

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Janine Wilson, associate minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Trinity Sunday, June 19, 2011, dedicated with joy to the children and grandchildren of First Congregational Church, UCC, Columbus – our most profound teachers of wonder and mystery.

“Pay Attention to the Texture”

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

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Let us pray. We give you thanks Amazing God, for the sound of birds welcoming this day; for sirens and those in need rushing to the hospital; and for our gathering to worship this morning. 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 sing, “Holy, Holy, Holy . . . God in three persons, blessed Trinity,” and it sounds majestic, divine, even sung by a small choir of voices. The minister blesses the baby at the font by saying, “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. We teach the children that God is one in three 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 even when grown up, we still wonder “How that can be”?

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. Technically speaking, that is correct I suppose – but the Bible is full of allusions to the three in one nature of God. In the Creation story, 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. And perhaps the greatest mention of our Trinitarian God, and of 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? How do we reconcile the difficult *concept* of the Trinity with our commission to continue the work of Christ, in the name of the Father and the 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 faith take us directly to the cross, font, table and out into the world. Wonder also 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 infuses 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 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, 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 waters and the sky; the sea-monsters and the birds of the air. And on days like today, at the break of day, the fog was rising up separating the primordial waters and the beasts of field and forest surrounded us—whenever we take time to look.

Our creative God also possesses an impeccable sense of timing and a great sense of humor. On our way back from finalizing some wedding plans in Kentucky for Katie Ann and Scott this past week, we were driving up Highway 71 between Louisville and Cincinnati. My husband and I started talking about our sermons for this Sunday. Just as I started to read the creation story from Genesis, in fact at the very point where I am often most moved, I glanced out the van window at the lush green rolling hills of the Kentucky, and saw . . . an enormous wild Turkey! Some people catch sight of triple rainbows, I spotted a turkey.

God's creation is as masterful and magnificent as a Rocky Mountain wreathed in white snow; or a sunrise in Florida full of too many shifting colors to ever name, and it is comes in as a gangly and awkward, three foot high neck-jiggling, muddy, brown bird along the side of the road. All of these are more than things to simply observe, when we invite them in, they become an experience of God's unique *texture* as Creator.

If all we ever had of God were experiences of the Creation, we could spend a lifetime in awe and wonder, but there are times when creation has a harsher agenda than we can rise to on our own, we need God the redeeming savior as well.

Part of my growing connection to our Redeeming Christ grew out of my seminary clinical pastoral education experience – alias CPE. It's a requirement for many students who go into ministry. It often includes supervised chaplaincy in a hospital. There are lots of reasons for it – one the more obvious reasons is that pastors called to serve in congregations are also called into homes and hospitals on a regular basis to visit, reassure, guide and pray with their members.

There is no single way to teach anyone how to be fully present spiritually, emotionally and intellectually given all the situations a pastor will face in ministry. Hospitals however, offer an amazing cross-section of experiences in a fairly short amount of time. In the course of any given day, a hospital chaplain may run the gamut – from being with a mom who has joyfully welcomed a new baby into the world, to being with a family who just said goodbye to their child, parent, partner or grandparent – and everything in between. Three months of walking in the shoes of a chaplain can give ministers in training a challenging variety of experiences that solicit joy, fear, sadness, and anger and lots of other feelings and thoughts. All of these help prepare them for congregational ministry.

Throughout the months in CPE, student ministers are taught to notice, learn and build up positive skills; while simultaneously discovering and letting go of some not-so-helpful or even destructive habits. Supervisors require things like looking for the intersection of faith and life, or more precisely, ways to unite listening skills and theology. One of the most valuable questions I had to respond to in every verbatim I wrote was: “Did you find yourself looking at, or through, the eyes of Christ in the encounter?” It is a question for all of us all the time. It helped me to understand that to some degree, part of a chaplain's job, is to repeatedly point to, recognize or even in some small way, become the presence of Christ, the redeemer. Then one day it hit home and I realized that is our shared job as Christians. It is yours, mine and ours.

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.

There is a phenomenon many Christians resonate with, especially those who engage in church mission ministries. Missioners sign up to help others. They feed the hungry, provide clothes to people in need; maybe even go on a mission trip the way our youth will be doing this summer. They want to help, they feel called to reach out, but someplace in the midst of helping, they discover how much more they gained than they gave away.

Not long ago, over a cup of warm coffee, a neighboring pastor told me about one of his youth group mission trips to West Virginia. The plan had been to shingle a rooftop and maybe do a little painting. When they arrived, it turned out they were not only scheduled to do that, but to also pull debris from the mosquito infested muck of a stream to clean up and beautify its banks. Their first response was a low-level panic. They wondered *what* had they gotten themselves into?

When the last night came they were all sitting around their campfire looking back. Several talked about how surprised they were that they could manage both tasks. Their conclusion was that they couldn't have done it without knowing God was with them in every breath and they would not have felt God's presence without the kindness of the people they'd met during the week.

They thought back to the day the elderly lady whose house they had refurbished and the surprise they had when she called them in after work to share a simple meal – a meal she pulled together from her own meager pantry – they were humbled. They filled the house and out onto the porch. They were humbled.

They also laughed at the task of sticking their arms into the muck and clearing the shoreline . . . and how funny it was when at the heat of the day the neighborhood boy brought them a beat-up thermos full of cool water. His kindness and desire to help startled them. Still, they laughed a little later, when he wasn't around

wondering if he had gotten the water from above or below the place they had cleaned up.

It was odd when they recognized that one night they were hungry and a poor woman fed them . . . and then when they were thirsty, a young man gave them cold water to drink. It may have been the Christ in their midst, but the Aha felt like the Spirit had flipped the story upside down.

When we open up the possibilities - who we are and who we might become, not only does the texture of our life deepen, the texture of God's being does too. The Sustainer, Dreamer Spirit moves across the face of the earth as the very breath of God the Spirit. It blows where it wills and we discover things have happen not only through us, but sometimes to us at the very same instant. One minute you may be a big brother or sister, the next a strong friend in faith, the next moment one weeping as you pray, even wondering if you can pray anymore...and then suddenly, a cloud breaks open and you know God was present in ways that are one in three and three in one.

Neither the teaching nor the concept of the Trinity is meant to "hem us in." It is instead, a challenge and invitation to consider the many ways the love and presence of God enter our life, not only right here and right now – but at the juncture of every "right now" that comes along. God's varied texture calls us to wonderment. It has *elements of consistency, reliability, curiosity and even occasional mischief.*

What I know beyond a shadow of doubt about the Trinity is this: Throughout our lives there will always be new ways for God to become known to us, and even through us. Let us pay attention and proclaim the mystery.

May *"the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you."*(2 Cor 13:13)
Amen.

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