

Love or Money – and Evolution

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This is the time of year I usually find myself preaching on love and evolution because St. Valentine's Day is right up against Darwin's birthday. You may remember that last year I gave a sermon called Darwin's Valentine, and then we had the Fleck Lecture from Ursula Goodenough on Darwin and the Sacred. This year, our Stewardship Committee, in its infinite wisdom, decided that the kickoff of the pledge campaign was going to be Friday the 19th, and so the stewardship sermon had to be Sunday the 14th. So I agreed to preach on evolution, love and money.

What was I thinking? On the surface, these topics have about as much to do with one another as Bach fugues do with the designated hitter rule in baseball. Think about that common phrase, "I wouldn't do that for love or money." That means that there is no way you are going to do whatever it is. The phrase "love or money" in that saying is supposed to stand for the two great motivators of human action, and they are set up as opposite values.

In traditional Christian preaching, love is the supreme good and money is the supreme bad, the root of all evil. But from an evolutionary perspective, things are not good or bad, but adaptive or maladaptive. This morning, let us look at love and money through the lens of evolution, which is as Daniel Dennett of Tufts has said, "a universal acid," which "eats through just about every traditional concept and leaves in its wake a revolutionized worldview."¹

Let's start with St. Valentine, the guy after whom the day is named. As I mentioned last year his story is shrouded in legend and who knows what of it is true, but the traditional story² is that in the Third Century of the Common Era, a cruel Roman Emperor named Claudius was concerned because he was running out of soldiers. Claudius was making war on almost everyone around, but he couldn't raise a big enough army. He realized that the young men of

¹Quoted in "Supernatural Selection" Boston *Globe* January 29, 2006, pg. E1

²See Garrison Keillor's *Writer's Almanac* for February 14, 2010, http://www.elabs7.com/functions/message_view.html?mid=945672&mlid=499&siteid=20130&uid=bed1482380

Rome would rather make love than war. So he decreed that no marriages could take place in this time of emergency. But Valentine circumvented this decree and went on marrying couples in secret. For this he was arrested, tried and put to death on this day in 269 C.E. On the day of his death, he wrote a note to the daughter of the jailer, with whom he had fallen in love, professing his undying love and signed “love from your Valentine.” Since his martyrdom, he has become canonized and is the patron saint of lovers.

Hello, young lovers, wherever you are. They embody what we usually think of as love in a Darwinian sense: how people find and get mates and make babies and pass down those genes to new generations. And you will notice right away that this paradigm is incomplete, because it does not allow for same-sex couples or for love which is not related to procreation.

For the moment, let us focus on Darwin’s scheme. Evolution operates through two means: survival and sexual selection. I once heard a scientist on Star Island say that for most of earth’s creatures for most of the time they have been on the planet, life reduces to two considerations: getting lunch, and avoiding being lunch. Evolution favors those animals and plants which are well enough adapted to their environment to be able to most successfully feed themselves and to avoid predators who would feed on them. So we get finches in the Galapagos evolving different shaped beaks to get different lunches in their different environments. The fossil record shows how claws and talons and flippers and hands all stem from the same structure but get adapted to different needs by different species. The great sculpting scalpel which shapes us and all life on earth is the principle of adaptation to the twin tasks of getting lunch and avoiding being lunch.

But that’s not all. Darwin recognized that sexual selection was a separate mechanism. If the peahen prefers to mate with a peacock with the brightest feather display, then the offspring are going to have ever brighter and gaudier plumage whether or not that display helps them get lunch or avoid being lunch.

I mentioned last year some research in evolutionary medicine suggesting that humans in closed communities, before the rise of modern genetics, instinctively selected mates who would be genetically good for them, perhaps by smell or taste. Sexual selection is certainly operative in human societies, as you can see by checking out your local high school prom.

Darwin, under the influence of gloomy theorists such as Thomas Malthus and Thomas Hobbes, emphasized competition and struggle for survival, and this gave rise to the phrase “survival of the fittest,” which has been used to justify all kinds of reactionary social policies ever since. Modern evolutionary theorists, on the other hand, have discovered that cooperation is at least as important as competition, and I want to outline that in this little sketch of the evolution of love, or perhaps more accurately, love from an evolutionary perspective.

Go back to that high school prom. Here we have the first stage of love from an

evolutionary perspective: sexual attraction between fertile individuals of the same species. The chemical basis for attraction, at least in non-human species, are chemicals called pheromones and there are specific sense organs for these, above and beyond regular taste and smell. There are strong instincts to engage in sex and release of dopamine and stimulation of the pleasure centers of the brain for anything connected with sex. There are ritualized forms of sexual display in many animals, including the human, that accompany the sex act. All these we know intellectually, but more importantly we know them from our lived experience.

