

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Janine Wilson, associate minister, at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, May 30, 2010, dedicated to Marilyn Trudell – teacher of so much that is good and generous and kind.

“Recognized and Recognizing”

***Proverbs 8:1-31; Romans 5:1-5;
John 16:12-15***

Ever-present God, we ask that you would teach us to follow you that we may learn to receive one another as you have received us. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Today is recognized around the world as the first week of Pentecost. Last Sunday, we celebrated God’s sending of the Holy Spirit into the world, drawing the church into a new era of new life. We paid special attention to the breath of God by having balloons floating brightly in the chancel – letting the breeze of the air become seemingly visible in the movement of the balloons.

We were in celebration mode. We wore our festive colors – red of all shades and hues – on ties, blouses, dresses and even in the delightful, almost visible, red threads pointed out to us on Tom Stewart’s handsome coat jacket. And floating down over us from above us, the choir filled our ears with their amazing sounds, with added voices of our confirmands singing and playing the trumpet.

On Pentecost we faced the same opportunity and dilemma that believers and writers of scripture have always faced – how to find ways to describe the Spirit of God: it’s like fire floating over heads;

like wind moving where it will; like voices and people from all regions being heard and understood. We weren't thinking about what would come next, we were busy living in the present. Even so, the Spirit of the Living God was busy preparing us for something else. The Spirit was moving forward, leading us toward Trinity Sunday; a time for turning our attention toward the Spirit of God, while calling our attention to the unity of God – of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

It was only 200 years after Jesus that a man by name of Tertullian came along. He became one of early voices of Christian teachings. He was a learned man. He had done his homework well. He knew Latin and Greek, worked in the court system and was therefore accustomed to describing complex ideas in simpler ways. He wasn't raised in the church, the way so many of us have been, but some of us, or people we know, still share things in common with him.

In his early life was lived freely. Some have described it as a pagan life, not unlike that of the one we think of with the younger son in the story of the prodigal son. And then one day his life changed; his lifestyle changed; his faith changed. He became a great teacher and defender of the faith. Tertullian's challenge reminds me of one of our well-known adages: "The more things change the more they remain the same."

The early followers of Jesus believed there was only one God. It hadn't been that many generations before that polytheism, believing in many gods, was a widely held belief; so to talk about this one God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and was confusing. It sometimes sounded a bit like folks were talking about three Gods and therefore committing heresy. In an attempt to explain the relationship nature of God, Tertullian used the phrase, "trinity" – or, "three in one."

Now, you can search the Bible from front to back and back to front and you won't find the word trinity in it. And yet, here we are – celebrating Trinity Sunday because the witness of the seeing, hearing and experiencing, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit working in unity is inescapable in the New Testament.

In his own clerical way of looking at the world, Tertullian must have thought the concept of Trinity crystallized the picture of relationship between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit that the New Testament scribes had written about. He had recognized the Lord and Spirit both rallying together in Paul's words to the Corinthians, proclaiming that the same spirit giving gifts is the "same God who activates them all." (I Cor. 12:4-6) And with him we hear Paul proclaim the teamwork of the Trinity to the Ephesians: "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all." (Eph 4:4-6)

Matthew declared the same thing – he wanted to make it clear that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit were pooling their resources and as he declared the baptismal formula – in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Tertullian also saw how the Old Testament concept of God's spirit and wisdom brought the Father and Son in Proverbs 8, where Wisdom declares, "The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago." And later, we too hear it echoed in John's gospel, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." (John 1:1)

So, is the Trinity simple or complex? Is it at all like a man able to be a son, father and inspiration; or a woman a sister, aunt and mentor and more, only wrapped in mystery and raised to godly scale? Can we hear the persons as distinct and yet one in the Father, Son and Spirit? Can we let in the power of interrelatedness between them? It is your call to wonder as much as believers from the years before us. Once this was clear, the community gathered at what we now know as Pentecost and focused attention on how God promised to always be with us, to never abandon us; and Trinity Sunday calls attention to the Spirit, the Son and the Father. Their connectedness directs us to our own.

God desires to participate in our lives. God loves us in limitless ways. We are loved, cherished and welcomed into the reign of God now and coming. We are justified by faith – not just our faith in God,

but by God's faith in us. God delights in us, and through grace, we are all lined up to fit into eternity. All of which challenges us to wonder how are we doing at offering our part of the same for one another and the world? We are recognized by God, custom-fit for the kingdom, but do we keep our side of the connection lined up?

Those of you who have traveled outside the United States, (and those of you who are careful movie viewers) know something about things fitting together. Other countries are not all calibrated the same way we are; in fact, we are the odd one out. Our speed signs tell us to drive in miles per hour; others call for kilometers per hour. If you bring your hairdryer, bring your adapter with you for the wall plug.

On the other hand, we don't need to go across the ocean, we can see how essential it is to recognize things that fit properly right here in Ohio. When I first started working here at First Church, Rev. Ahrens emailed a couple of documents to my home. I wasn't able to open them because my software was not compatible. The Apostle Paul reminds us we have to desire to be lined up in ways that are compatible with God's hope for us. While God has done God's part, we still have to choose to participate, to choose to be witnesses of the faith we say we have.

So how are your relationships and my own going these days with the people we know in this place, down the street and around the world? Are the words you and I speak and write words of encouragement or discouragement? Are they joyful blessings or only marginally disguised curses? Are our actions intended to build up or tear down? We get to choose. What we choose gives a picture of what we believe. They keep us apart or bring us together.

God has justified us through the love of the Christ and we have a perfect picture of love in the Trinity. When we look at the Father, Son and Spirit we witness unity and interdependence. Do our relationships mirror even a frail image of such love as this?

I don't remember where I first heard it, but it has lived with me for years now – three questions for living together in peace and hope as the family of God: Is it true? Is it kind? Does it build up the body

of Christ? I find it a helpful quiz to guide my daily choices of words and actions, and then as a thoughtful review before my prayers. I confess that when I pose these questions, I never run out of things to talk about with God. I always discover I need a fresh start. The word trinity may not appear in your Bible, but the relationship of God and how God calls us to be in relationship is designed to be reflected in our lives.

Aristotle begins his discussion of good by essentially inviting the listener to wonder – if you want to know what’s good then look at what you like to eat. He uses this in a broader sense, but we can apply it in ways close to home and heart.

How many of us, when we think of our role models in the faith, think of food? Maybe that person is a grandmother or Uncle whose meals and special recipes you still look back on with delight. And that person’s wisdom, their essential connection to goodness, stemmed from all that she did to feed and nurture others, whether it was you, or family, or friends, or even strangers. The kind of wisdom and goodness that God calls us to through the example of the trinity is not contained in just one act—nor even a string of several similar acts. No, it is a relationship to the good that involves a person’s whole being. She does not just cook a good meal; she is a good cook. Her craft, her time and her goodness all become part of those whom she serves. She brings a hint of the sustenance of the Trinity to them.

Your role model of faith may not be a cook at all. He or she may be a good teacher; one whom Parker Palmer might describe as weaving together the subject, their own integrity and the identity of their students on “the loom of the heart.” This weaving is where all of wisdom comes from, whether teacher or cook or someone else. This is the character of the heart and mind of the triune God. They challenge us to wonder how we emulate our role models.

How do you take whatever is at the very heart of your own identity and make sure that it is linked to goodness and shared with all those whom God puts in your life? God has recognized us. God has justified us. Our relationship to God is impacted by our

relationship with others. May we give to others as we have received and continue to receive from our Triune God. Amen.

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