

## The Scopes “Monkey Trial,” 100 Years Later: Exploring the Divide

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, preaching

Sunday, September 21, 2025, Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: How Shall We Come Together? (Maggie Wheeler, b. 1961), #51 Lady of the Seasons’  
Laughter, #163 For the Earth Forever Turning.

Piano: Solace (Scott Joplin, 1868-1917), Never Break (John Legend, b. 1978).

Reading A: Book of Genesis 1:1-13 (Days 1 thru 3), English Standard Version.

Reading B: “The Place Where We Are Right,” by Yehuda Amichai (1924-2000)

The Place Where We Are Right by Yehuda Amichai

From the place where we are right  
Flowers will never grow  
In the spring.

The place where we are right  
Is hard and trampled  
Like a yard.

But doubts and loves  
Dig up the world  
Like a mole, a plow.  
And a whisper will be heard in the place  
Where the ruined  
House once stood.

### SERMON

July of this year marked the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a big trial in a small town in America. The Scopes trial highlighted the divisions in this country along lines of politics, religion, class and culture—divisions which are still with us. That’s what I think; see if you agree after I tell you the story. The more I learn about the way this trial came about and its main characters, the less confident I am in saying who the good guys and bad guys were. The less comfortable I am in a Place Where I Am Right.

In March of 1925 the State of Tennessee outlawed the teaching of evolutionary science in public schools. Four other southern states plus Oklahoma would soon have similar laws prohibiting lessons about Charles Darwin’s theories. To challenge the Tennessee law in court, the American Civil Liberties Union published an ad in a Chattanooga newspaper to find a teacher willing to break the law. Nestled in the blue-green foothills of eastern Tennessee was the town of Dayton, population 1,800. With railroads, mines and hosiery manufacturing, it had been

prosperous earlier, but now it was in decline. An engineer and mining manager who had come from New York hatched an idea with other businessmen to get the trial to be held in Dayton. The engineer didn't care either way about the law, but he did believe in evolutionary science. He said the trial could attract attention, people, and money to their town.

Twenty-four-year-old John Scopes was employed by Dayton High School to coach football and be a substitute teacher. In a friendly conversation at a corner drugstore coffee shop, the businessmen asked him if he would accept the offer of the ACLU to defend him. Scopes wasn't actually sure if he had *taught* evolution or not when he had been a substitute for the science teacher, but he *had* used the biology textbook in question. In order to benefit the town's economy, Scopes told them yes. Indeed, it brought 100 journalists to town. The town had to build a new telegraph office and even an air strip. Tourists still go there to see reenactments of the trial. John Scopes is perhaps the best-known substitute teacher in American history.

The big draws to Dayton for the trial were the two most famous lawyers in the country, who were on opposite sides. The one I want to tell you the most about is William Jennings Bryan. As an activist and politician, he spoke out for laborers, farmers, and poor people. He attacked the control of the country by corporations and wealthy people. He advocated for economic reforms, including a permanent income tax, which was adopted by constitutional amendment in 1913. To reduce corruption in politics, he proposed public financing of campaigns. He was a left-wing economic populist. [To help raise farm prices, he spoke out against the gold standard for currency and advocated for adding silver coins to the money supply.—brackets indicate words not spoken in sermon]

Bryan had been a colonel in the Spanish American War, and later he opposed American imperialism. He opposed wars of any kind. In his concern for the lives of ordinary people, he advocated for policies to promote morality. Bryan also was an advocate of prohibition of the sale of alcoholic beverages. Prohibition started in 1920. [It ended in 1933.]

Bryan did all this and more. He was born in southern Illinois [Salem] and went to college in central Illinois [Jacksonville]. He was called the Boy Orator, and his oratorical skills made him famous. After law school, Bryan moved to Lincoln, Nebraska, to practice law. At age 30, he was elected to represent Nebraska as a member of the U.S. Congress for two terms. At age 36 he became the youngest presidential nominee in American history. He was the Democratic nominee for President three times, in 1896, 1900 and 1908. The Progressive Party also chose him as its

candidate. He lost each election. President Woodrow Wilson appointed him as the Secretary of State in 1913, but two years later Bryan resigned his position in protest as the President prepared this country to enter the First World War. The United States joined the war and lost 100,000 service members. Bryan was loved by countless people whom he had fought for and inspired. People named their children after him. In fact, Rev. Lucy's father was born a month after the politician's death. His parents gave him the first name of Brian in honor of their hero.

