

Jesus' healing of the man with leprosy and the 200th birthdays of Charles Darwin and Abraham Lincoln call our attention to the breakthroughs in the growth and evolution of human consciousness and compassion.

This is a glorious day. And our reading and current events converge in a special way this week.

They are powerfully connected to our spiritual growth -
to humanity's growth – to compassion - awareness –
to the connectedness of all things -
more than we would ever think – looking at them separately.

Would you like to look at them with me?

These are three people who converge today:

The first is our scripture reading of Jesus' – healing a leper.

In our story, Jesus reaches out and chooses to heal the man of this disease.

The first known mention of leprosy was in 600 B.C.

Those infected were forever forbidden to participate in a normal social life -
often placed in confinement – imprisoned – anathema –sub-human.

The first breakthrough finally happened in the 1940's.

In 1995 the World Health Organization
began giving free treatment for all patients around the world.

Leprosy is still a public health problem in some countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America,
namely Brazil, India, Madagascar, Mozambique and Nepal..

It is not completely eliminated. But today - it is a curable disease.¹

A few people still live on one of the last remaining leper colonies
on the island of Molokai in Hawaii – but they stay by choice – not by law.

It is a national historical park and welcomes visitors.

But our story is one of Jesus reaching out to someone ostracized by the community -
someone seen as less than human.

Jesus extended compassion – and restored his wholeness.

Jesus stretched out his hand and said "I so choose."

There is very little – if any – record of this happening before – anywhere in history.

It's no wonder the cured leper went out and spread the word. It was news.

Jesus had freed the captive – elevated the sub-human and increased consciousness for everyone.



Now to the second person -

Many years later - in about 1830 a young biologist from England
boarded a ship called the *HMS Beagle*
to sail around the world and study all the life forms he could find -
categorizing and ordering -
describing what was similar and what was different -
discovering the connections.

He sailed and studied the coasts of South America and the Galapagos Islands
in all their intricacies.

*The second convergence for today is Charles Darwin at his 200th birthday-
and The Origin of Species.*

Darwin discovered what we call the process of natural selection - evolution.

But as you know – it was - and for some still is - a sensitive subject.

It treaded on the vested interests of organized religion.

But then – so did Jesus.

It treaded on the sensitivities of those who wanted to take the Genesis story –
not as ancient poetry – as tales told around campfires –
but as science - before science was known to exist.

I would ask:

Why not see God as the source - and evolution - the process?

Well – probably a lot of reasons that we can't go into today -

but it would certainly include the vested power interests of the Christian church.

But also of individual believers who liked their religion the way it was.

Something similar that Jesus encountered – to be sure.

It seems to me that Darwin's work in natural selection and evolution
helped us to learn, "There's always something more." ²

Now - this is what I want to share with you today about Darwin:

What most people don't know is that
Darwin was morally anchored in the British anti-slavery movement
and driven to find - how we surely had more in common –
that surely there was - no reason one race - could be singled out
to be subservient to another -
who should make slaves of another.³

The recovery of Darwin's letters is pretty new – since 2000.

The letters show Darwin's abhorrence of slavery
resulted in our understanding of evolution
and drove his research.

Darwin's starting point – his passion fueled by
his hatred of slavers desire – as he jotted in his notes -
"to make the black man other - sub-human – to be chained."

And - as hard as it was - he had to tread on some sacredly held beliefs of the church.

He was courageous. He made news. He introduced a new paradigm.

After *The Origin of the Species* Darwin applied evolution to humans
in his book *The Descent of Man*.

Darwin – like Jesus – helped to free the captive -
elevate those treated as sub-human -
and increased consciousness.



Now, the third person in our convergence today -
At about the same time Darwin was sorting – analyzing – and writing -
a young politician from Illinois becomes President of the United States -
at a time slavery was tearing our new nation apart.

This is our third convergence – born on February 12, 1808 – Abraham Lincoln

In 1862 he issued two executive orders
declaring the freedom of all slaves in Confederate states.

It was a war order so its directives were confined to war -
but slavery was outlawed after the states ratified the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865.

We all know it has been a long road –
the historical baggage of the doctrine of “separate but equal” –
the Dred Scott decision of the US Supreme Court – Brown vs. the Board of Education –
President Eisenhower sending troops to Little Rock.
Rosa Parks – Martin Luther King, Jr. – Lyndon Johnson’s civil rights act -
and so many other things and so many other people -
to free us from the dictates of ignorance
and help us evolve into a more compassionate people

The young President from Illinois – born on the same day as Charles Darwin -
heard the same cry of a human being in bondage.
He was courageous. He made news.

Lincoln probably did not know anything about Darwin -
but we know Darwin had a keen ear to what was happening in America -
for his own relatives and friends had been a part of fighting slavery in England.
And Darwin had been writing about it since he was aboard the *HMS Beagle*.



The tide of history is clear – exciting and joyful.
Despite all of our failings which are numerous –
our inhumanity to one another throughout history -
our lack of compassion and our lack of justice in so many places –
despite all this - the tide of history is clear.
We are evolving - in our ability to understand the natural world around us -
and our participation in it.

May I read to you from the Conclusion to “On the Origin of Species”:

It is interesting to contemplate a tangled bank,
clothed with many plants of many kinds,
with birds singing on the bushes,
with various insects flitting about,
and with worms crawling through the damp earth,
and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms,
so different from each other,

Convergence – based on Mark 1:40-45
Aspen Community UMC
February 15, 2009

Page 5 of 6

and dependent upon each other in so complex a manner,
have all been produced by laws acting around us.

And further into the conclusion:

There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers,
having been originally breathed by the Creator
into a few forms or into one;
and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity,
from so simple a beginning
endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful
have been, and are being, evolved.



Jesus took human consciousness to a new level.

So did Charles Darwin – and so did Abraham Lincoln.

All three took compassion and connection to a new level.

All three stepped out of the mindsets – the paradigms of their time -
and created new ones.

We live every day with the fruits of their labors – we take it for granted.

Hopefully, they have given us reason to love learning
and to love the pursuit of truth – wherever it takes us.

Even the shifting nature of work –
that we experience as unemployment -
is a process of natural selection.

Some things die for others to be born.

That means that our greatest skill should be -
knowing how to learn new things in a changing world.



Where does that leave us? Where do we stand – as a church?

I hope this church is a place where all are encouraged
to honor their minds and live their questions.

Convergence – based on Mark 1:40-45
Aspen Community UMC
February 15, 2009

Page 6 of 6

I hope we are a church that respects the earth
and the intricate way it moves and changes.

I hope we are a church that honors healing
in the many forms it manifests itself.

I hope we are a people who honor justice
and are willing to advocate for anyone
for whom it is compromised.

I hope we are a church
who looks deeply into life –
for the sparks of divinity – waiting to be discovered and shared.

I hope we are a church willing to engage a future
that will be different from our past –
to imagine what it will look like – and go for it.

I hope we are a church with an open mind and a warm heart
where you and I find fellowship for the journey together.

So, this convergence today -
the healing activity of Jesus -
the gift of science brought by Charles Darwin -
and the political leadership of Abraham Lincoln -
they are intimately connected.
May we say, "Happy Birthday."

¹ World Health Organization Fact sheet N101, Revised October 2005.

² Adapted from Ian Lawton in "Lincoln, Darwin and Unemployment" February 2009.

³ *Darwin's Sacred Cause: How a Hatred of Slavery Shaped Darwin's Views on Human Evolution* by Adrian Desmond and James Moore (Feb 15, 2008)