

“The Great Commission”

Trinity Sunday

*Genesis 1:1-2:4a; Psalm 8; 2 Corinthians 13:11-13;
Matthew 28:16-20*

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, June 11, 2017, Trinity Sunday, dedicated to the memory of my father on his 92nd birthday, to all the mission partners returning from Washington D.C., to all our new members and their children in the June 2017 class, especially to Angela Troutman as she is baptized into our faith and always to the glory of God!

“The Great Commission”

Genesis 1:1-2:4a; Psalm 8; 2 Corinthians 13:11-13;

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Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

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We love the concept of trinity. It can be a beautiful creation – bound together through time - three in one and one in three.

We sing, “Holy, Holy, Holy . . . God in three persons, blessed Trinity,” and it sounds majestic, divine, even sung by a small choir of voices. We watch our pastors bless babies at the font,

“I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit,” and the waters of renewal and remembrance wells up in our eyes and our hearts. Just a few weeks ago, as our 13 Confirmands were welcomed into full membership, their baptisms were “confirmed” and sealed in the name of “the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” We teach the children that God is one in three and three in one – “like the light, heat and color of the flame,” and they lean their heads to the side and ask us, “How that can be?” The Trinity is one of the most repeated teachings of our faith, and one of the most verbalized parts of our liturgy and our statement of faith and creeds as we continually offer blessings almost always in trinitarian formulas. But, like the children we as grown-ups still wonder – “How that can be?” How is God three and one and one in three?

As a concept, Trinity can be confusing. Some have said that it was invented by the early Roman church and that it is not mentioned anywhere specifically in the Bible. That is what our own Washington Gladden said about the Trinity. He said, “The doctrine of the Trinity is a construction of human imagination.” Technically speaking, that is correct I suppose – but the Bible is full of allusions to the three in one nature of God. We just heard the creation story in Genesis in which the Creator consisted of • God, • a Wind and • a Word. Jesus

spoke often of his relationship as the son to the Father, and he promised the Holy Spirit would be given to us, even • breathing the Spirit out upon the early disciples. When the time came, Jesus “gave us the Spirit” as a blessing and a guide in our faith. And perhaps the greatest mention of our Trinitarian God, and why we see God and our mission for God as three in one, comes from the Great Commission in Matthew:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them all that I have commanded you” (Mt 28:19).

Do you ever wonder about our three-in-one God? Is it possible to devote our life to something that we may not completely understand? Or more significantly, is it right to commit to something you don’t really believe in? How do we reconcile the difficult concept of the Trinity with our “great commission” from Jesus to continue his work of healing, teaching, and bringing in the Realm of God in the name of “The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit?” Maybe the key to our wondering – how the Trinity can be – is exactly that, **the wonder**. Instead of trying to figure out how God can be three in one, we can add to the evidence for Trinity that is found in scripture combined with our own experiences of God as **Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer**.

Wonder and awe, or said in the familiar biblical phrase, “Fear of the Lord,” is a good place to start because it speaks directly of our relationship with God. It’s a healthy reminder that Trinity is not a mathematical or engineering formula. It is a relational reality.

Our wonder-filled experiences of the three persons of God mesh. They come out of and lead us into scripture and life. Our “wonder and awe faith” takes us directly to the cross, font, table and out into the world. We enter to worship in wonder and depart to serve with awe. It is Wonder and Awe that lead us into relationships in worship, one another and together as the body of Christ. All of these are part of the elements that become our communal faith. This is true, however, only if we are paying attention to the texture of God that infuse our daily life.

