Sunday, September 18, 1988
WHAT DO WE BELIEVE ABOUT GOD? (No. 1 in a Series: The Statement of Faith)
Genesis 1:1-2,26-27; John 1:1-5

Today, we begin a sermon series based on the United Church of Christ Statement of Faith.

Statements of Faith or Creeds are as old as the church itself. Many of you may have memorized the Apostle's Creed as a young person. "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth," is the first phrase of that Creed. Another ancient creed is known as "The Nicene Creed," and it begins similarly: "I believe in one God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible."

In 1957, when the United Church of Christ was formed through the merger of the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church, a new Statement of Faith was written — not as a test of faith, but as a testimony to what we commonly believe. You have a copy of that Statement in your Order of Service.

Look at that Statement now and notice that, in format, it is primarily a recital of the activity of God. God is not described in abstract terms but in terms of actions — this is what God has done and is doing.

These acts of God are framed between the opening statement—"We believe in God, the Eternal Spirit, who is made known to us in Jesus our brother, and to those deeds we testify:"—and the closing statement—"Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto God." In between these, seven actions of God are listed: "God calls the worlds into being… God seeks in holy love… God judges… In Jesus, God has come to us… God bestows upon us the Holy Spirit… God calls us into the church… God promises."

Note particularly that the Statement of Faith is in the present tense, indicating that God's activity is ongoing. Also, note that the Statement begins with the pronoun "We." "We believe." Our faith, our belief, is not only an individual matter but grows out of a community of faith. The community has a long history; it has a memory. As individuals, we have short histories that frequently need checking against the community's longer history.

When we say, "We believe," we are saying that this is what the Christian community has held in common throughout its history, and this is what binds us together.

What do we believe? First of all, we believe in God. All things begin with God: all religions, all creation, all of us. The opening sentence of the Bible begins with God: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." God has always been. There is nothing prior to or before God. God was not created.

But what is the nature of this God we say we believe in? The rest of the Statement of Faith describes some of God's activity, and we'll be talking about those actions of God in future sermons in this series. But what else can we say about God? As we recruit and train Sunday Church School teachers, what kind of God are we asking them to portray? As we talk with people about God in the hospital facing terminal illness, or others who have experienced some deep tragedy, what can we say to them about God? As ministers prepare to teach the Confirmation Class, what metaphors are appropriate to use in today's world in talking about God?

Now let's take a little detour in this sermon and talk for a bit about metaphors and adjectives we commonly use in talking about God.

As little children, we used to say to those who called us names we didn't like, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt me." But that's not true. It is the names that hurt. Sometimes one would prefer the sticks and stones. Names matter because what we call something, how we name it, is, to a large extent, what it is to us.

In a book published last year entitled Models of God, Sallie McFague reminds us that we human beings are creatures of language, and though language does not exhaust human reality, it qualifies it in profound ways. So naming can be hurtful, and it can also be healing or helpful. Thus, the names or metaphors or words we use to describe God can either hinder us in our understanding of God or expand our understanding.

Dr. McFague goes on to argue — and I agree wholeheartedly with her — that we live most of the time by outmoded, anachronistic names and metaphors, especially in reference to God. What this does is limit our ideas about God and how the world is put together.

Some examples: More and more, we are learning from physics, biology, and chemistry that the creation we live in is interdependent. Nothing is itself taken alone. Things are what they are because of their interrelations and interconnections. We are learning to see creation in a holistic way. We are what we are because of our relationships, and this is true not only of human beings but of everything in creation.

We human beings could not live without other human beings, and equally significant, we could not live without the millions of microbes and bacteria which live in and are a part of all of us. As Dr. Lewis Thomas said, "Without them, we could not move a muscle, drum a finger, or think a thought." We are embedded in nature. Again, as Dr. Lewis Thomas put it, "The old, clung-to notions most of us have held about our special lordship are being deeply undermined. A good case can be made for our nonexistence as entities."

In the past, we human beings tended to think of ourselves as being totally separated from nature, and we even saw bacteria and other microbes as enemies. Individualism was emphasized in every realm. We talked about conquering nature, about domination, rather than seeing that we are a part of nature and creation and interrelated.

