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First Congregational Church  
United Church of Christ  
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## One God

It is remarkable how the suggested universal lectionary readings of scripture for any given Sunday sometimes correspond to what is happening in a local church that day. This week I was astonished by it.

Here, this morning, we each took our appropriate parts in the baptism of a beautiful baby belonging to a wonderful family whose members represent different cultural and religious traditions. How rich Isabel's experience will be as she learns to value her heritage and benefit from each part of it!

*Go, therefore, Jesus said, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,... (Matthew 28:19)*

What is known as the Great Commission seems straight forward enough, but for many of us, it gets somewhat knotty when it comes to the details. It involves three many-faceted Christian propositions.

The command to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations raises the issue of the comparison of Christianity to other religions and what Christians are to think of other religions. The command to baptize might bring us to consider the meaning of baptism. The idea of baptizing in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit may serve as pretext to deliberation about the nature of the Trinity. Wow! Those, my friends, are some big issues.

Volumes have been written about each of these subjects and it would be the height of foolishness to attempt to respond to all three in one sermon. Well, something about fools rushing in where angels fear to tread! Are you intrepid enough to consider these issues with me this morning? If not, you may want to begin a daydream or two.

Of the first question, what is the comparison of Christianity to other religions? Is it superior to them? Yes, I believe it is. After all, it is my religion. I think I need to say it this way because, you know what, I don't really know that much about other religions and I think I would not be mistaken to suggest that neither do the rest of us know much about other religions. Thus, I do not say that Christianity is superior to other religions as a result of extensive study of all the major religions of the world, concluding from that study that Christianity has come out on top for me. For goodness sakes, if that was the case what a dull pedantic religion I might have! Religion, rather, is of its nature something other than objective, it is by its nature subjective; it is experiential, it is bias, it

is tradition, it is heritage. That's what makes it so powerful. It is not irrational, but finally it is more than rational. That's why it requires faith.

The story of my faith goes something like this. I was baptized as an infant and raised as a Christian and through this tradition I believe I have had some very real experiences of God. These personal experiences have validated Christianity for me. Because my experience of God through my faith in Christ is real to me I trust that when Christ said to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations it is as right a thing to do as when he tells me to love my neighbor as I love myself. I understand that those who believe that they have experienced God through other faith traditions will likely differ with me about the value of Christianity. They may well believe that their religion is superior to mine. That I would actually expect. After all, it is their religion.

So how should people of different religions who each think that their own religion is the right religion, relate? Well, I think they should talk to each other, respect each other, and learn from each other. Just because we believe that God has revealed God's self to the world with final authority through our own religion does not mean that God has not revealed God's self through other religions too. Unless we are willing to say that people of other religions have no knowledge of God at all, no matter how devoutly they worship and practice love in their lives, love which we Christians believe is the very nature of God and which is always evidence of the presence of God; and unless we believe that no one had knowledge of God before Jesus came to earth and thus we exclude all the Old Testament heroes of the Bible as well as the very prophets themselves whom we believe even predicted the coming of Christ as also having no knowledge of God because Jesus had not come to earth yet; if we are not willing to say that all those people present and past have no knowledge of God at all because they are not Christians, do we not need to allow then that they have knowledge of God and have come into contact with God through their own religions, and so their religions are worthy of respect, and we ought even be able to learn from them? In short, everyone is biased about the final authority of their religion. That is what makes it religion. But we don't need to fight or even argue with each other about whose religion is best. If we do that we are not being true to our religions, we are just exercising our egos.

Concerning the nature of baptism \_ get ready this is going to be quick. We might sum up the understanding of baptism in the United Church of Christ as any method, any way. I really don't think that is taking our position too far. On the other hand, there are other churches which insist on pouring, or sprinkling or dunking. There are those who insist on baptism only in a river, as John the Baptist did in the river Jordan. In the United Church of Christ we believe that baptism signifies a person's entry into the life and participation in the Christian church as well as a means of grace given by God to help the baptized grow in Christian faith and practice. As such, we believe that baptism is a gift of grace for this life. It is not the means of salvation for the next life. It is not the means by which the penalty of original sin is blotted out. The United Church of Christ holds no doctrine that a baby is born guilty because he or she has had passed down to him or her as through a sort of spiritual DNA the guilt of sins committed by previous generations going all the way back to Adam. Most of us in the United Church of Christ and many other

protestant denominations think such an idea is nonsense and that a baby is as innocent in the eyes of God as in our own eyes. We baptized Isabel as her entrance into the church and we believe that through the sacrament God has begun a special presence with her to help her to grow up well and one day choose for herself to be a Christian. In short, in the United Church of Christ, we believe that baptism is a blessing for this life, not one that is essential for salvation in the next.

Now, for the Trinity \_ Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In brief, apart from what may be some interesting mental gymnastics exercised by the more studious among us; can we just not over complicate this? The Creator is God, Jesus is God, the Holy Spirit is God. If you want to separate them into three individuals who are members of one Godhead, fine. If you want to say they are three manifestations of one God, fine. If you want to say that they are roles or parts that the One God plays in the universe, fine. Because you know what, in this world so hungry for the love of God and God's people, it absolutely doesn't matter how you attempt to make logical sense of the Trinity. The Creator is God, Jesus is God, the Holy Spirit is God; and God always, always, always, loves us and cares for us, forgives us and renews us, guides us and comforts us. That is the knowledge that is important. That understanding matters very much.

Once there were little children coming to Jesus and the disciples tried to stop them. But Jesus forbade it. He took the children up into his arms and blessed them. He said, whoever does not welcome the reign of God \_ in other words, whoever does not welcome the rule of God \_ in other words whoever does not welcome the rule of love, everywhere and every time, whoever does not welcome that as a little child welcomes that, such person does not know God, no matter that person's family, no matter that person's religion. But let's make it positive. Whoever welcomes the rule of love in every situation as a little child welcomes it, that person knows God no matter that person's family, no matter that person's religion.

This morning, Isabel began her life in the church, the receiving and the giving. She has received the acceptance of the church and the acceptance and grace of God, and she has given to us a precious lesson of what matters in religion and what does not.

*The wolf shall lie down with the lamb, Isaiah wrote, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. (Isaiah 11:6)*