

“Three in One and One in Three”

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

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens
Senior Minister

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From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, June 4, 2023, Trinity Sunday, dedicated to all our mission partners – youth and adults – serving Christ in our city this week and always to the glory of God!

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*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations
of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock,
and our salvation. Amen.*

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We, as Christians, love the concept of the 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 when sung by only a few 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 well up in our eyes and our hearts. Just a few weeks ago, as our two Confirmands were welcomed into full membership and 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, “What? 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 in one and one in three?

I believe that as a concept, the 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, he is correct, I suppose – although 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: Wind, Word and Matter. 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 to 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 28:19: *“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.”*

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**.

I was in Florida for the past three days. I was there to celebrate my grandson Ethan's kindergarten graduation from his Christian Academy – Grace Fellowship. The graduation was lovely, and he was well celebrated by his school and family throughout Florida and me (Susan had to finish her school year back here...so I was solo). There in the Panhandle of Florida, I was aware of a much different environment than where I usually spent my time – sultry, swampy, filled with gators and to top it off – the home of America's leading book banning governor.

As I was praying and reflecting on “threes” and with Trinity Sunday around the corner, I was made aware of one of the governor's top banned books, *And Tango Makes Three*. It is a children's book out now 18 years – most of which have been on someone's banned book list somewhere.

And Tango Makes Three is based on a true story about two penguins in the Central Park Zoo in New York City. Roy and Silo were two real male chinstrap penguins who fell in love. They did everything together – sing, swim, built a nest and even sat on a rock thinking it was an egg. The zookeeper noticed this and brought Roy and Silo an extra egg from one of the females which needed someone to care for it until hatching. They did just that. When the egg hatches, the zookeeper names the little female Tango. People came from everywhere to the zoo and cheered the family of three – Roy, Silo and Tango. Tango grew up happy and healthy with two dads. In God's creative order – (including the homo sapien part of the creative order) – families come in diverse configurations!

And this is where the Trinity and book banning come together. For most of the last ten years, Tango has been mocked and challenged by those who are threatened by God's creative order and a different kind of Trinity – true though it is. It reminds me of a 1944 article I discovered written in the Missouri-Synod Lutheran journal “The Concordian.” The article accused the

Congregationalists of 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 – even though nowhere in scripture does the Triune God – God the Father, God the Son, or God the Holy Spirit write or recite a creed for us.

I have been told I see patterns and connections that others don't see. Here is what I see on this Trinity Sunday: I see that love – in God and in humanity – is always relational (and not creedal) and loves happens in the Trinity and cannot be named and claimed as exclusive to certain people – and their limited and limiting way of defining love. What they see and say about the Holy Trinity or Penguins in love is only allowed with their exclusive interpretation.

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. Stop, look, listen, and you will see the awe and wonder of God at work.

So, let's try it out. Take your wonder about God the father, mother, parent-Creator. Consider Genesis and the stories of creation. Are you able to let it touch your heart? Stop, look, listen, and be still. Do you see our Creator God touching the earth? To protect the earth is given into our power by God in the earliest words of Genesis. We need to do this – a little bit every day. 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?

In Jesus there is also wonder and awe. In Him, we encounter the tougher and harsher realities of our relationship with God as 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. In 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.

Then the Spirit completes the Trinity (just as Tango completes the family). 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!

Three in One and One in Three. Once again, 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 the United Church of Christ – “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. They offer through law and grace; justice and mercy; compassion and action “a way” to live – in love with 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 to all people and places. To give each person hope and open to them the possibility of a life giving and life sustaining relationships with God.

We call it discipleship and baptism. 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.

Let us turn our hearts to the Table of Love. Here we can tango with God – Three in One and One in Three. Amen.