Bryan's motivation for all of his populist goals was his Christian faith. The Social Gospel movement called on Christians not merely to be good individuals but to work together to cure social injustice. He said that the life of Christ must lead us to "put human rights before property rights." The Christian faith called us, he believed, to lift up the downtrodden, protect the vulnerable, and build a society of mercy, justice and equality. Except, however, when it came to race. Like many Democrats in the early 1900s, he did not invite African Americans into his coalition. Advocating white supremacy, he defended racial segregation and voter suppression in states with large Black populations. When the Ku Klux Klan controlled several state governments, he kept his party from speaking out against the Klan [a violent white-nationalist organization].

Though he was never ordained, Bryan was a frequent preacher all over the country. He gave Bible talks, wrote articles and books. He gave some talks at synagogues. He even had a radio program. In his own Presbyterian denomination he was active against an emerging liberal movement, called modernism. Modernist Christians endeavored to adjust their expressions of belief to incorporate scientific understandings. Rather than rejecting the Bible, they interpreted it to adjust to the findings of science. Fundamentalists, on the other hand, believed in the words of Scripture as literal. They didn't believe they were interpreting the Bible; *they were sure* of what it said.

Bryan feared that any adjustment of Christian faith would weaken moral principles. For this reason, he ran for election as Moderator of his denomination. His platform was anti-modernist. He lost by a small margin because African American Presbyterian delegates vote against him in a rejection of his racism.

By the time of the Scopes trial, Bryan's health was declining. He had diabetes, and his busy travel schedule caused him to neglect the new treatment of insulin. He was still popular as an advocate and preacher. Bryan even had advised Tennessee legislators on evolution. He urged

them *only* to outlaw evolution from being taught as “true.” He said it should be taught as a theory, or what he called a hypothesis. Also, he said there should be no penalty for breaking the law. But the legislature disregarded his advice on both points.

He opposed evolutionary teaching because he feared that human dignity was on the line. In 1922, he said: “If human beings were created *not* in the image of God *but as brute mammals*, how can one feel God’s presence in his daily life?” Moreover, he argued, if we think we’re nothing but animals, we will have no reason to care for the ‘weak and helpless’ in society.” Bryan was targeting a real threat, not an imagined one. Social Darwinism is the use of Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection to justify the unequal treatment of people. It can justify wars of conquest, Bryan said. Indeed, military leaders in the Kaiser’s Germany had advocated waging war against other countries because their people were inferior—they were “lesser human beings.” Moreover, Social Darwinism had been used to justify eugenics in the United States and elsewhere. Many educated white Americans worked to prohibit disabled people or poor people from having babies, even forcing them to be sterilized. Understandably, Bryan was distressed by any violence which evolutionary theory might excuse or justify.

So he was the obvious choice to prosecute this case. He brought along two other lawyers, including his son. On the other side of the case was a famous defense attorney, Clarence Darrow. He had started out as a divorce lawyer, but in 1924 he had defended Leopold and Loeb, two University of Chicago students convicted of the kidnapping and murder of a teenager. Darrow’s arguments against the death penalty probably earned them a sentence of life in prison rather than execution.

In several ways, Darrow reflected Bryan’s progressive commitments. He represented labor unions that sought to organize workers for just wages and fair working conditions. [Darrow also advocated for an economic philosophy of the common shared ownership of land by all members of society, a reform idea which had originated with Henry George.]

Darrow had even supported William Jennings Bryan as a candidate for election. Darrow he was a proud agnostic, however, and a strong civil libertarian. He didn’t like Bryan’s religious talk or his opposition to the teaching of evolution. Once Darrow learned that Bryan was the prosecutor for the Scopes trial, he signed up for the defense.

The American Civil Liberties Union had been established in 1920. One of its co-founders was Roger Nash Baldwin, who grew up in a Unitarian church in a wealthy suburb of

Boston. [He would lead it for four decades.] Baldwin later said he had learned *in his church* the importance of helping others. (*UU World* article). However, when it came to the teaching of evolution, Baldwin's view of how to help others was the opposite of the ideas of William Jennings Bryan.

Clarence Darrow's team included a secular Jew and a moderate Protestant, both men. One of them, Dudley Malone, had served for nine months in the State Department as William Jennings Bryan's assistant secretary of state. In his trial argument, Malone gave a strong defense of free thought. He started by praising his former boss for his courage and activism over the years. But then he said: "The Bible is not a work of science." He argued that students should not be shielded from learning about a variety of views; they can then make their own decisions. The room erupted in applause, even though most people were anti-evolutionists. Bryan walked over to Malone and said: "Although we differ, I have never heard a better speech." Malone replied: "I am terribly sorry I had to do it."

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flowers will never grow in the spring. The place  
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There were several points of connection or overlap between the opposing sides. In 1919, for example, William Jennings Bryan was invited to be the commencement speaker at his hometown high school in Salem, Illinois. In the graduating class Salem High was young John Scopes, who would become a coach and a teacher, and whom Bryan would prosecute a few years later.