So, let’s try it out. Take your wonder about God the father, mother, parent-Creator. Let that image move up close to the sound of the great hymn of creation, “How Great Thou Art.” It flows out of scripture and it is lived out by creation and within the creation. Likewise, consider Genesis and the stories of creation. Are you able to let it touch your heart and not simply become a debate about which came first the chicken or the egg? Furthermore, if you are one who steps out on vacation this time of the year, or takes time to walk the trails

which wonder along our streams, rivers and lakes in Ohio, what sights and magnificent sounds of nature, are you hoping will fill you a sense of awe? Our Creator is always present for us to experience. We can turn off the AC and open a window and immediately be greeted by the breath of God, the wind of the Spirit, the waters and the sky; the sea-monsters and the birds of the air. On a day like today, the birds are calling us to pay attention to the beauty of this sacred earth which God has given to our care. Just this morning was out early and the birds were the first to wake the sleeping world around them – working out all the agreements and disagreements that had about who was nesting where, had anyone seen that black and white cat around, had anyone stopped the ISIS squirrels from their deadly attacks and how beautiful and awkward all their little birds were. At least that is my interpretation of what I heard.

When we lose the ability to look and see, to listen and be still, to touch the earth of God's creating, we lose the ability to enter into wonder and awe. When we lose wonder and awe, we lose our sensitivity to the sacred earth itself - which I believe is the whole intention of earth care initiatives – like the Paris Climate Agreement. To protect the earth is given into our power by God in the earliest chapters of Genesis. We need to do this with all that is in us.

Our creative God also possesses an impeccable sense of timing and a great sense of humor. Sometimes we find ourselves paying attention to the beauty and wonder of creation and we are caught off guard. We are looking for one thing and something else grabs us. About six weeks ago, following our weekend at Pilgrim Hills outside Danville, Ohio, David and Cameron Mailer went to check out the longest covered bridge in Ohio called “the Bridge of Dreams.” As they came to the bridge they saw an Amish carriage coming toward them on a Sunday afternoon. Swept back into the 19th Century, they were touched by what they saw as a young Amish man and his young Amish woman were riding along side by side on the Sunday afternoon. But, what they heard coming toward them was different. Here from an old Boom Box on the back of the carriage, a deep baseline was laying down some serious Rap. The Amish and rap in a carriage on Sunday afternoon... You tell me God doesn't have a sense of humor... Our God, filled with wonder and awe, has a sense of humor and surprises us—especially when nature and God's special creation people come together.

God's creation is as masterful and magnificent as a Rocky Mountain wreathed in white snow; or a sunrise on a Florida beach full of too many shifting colors to ever name and it can simply come alive for us when a deer emerges from the woods

and smiles on us. The question is – do we enter the awe? Do we give in to the wonder of it all?

To encounter the tougher and harsher realities of our relationship with God, we are given “a God with skin on” in Jesus the Christ. I have spent my life looking at God with skin on. Jesus is not simply an historic character, a First Century peasant along the Mediterranean region known as Palestine. But he is that. He is so much more as he emerges from a carpenter’s workshop to become the one who creates and crafts a reality of care and compassion that changes the world. I have witnessed the story of Jesus, the name of Jesus, the presence of Jesus touch and transform those who have felt forsaken forgotten and left behind to become people who are empowered to change their lives and change the world. In the mix of this Holy Trinity, I would say it is the name and presence of Jesus that changes the world. Mohammed studied Jesus and declared him the greatest prophet of all time. Mahatma Gandhi took Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount – and as a practicing Hindu – used the lessons and principles of peace with justice to overturn an empire – through the power of nonviolence. He is the Redeeming Christ because he saves and turns around broken and hopeless people and situations and makes them hopeful and whole again.

If you step into Jesus' sandals and see the world through his eyes, through his reality, how would you see people differently? Let me frame it another way, "As you look at the brokenness of this world, through the eyes of Jesus, what do you see? What do you encounter?" These are questions for all of us all the time. I see those who trouble me with the eyes of awe and wonder. I see what appeared to be a hopeless situation become a winnable one. I see hope where there was no hope. I see relationships forming where there was only fear or distrust. I encounter the God-spirit in another – when I had only seen the Not-God Spirit in another.

If all we ever had of God were experiences of the Christ, we could spend a lifetime in awe and wonder, but there are times when creation has less concrete experiences. Things intertwine in mystery and we find them harder to define. We need God the Spirit as well.

