



TRINITY SUNDAY: UCC SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY SUNDAY, MAY 18, 2008

The Scriptures of the Day

Genesis 1:1-2:4a

Psalm 8

2 Corinthians 13:11-13

Matthew 28:16-20

This Sunday, we celebrate the Holy Trinity, as a doctrine of the church, and inspiration to the Christian explorations in science and technology in an era in which many Christians see the relationship between faith and science as ambiguous at best. At first glance, the celebration of Trinity Sunday appears to have little to do with issues of science and technology. On the one hand, the doctrine of the Trinity is, perhaps, the least empirically verifiable Christian doctrine, often omitted in contemporary theological treatises, while the scientific method claims to be rooted in realities that are, in principle, measurable, observable, and quantifiable. On the other hand, the doctrine of the Trinity seems to have little to do with the every day lives of mainstream and progressive Christians, whether in preaching or decision-making, while issues of science and technology make front page news, transform our lives, and are often subjects of ethical and educational controversy. But, perhaps, the doctrine of the Trinity and issues of science and technology really do have something in common. The doctrine of the Trinity describes the complexity and creativity of God who brings forth the universe, influences the affairs of humans and nations, and inspires personal commitment and creativity.

If the dynamic movements of God, described by the doctrine of the Trinity, are omnipresent and omni-active in cosmic and personal experience, then traces of the Trinity can be found in the scientific adventure, even though the Trinity itself, or the direct actions of God in human life, cannot be objects of research or verified empirically.¹ A lively affirmation of divine complexity and creativity enables us to recognize God's presence in the quest for truth and healing, whether it is found in the sanctuary, retreat center, laboratory, or operating room. Even if the name of God is not invoked, we can affirm that God is at work seeking abundant life wherever truth and

¹ While medical research on the impact of meditation, intercessory prayer, and religious commitment suggests the existence of a "faith factor" that positively influences human life, medical research is limited to studying the association of certain religious behaviors, such as praying for persons following surgery, with positive health outcomes. To the surprise of many faithful persons, the prayer studies focus on human, rather than divine, activity and cannot "prove" that God answers prayer. Theologically speaking, we can affirm the role of prayer in transforming our lives, including our physical and spiritual well-being. But, theologically and scientifically, we need to remain "agnostic" in terms of God's role in answers to prayer. While I believe God influences our lives and uses our prayers to create a healing environment in the lives of those for whom we pray, we cannot fully fathom God's vision of what is best in any particular situation, nor can we assume that God's vision is restricted to immediate and individualistic answers to prayer. As a relational reading of Romans 8:18-28 suggests, answers to prayer may, in fact, involve the well-being of the planetary community rather than the well-being of a solitary individual. For more on the relationship of prayer, medicine, and healing, see Bruce Epperly, *God's Touch: Faith, Wholeness, and the Healing Miracles of Jesus* (Westminster/John Knox, 2001); *Walking in the Light: A Jewish-Christian Vision of Healing and Wholeness*, written with Rabbi Lewis Solomon (Chalice Press, 2004); and *Healing Worship: Purpose and Practice* (Pilgrim Press, 2006).

well-being are sought and experienced. Reclaiming a holistic understanding of the Trinity may enable contemporary Christians to integrate mysticism and science, healing and medicine, poetry and cosmology, and values and technology in ways that will bring wholeness to our individual and corporate enterprises.

The Genesis 1:1-2:4a account of creation is best understood as a poetic and liturgical vision of the cosmos rather than a scientific description of the processes of cosmic, planetary, and human creation and evolution. The vision of an emerging universe and planet are intended to inspire wonder, gratitude, worship, and ethics. The two Genesis accounts of creation, found in Genesis 1:1-2:4a and Genesis 2:4b-24 provide a spiritual and theological framework within which the human adventure in its broadest strokes, whether scientific, medical, and technological, finds guidance, value, and meaning. While mainstream Christians may not be able to reclaim the words “intelligent design,” given their identification with scientific creationism, young earth theory, six-day creation, and Christian fundamentalism as descriptive of the Genesis creator, surely the God portrayed in Genesis manifests an aesthetic and creative intelligence that brings forth galaxies, animal and plant life, and humankind. God’s own creative intelligence inspires and serves as the model for the best of human creativity and artistry. Further, the orderly structures of the universe, grounded in divine creativity and wisdom, have served within the West as the metaphysical foundation for the scientific endeavor. The appropriate balance of novelty and order makes scientific knowledge possible.

According to many biblical scholars, the God, described in Genesis, creates from a formless void, an unstructured and unordered chaos, rather than in terms of the later doctrine of “creation out of nothing.” Whether divine creation is from a pre-existing chaos or from nothingness (creation ex nihilo), as Augustine, Barth, and others have suggested, the best of divine and human creativity involves an ongoing call and response in which the creator brings forth something novel, beautiful, and imaginative from the materials (human or non-human) with which the creator interacts. While Genesis does not give us a method of world and planetary creation, it describes an emerging universe and planet in which God’s creative word brings forth more complex life forms, dependent for their existence on a web of interdependence involving the movements of planets, stars, and sea, the regularity of the seasons, and plants and animals which existence not only for their sake, but are the source of human nourishment.