In the process of bearing and raising children, a second set of love interests come into play, that between a parent and offspring of the same species. In the process of labor in humans, the hormone oxytocin is released into the blood stream of the mother, which results in strong bonding to the infant. The father too secretes oxytocin. Because of the large head and the narrow birth canal, the human has to be born at an earlier stage of development than any other animal, and the period of dependency on the parents is correspondingly longer. So the human has had to develop powerful instincts of protection of its young, and that is the basis for family.

So we have some basis for cooperation already; it is not strictly the war of all against all for survival. The parent has the incentive and the instincts to put the child's survival ahead of her own. Individuals who have these altruistic parental instincts will be on the whole more successful at passing on their gene line.

Now we can extend this altruism outward to the clan and to the tribe, relatives with whom I share genetic inheritance. I have the incentive to fall on the hand grenade to save the life of my brother's son who will pass on some of my genes. Evolution has hard-wired certain altruistic impulses.

But humans do not just have instincts; we have language and whole systems of symbols and our instincts get triggered as much by those symbols as by any immediate nonverbal pleasure or pain. My country's flag becomes a symbol for my tribe, and evokes the same instincts of loyalty as my tribe.

A religion, in an evolutionary perspective, is a system of symbols backed up by a social organization which channels our instincts into cooperative modes and thus ensures more reproductive success. When tribe fights tribe, each tribe has its own God, its own rituals, and this is adaptive to the survival of the tribe. At a later evolutionary stage, the idea of a universal religion comes into play, and our liberal religious traditions – not only Unitarianism and Universalism but Bahai and Sufism and Jainism and certain forms of Hinduism, Buddhism and Quakerism – take as the center the command to love everyone and the tribe, the object of love, becomes all humanity or even all living things. We conceptualize this as the universal parenthood of God, which implies the universal brotherhood and sisterhood of all people. So

love evolves from a way to select a mate and procreate to the compassion for all beings. Evolved love includes sexual attraction within the same sex, companionate marriage, friendship and acts of altruism and generosity.

Now let's turn to the evolution of money. Money is a medium of exchange which can be turned into specific goods. If we consider that the first form of economic organization was hunter-gatherer societies, people in such groups probably didn't have many goods; they consumed what they could get their hands on and the only thing they possessed was rudimentary cooking tools, gathering vessels and hunting weapons. The first stage where we have movable goods which can be exchanged is probably the pastoralists. In a pastoral society, wealth is in the sheep or cattle, and these are movable, but not very. You can't wire a sheep by Federal Express to bail your son out of jail in Arizona.

The next stage of society was agriculture, and one account of the origin of money that I read said that in Egypt the Pharaoh demanded that each farmer give him a portion of the crop, and built silos which not only stored the king's grain, but also stored the grain for the farmer. When the farmer gave the grain in to the silo, he was given a receipt for the grain. It soon developed that when he needed grain, he didn't have to go back to the same silo, but could go to any of the king's silos, present his receipt, and get his grain. If he took out only a portion of the grain he had on deposit, he would get a new receipt.

These receipts then became a form of wealth. Gradually it became clear that anything could stand for wealth as long as everyone in the society agreed they could. In order to have symbolic value, it needed to be something which stood apart from the ordinary goods. Roman soldiers used to be paid in salt, which is the origin of our word salary. But as coinage developed, instead of using bronze and iron to make money, the ancients used the rarer metals, gold and silver. Originally, they used the pure metals, but they were so soft, that the coins didn't last, so they were alloyed with baser metals. Originally the coinage systems were private, but government got into the act to standardize the coins, so that everyone could have confidence in the currency. When the genuineness of a coin was in question, the merchant used a touchstone, piece of slate or basalt, which would react with the precious metal if it came into contact.

Money, in other words, evolved in a way that is similar to the evolution of biological systems and other social systems. Different mutations arose and those which proved to be adaptive to the economic needs of the social order would survive, and that in turn would make possible new developments in the social order.

Nowadays money is primarily represented not in coins or even in precious metals and not in paper currency, but in digits buried in the internet. Apart from the real estate I own, my own personal monetary wealth as well as the wealth of everyone in this room, sits in a set of ones and

zeroes, binary code, on one or more computers in a server farm which might be on a hillside in Argentina or in the deserts of Utah. You don't go to the king's silo and claim your grain, you don't go to a bank vault and ask for your silver ingot, you go to an ATM and punch in some numbers and it spits out some bills into your hand. Or you just go into a store, wave some plastic at the cash register, and walk out with your goods.

Money has adapted to our highly mobile lifestyle and thus has made that lifestyle possible. The ability to move our money and our work just about anywhere tends to devalue things that are unique and local, like mom and pop stores, local characters, particular congregations, and favors things that are standardized and franchised, like fast-food places, name-brand stores and religious denominations.