Now the Spirit comes – late in the sermon.... I love the Spirit. It is mystery and wonder and awe all tied up together. Ten days ago, I was honored to lead a demonstration at the Statehouse. We had gathered to call for the repeal of The American Health Care Act – which has passed the US House and is now in the US Senate where there are revisions being made. We shall see what that means. I shared statistics from the Ohio based Center for Community Solutions. Their

analysis shows a shortfall of \$16-22 billion dollars in Medicaid spending in Ohio. They have data that shows the effect on all 88 counties in Ohio. In Franklin County Alone the AHCA cuts will take \$2.13 BILLION out of our economy. Projections are that 127,000 jobs will be lost in Ohio – 50,000 in health care alone. In out hospitals in outlying counties – counties that overwhelmingly voted for President Trump – the impact will be greater. It is predicted that hospitals will close, emergency services will be deeply affected and lives will be lost by the thousands because all the care is so far away.

At the demonstration, it was an honor to introduce and stand with and march with The Rev. Dr. William Barber, II, pastor of Greenleaf Christian Church and the founder of the Moral Monday Movement in North Carolina (who was front page news in Sunday June 11th's New York Times). As I had brunch Dr. Barber, talked with him and walked to the rally from the Renaissance Hotel, I was struck by the genuineness of this man. He was homegrown from the soil of North Carolina. He reminded me of my North Carolinian mom – down to earth, clear and driven by the doing right in this world. I said to myself, “the Spirit of the Lord is in this man. I have no doubt.” I said that to the 300+ who gathered as well.

The Spirit of the Lord is in this man. The spirit of the Lord is in this place. The Spirit of the Lord IS.... Where?

Can we see it? (sometimes). Can we grab hold of it? (only when we hold to someone who has it!) Can we feel it? (most certainly). The Spirit blows through a room when hearts which were on fire to burn and destroy another are changed to save and protect another. The Spirit enters a person or a place when we call for its arrival and acknowledge its presence. Come Holy Spirit. Thank you, Holy Spirit, ... The spirit is as real AND as amorphous as we allow it to be in our lives. Being Open to the Movement of the Spirit is crucial to actually being able to receive the spirit of God. Wonder and awe. Be open and stay open. It is true – the Holy Spirit is the one who Sustains us. Being sustained in the daily walk of life and faith is no easy matter. Be open to being sustained!

I believe that the doctrine of the Trinity is not nearly as important as the relationships we have that are touched and healed by any (and all) of the “three persons” of the Trinity. We have a saying in our tradition of Christianity, “We believe in Testimonies of Faith, not tests of Faith.” In other words, share your stories. Listen and live into the impact of our Creator, Redeemer and Sustaining God. In preparing for today’s sermon I came across an article written in 1944 in the Missouri-Synod Lutheran journal “The Concordian.” The article spoke of the Congregationalists destroying the formulaic understanding of the Trinity. Because of our forbearers, the

article proclaimed, Christianity would be destroyed by those who rather speak of experiences of faith rather than creeds of faith. It is funny, that nowhere in scripture does God, the Father, God the Son, or God the Holy Spirit write and recite a creed for us. They offer through law and grace; justice and mercy; compassion, love and action “a way” to live in this world.

When Jesus gave us the Great Commission to “*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them all that I have commanded you,*” I believe he was telling us to “move.” To go out to others. To go all people and places. To give each person hope and open to them to the possibility of a life giving and life sustaining relationships with God. We call it discipleship and baptism. But, perhaps we are better suited to simply call it love. I am more convinced each and every day that we are simply and directly and specifically called to love one another. We are called to strip away judgment and divisions and hate and anger. We are called to Embrace love. The Three in One becomes One in Love. This is our greatest commission – to BE disciples of Love. To Baptize others with Love. To see the Creator, the Redeemer and the Sustainer of life and hope through the lenses of awe and wonder – and love.

Blessings to you as you depart to serve with a heart of love and thus to live out the great commission. Amen.

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