It has been said that philosophy, theology, and science all begin with a sense of wonder. Surely, this sense of wonder is at the heart of both Psalm 8 and Genesis 1:2:4a. While the Psalmist could only imagine the world of billions of galaxies, each with at least a billion suns and solar systems, characteristic of contemporary cosmology, the Psalmist expresses the sense of awe that we feel as we look at the evening sky, gaze upon the sunrise, or examine photographs taken from the Hubble telescope. According to the Psalmist, our planet and its affairs are dwarfed by the immensity of the universe and the creator who is sovereign over all things. Scientist, theologian, and faithful believer alike, exclaim, “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, and mortals that you care for them?”

In imagining the immensity of the universe, some physicists have postulated that in a universe that has no absolute center, all places can be perceived as the center of the universe. In this same spirit, mystics have proclaimed that “God is the circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.” God is infinite, yet intimate. The entirety of divine creativity is resident in each entity, even the hazelnut, as the mystic Julian of Norwich asserts. From this perspective, all things reveal God, but nothing fully reveals God. Our treasures, whether

scientific, theological, or technological, are clothed in earthen vessels. While they reveal the truths of the universe, they never fully encompass the wisdom and wonder of God and God's creative world. Humility is the only proper attitude for the scientist and theologian alike.

Unfortunately, both Psalm 8 and Genesis 1:1-2:4a have been read in ways that suggest that humankind can do as it wishes with the non-human world. Such misunderstandings of "dominion" have left in their wake species destruction, global warming, and economic exploitation. While Genesis, chapters 1-2, and Psalm 8 describe humans as unique on the planet, our uniqueness has a vocational quality. Rather than destroying and subduing the non-human world, we are called to be the "shepherds of being" (Heidegger) and the "gardeners of creation." (Epperly) When humankind forgets that "the earth is God's and the fullness thereof," we misuse the creation we are intended to honor and nurture. Our creativity is intended to mend the world (tikkin 'olam) and to add to the beauty that is inherent in all life.

Paul's blessing at the conclusion of 2 Corinthians is an affirmation that the Trinity is ultimately relational in nature. Grace, communion, and love characterize the dance of the Trinity and God's relationship with the world. In a similar fashion, Matthew's description of Jesus' farewell to his disciples is equally relational in character. All nations are embraced in the waters of baptism. The name, the creative word of God, joins Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Creator, Redeemer, and Inspirer of all things. We are saved by God's intimate presence in the midst of persecution or as we ponder strategies to save a planet threatened by ecological destruction. We can persevere with hope, even as we face our own hopelessness as we look at our planet's present and future, because Christ promises, "I am with you always, to the end of the age."

From the perspective of today's scriptures, we can celebrate the scientific adventure. The quest to understand the universe is a holy task just as medical and scientific discoveries reflect God's quest for healing, wholeness, and abundant life. Science and faith are not opposed to each other, but complement and enhance our sense of wonder and our calling to heal and enhance human life. Faithfulness to God calls Christians to embrace with gratitude the gifts of scientific discovery and technological achievement, even as we examine the ethical implications of science and technology in our time. In a culture of polarization, we are called to affirm that "God is still speaking" in the interplay of faith, medicine, science, and technology.

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Worship for Science and Technology Sunday

Worship on Trinity Sunday, Science and Technology Sunday in the United Church of Christ, can embrace all the senses. Images from the Hubble telescope and photographs of the night sky can be placed side by side with photographs of hospital rooms, laboratories, and major figures in science and medicine. We can set side by side images of the universe as well as the immune system. We can also post photographs of noted scientists, along with statements that reflect their appreciation of the mysteries of life and the role of faith in their own spiritual journeys.

In the prayers of the people, the leader may invite persons to give thanks for the benefits of science and technology in their lives, for example, in the use of x-rays and C-T scans, chemotherapy, space travel, heart by-pass surgery, AIDS research, desalinization, the skill of surgeons, the dedication of those who study climate change.

In prayers of confession, we note 1) times in which we have misused our scientific powers and 2) the continuous challenge to support, yet ethically examine, new scientific discoveries.

Our prayers of gratitude and confession can be framed in the context of our ultimate affirmation of the goodness of life and the wondrous complexity and immensity of the universe journey and the God moving through the cells of our bodies and the stars in the sky.

In contrast to the media and religious reports of “culture wars” between faith and science, the children’s sermon can celebrate faithful persons who have also been scientists, such as Charles Townes, a United Church of Christ layperson. A physician, nurse, researcher, or scientist in the congregation can share her or his insights with the congregation in the context of a “word from the faithful” or the children’s sermon.

While there are many hymns appropriate to the occasion, the following hymns from the *New Century Hymnal* are among those that reflect the wonder of the universe and the challenges of scientific creativity in our time:

For the Beauty of the Earth, 28
From All That Dwell Below the Skies, 27
God, Who Stretched the Spangled Heavens, 536
Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise, 1
I Sing the Mighty Power of God, 12
God of Change and Glory, 177
God of the Sparrow, God of the Whale, 32
How Great Thou Art (O Mighty God, When I Survey in Wonder), 35
Joyful, Joyful, We Adore You, 4
Let Heaven Your Wonders Proclaim, 29
Many and Great, O God, Are Your Works (Wakantanka Taku Nitawa), 3
O Grant Us, God, a Little Space, 516
Praise the Source of Faith and Learning, 411
Praise to the Living God, 8

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