A few weeks ago, the US Supreme Court handed down a hugely important decision called *Citizens United*, in which they struck down a federal statute which had prohibited corporations and labor unions from spending their money to influence federal elections. The conservative majority on the Court found that the statute inhibited the right of free speech of the corporations and the unions. The Court held that in a political context, a restriction on money is a restriction on speech and that the statute's prohibitions holding corporations and unions to a different standard than the rest of society could not be squared with the First Amendment's command that Congress shall make no law abridging freedom of speech. At its heart, the Court held that corporations had the free speech rights of natural persons.

There has been a great hue and cry over this decision, and some people have been proposing a constitutional amendment to deny to corporations any rights under the First Amendment. One of you gave me a cogent historical explanation of how this decision fit perfectly with the original theory of fascism from the 19-teens.

I'll have more to say on the *Citizens United* decision and the constitutional rights of corporations in future sermons. What I want to do in the few minutes I have left is to take the court's idea that money is speech and to tie that to what I have said about the evolution of money and the evolution of love.

Like many of you, I am appalled by the decision because I don't want large business corporations like General Motors or Microsoft to be able to buy the politicians they want and control the policies of this country. But there are many different types of corporations. This church, for example, is a corporation.

At the time of the adoption of our Constitution, there were few business corporations on the scene, and most of the corporations were chartered by the crown before the revolution or by the state legislatures afterwards. One of the earliest cases to come before the Supreme Court as that of *Dartmouth College* in 1819, where the New Hampshire legislature had tried to convert a privately-chartered college to a public institution. The most memorable thing about the case

was the emotional argument Daniel Webster gave the Court on behalf of the college trustees, saying that Dartmouth was “only a small college,” but “there are those who love it.”

A corporation can be organized for any purpose. A business corporation is usually organized to make money. A nonprofit may be organized for a charitable endeavor, to run a school, or to advocate for a particular point of view.

Thus the goal of General Motors or Microsoft is to make a profit for their shareholders, and the danger in having them speak in the political arena is that they have so much money to speak with that they will drown out all other voices and essentially have a government which is captive to their interests.

The goal of this little corporation, this little Meeting House, on the other hand, is love. It is set up for the express purpose of bearing witness to the healing and transformative value of love, the absolute goods which are beyond the power of the market to value, to buy or to sell. This is what we are about.

Evolution says that the goal of an individual life is to survive and reproduce so that the species can go on; it does not say what the purpose is of survival of the species. The market says that the purpose of life is to make money. Our religious values say that the purpose of life is to make more love.

Money is a medium of sexual selection in our society, just like the peacock’s tail feathers. People go after education because that leads to good salaries, and good salaries leads to lots of salt salted away, fat portfolios and solid houses, well-feathered nests which will surely attract the mate with good germ-lines. Money is a medium of the sexual marketplace, of the competition for mates. That marketplace is where love is bought and sold.

And the fundamental delusion of our lives is that love is only in that marketplace, and we are always too poor to play. We spend our lives thinking we need more love, thinking we don’t have enough and we need to scheme and worry to get more somehow. The reality is that if we stop and look at what’s really there, we have all the love we need and have always had it. It is in our power to make it.

We are the mint in the currency of love. We have the power to print it when we need it. This church is a place where we can make that happen. We made it happen for Haiti twice in the last month; a special collection at a Sunday service raised \$1700 dollars; and the blowout concert on February 4th raised \$2800. This is chump change if we compare it to the million dollar checks that celebrities and athletes have been writing, but it is pretty good for this little corner of the world.

This church is what we make it; we have the power to make it a powerful voice for values which are not of the marketplace. We have the power, we have the choice, to stand on the side of love in this hurting world. Ironically, this takes a little money.

This is just a little church in a little town, but there are those who love it. At pledge time, money is the medium of love. We open our wallets because we open our hearts. Please be generous in your pledges.

Amen.

Readings

1 Corinthians 13

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

4 Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. 7 It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

8 Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. 9 For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; 10 but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 11 When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. 12 For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. 13 And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Ulysses, by James Joyce “Cyclops”

Love loves to love love. Nurse loves the new chemist. Constable 14A loves Mary Kelly. Gerty MacDowell loves the boy that has the bicycle. M. B. loves a fair gentleman. Li Chi Han lovey up kissy Cha Pu Chow. Jumbo, the elephant, loves Alice, the elephant. Old Mr Verschoyle with the ear trumpet loves old Mrs Verschoyle with the turnedin eye. The man in the brown macintosh loves a lady who is dead. His Majesty the King loves Her Majesty the Queen. Mrs Norman W. Tupper loves officer Taylor. You love a certain person. And this person loves that other person because everybody loves somebody but God loves everybody.