Huston Smith, in contrasting Western and Eastern attitudes toward nature, wrote:

"When Mount Everest was scaled, the phrase commonly used in the West to describe the feat was 'The Conquest of Everest.' An Oriental whose writings have been deeply influenced by Taoism remarked, 'We would put the matter differently. We would speak of the befriending of Everest.'"

This emphasis on individualism, on separateness, on power and domination, can also be seen in some of our old ways of describing and understanding God. One of the adjectives used most frequently in describing God has been and still is "Almighty." Other metaphors used in reference to God are king, lord, and father.

In cruder versions of this way of looking at God, God is the king who fights on the side of his chosen ones to bring their enemies down. In more refined versions, God is the father who will not let his children suffer.

Now look at the implications. Two groups of American Christians currently rely on these images of God in their responses to the nuclear situation: One group claims that if a nuclear holocaust comes, it will be God's will — the Armageddon — and America should arm itself to fight the devil's agent, communist Russia; the other group passively relies on the all-powerful father to take care of the situation.

What neither version supports is any human responsibility for the world, and both see power only in terms of domination.

The question then for us is, what are some new and additional metaphors and adjectives we can use for describing and understanding God? I'm not saying that we need to throw out all the older and more traditional metaphors — only that we need new and additional ones. And we need also to remember that they are metaphors — attempts at description. All too frequently, we make a metaphor or an adjective into hard doctrine. For example, to say God is like a father is not to say that God is masculine. Nor is it to identify God with "father," but rather to understand God in light of some of the characteristics associated with being a father.

Here's how Sallie McFague puts it: "The primary metaphors in the Christian tradition are hierarchical, imperialistic, and dualistic, stressing the distance between God and the world and the total reliance of the world on ruler, lord, master, and governor, and the concepts that accompany them of God as absolute, complete, transcendent, and omnipotent permit no sense of mutuality, shared responsibility, reciprocity, and love (except in the sense of gratitude)."

Dr. McFague goes on to suggest that some new and additional metaphors for God in our time are God as mother, lover, and friend. She further suggests another metaphor is to see the world or the cosmos as God's body. These models of God, she believes, will help us see power in unified, interdependent ways quite different from the view of power as either domination or benevolence. We will be using some of these new metaphors in more detail later in this sermon series.

But now let's get back from our little detour on metaphors and the need for new and additional ones to the Statement of Faith and what it says about our belief in God.

Look at the opening sentence: "We believe in God, the Eternal Spirit, who is made known to us in Jesus our brother, and to whose deeds we testify."

To believe in God is to believe there is a basic intentionality at work throughout the cosmos, a purpose in creation, and that life has meaning. It is an affirmation about life itself.

But now the belief becomes more specific. God is not only the eternal spirit that pervades the universe so that the world is like God's body, but this God is uniquely made known to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

Then the Statement of Faith continues: "God calls the worlds into being, (notice the plural), creates humankind in the divine image, and sets before us the ways of life and death."

This is another way of saying that God is in all of creation everywhere. This is a Statement of Faith for the space age. God has created everything that is, not only this tiny earth on which we live, and God is still at work creating. Science tells us that new universes are being launched at this very moment, stars exploding, planets being formed. God also calls into being the worlds of mind and thought and spirit; the worlds other than the physical, the world of life after death, and all that goes with it. If we find living beings on other planets, it is our faith that God is still One, the same God is behind all, in all, and through all. God is the One in whom we live, move, and have our being.

“God creates humankind in the divine image.” With the word “image,” we do not mean physical resemblance. In the divine image means there is a part of God, a capacity for God, a thirst for God, a divine spark within each one of us. It means we are capable of deep love; we are capable of working with God in creation; we are capable of deciding. God has created us to be responsible human beings. We are not puppets on a string with God pulling the strings.

What does what we have been saying about God mean to you personally? To begin with, I hope you will begin to think of God in some new ways with fresh metaphors. For example, the picture of God as a loving mother or as a parent of the world represents God as a creator intimately and impartially concerned with life in all its manifestations and levels. God as a parent is on the side of life as such and seeks to save you and all people and creation itself from aimlessness and sin. God loves the world, which means that God loves you and everything in the world. Amen.