical imperative to care for one another. If anything, it should increase our commitment to care for all beings and all of nature.

Even when science and education disprove the historical accuracy of the Bible, the Bible still remains a treasure trove of mythic wisdom. In the Bible we find people dealing with the same kinds of issues we deal with: betrayal, loss, temptation, greed, sibling rivalry, marital discord, real human fears and real human hopes. If we're open to it, we can see their stories in our stories, and they can unlock truths about our lives and the human condition that can enlighten our way. When reading the stories of the Hebrew Scriptures, or the parables of Jesus, we're invited to listen, not so much for history, but for deeper truths and meanings. One Christian writer Madeline L'Engle insisted: "The Bible isn't factual, it's True!"

The stories of people like Noah, Ruth, Moses and Abraham convey meanings that transcend historical facts. They have the potential to impart good news upon those who take them seriously but not literally. And yet, despite the value of Biblical stories for human wellbeing

and imagination, we cannot afford to have mythological storytelling being mistaken for hard science.

Currently in Oklahoma there are three bills that will go before our state legislature in the coming weeks that would allow for the teaching of intelligent design in science classrooms in Oklahoma public schools. We owe it to our children, to our country and to ourselves to oppose these potentially disastrous legislations.

Today in our fellowship hall, you will find information and a petition you can sign to oppose these unfortunate and misguided bills. Two of the bills pose as supporting “Academic Freedom,” which sounds noble, except their true intention is to allow teachers to teach their personal religious beliefs in the science classroom without legal ramifications. These bills are not only bad for our schools and our children, they will also cost our state untold amounts of money defending them in court. And they will no doubt hurt our state with regard to attracting new businesses, especially high-tech industries.

Do you realize that over the past four years the Oklahoma state legislature has defeated legislation to add disclaimers to science textbooks that teach evolution in public schools? Two years ago, the legislation was defeated by only one vote in the senate. You must understand the seriousness of this hour.

On this 197<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin, let us do our part to protect the integrity of science education in our state and country. Let us acknowledge that much more than the promotion of Intelligent Design, what the world needs most right now is the promotion of intelligent religion.

Happy Birthday Mr. Darwin!

Amen.