Darrow's defense team decided that John Scopes didn't know enough about biology to take the stand in his own defense. But they did bring a number of accomplished scientists who were also practicing Christians to be witnesses. One was a zoologist who also taught Sunday school. Bryan's fellow prosecutors objected, saying the men of the jury hadn't signed up for science lectures.

Darrow called Bryan as a witness. For two hours, he peppered him with questions about science and about the Bible. *Do you really believe a whale swallowed Jonah?*, he asked him. *Do you think the earth was made in six days?* (In the reading earlier, we heard the Bible's poetic images for the first three days of creation.) Bryan admitted that each day of the creation story in

Genesis probably represents a long span of time, an eon. In fact, that was not an unusual assumption among Bible believers back then. Yet Bryan was an evangelist, not a theologian. He didn't do well.

During his own arguments, Bryan showed the biology textbook in question. He made fun of its diagram of the evolutionary tree, with circles on the tree showing groups of animal and plant life forms, with humans lumped in with other mammals. But Bryan could have made a stronger case if he'd shown that the book argued for eugenics. In fact, the textbook says this: "The same principles for breeding which produced healthier, stronger horses could and should improve future generations of men and women." The book provides an example of two families with Eastern European surnames, who have been plagued for generations by "immorality and feeble-mindedness." They are "true parasites," the textbook says, and "if they were lower animals we would probably kill them off." But we should at least keep them from having sex, it advises.

Bryan overlooked this opportunity to make a moral objection to the violence for which science can be used. In hindsight it's no surprise that Bryan was not well prepared for the trial, for five days after it ended, he died in his sleep.

The trial lasted from July 10 to July 21. The second-floor courtroom was so crowded, the judge worried that the floor might fall in. It was hot in that red-brick courthouse. One day he adjourned court so that ceiling fans could be installed. On the last day of the trial, the judge moved it outside so that everybody could hear the closing arguments.

As both sides had expected, the verdict was guilty. John Scopes was fined \$100, close to \$1,700 in today's money. The writer who had come from the *Baltimore Sun* paper offered to pay the fine for him or offered for the newspaper to pay it. This was the famous H.L. Mencken, a social satirist and combative critic. It was Mencken who named this The Monkey Trial. Mencken ridiculed the anti-evolutionists as ignoramuses and morons. He called Bryan the fundamentalist pope.

It's worth noting that this test case did nothing to change the law. The ACLU defense attorneys did not file an appeal to overturn it. The case seems only to have deepened the wedge between white conservative Christians and liberal ones, not to mention secular people in this country.

After the trial, William Jennings Bryan and his wife Mary stayed in Dayton, where he promised to preach at a Sunday evening worship service. However, after they went to church in the morning and ate lunch together, he took a nap, and he never woke up.

Bryan had said that the life of Christ must lead us to “put human rights before property rights.” So he pursued economic reforms and fought corruption. He advocated for needy and vulnerable people. He opposed war and imperialism. Thus it is unfortunate that the last event for which Bryan is remembered is the trial for which he was ridiculed as a fool and depicted as the leader of backward and intolerant people. He was a left-wing economic populist, a compassionate advocate for ordinary people who felt unseen and misunderstood.

Thus I think that Bryan would find it even worse to know that his way of appealing to the genuine concerns and fears of ordinary Americans would later be exploited by the economic elite which he had fought against. What I mean is that his populist appeal has been hijacked by movements and politicians who cut income taxes for wealthy people and corporations and who cut basic services for people in need. It’s been hijacked by those who profit from the arms race and those who attack other countries that have not attacked us. Bryan’s legacy has been perverted by those who deny the chaos of climate change and who don’t care about the disasters it causes for some of the poorest people in the world.

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where we are right/ Is hard and trampled/ Like a yard.  
But doubts and loves/ Dig up the world/ Like a mole, a plow./ And a whisper will be  
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I believe that religious traditions can teach us values and inspire us to live by them. Spiritual communities can give us the courage to be fair, kind, honest and generous, to care for people and for the rest of the natural world. Religions need not and should not justify domination or violence. Nor should science. Science must not be used in hurtful, deceptive ways. Science is for learning about life and its origins, about its complexity and variety. Science is a tool which aids us in understanding the universe, starting with our home, this turning earth, as we human beings turn from day to day and season to season, side by side with all beings.

May the wonders of the world keep us humble with doubts and make us kind with whispers of love. May all sources of knowledge and wisdom bring us peace and courage and love, now and in the days to come. Amen.

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