

**The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush  
The Reverend Heather T. Schoenewolf  
East Liberty Presbyterian Church  
May 2, 2010  
“Ask the Pastor”**

*In today’s service, Rev. Bush and Rev. Schoenewolf responded to questions that the church youth had previously submitted.*

*Rev. Schoenewolf: Randy and I were both impressed at how profound the questions were that our youth had asked at our last retreat. And how universal. Most of the questions are not particularly “kid” questions – they are essential questions about our faith that we all have asked—or ask each day.*

### **1) How are God and Jesus the same? How are they different?**

*Rev. Schoenewolf responds:*

This is a question that is really about the Trinity. In church history we know that the doctrine of the Trinity emerged out of just this sort of question, where the early church tried to sort out how to maintain monotheistic worship while also worshipping Jesus. The early church gave voice to a mysterious understanding that while God is one, there are three distinct relationships within the Godhead: Creator, or Father; Redeemer, or Son; Sustainer, or Spirit. How can they be one and the same, and different and unique at the same time?

The early church gave a name to this concept: *homoousia*, which means “same substance”—one divine substance, characterized by three distinct relationships. It is a mysterious concept, so we try to find metaphors we understand. St. Augustine says: “Lover, beloved, and love.” Some use ice, water and steam to describe one substance and three different ways of being that substance or of relating to that substance. But we have to remember, though, that the trinity is all three at once—not, like an ice cube, where you only have one mode of being at a time. With kids I talk about *Play-doh*; reminding them that even if you have three different colors of Play-doh mixed together into one ball, you have one unified substance, but the colors don’t blend together. Each distinct color can be seen at all times. Really, this is mysterious. But we can find our answer when we think about relationships:

- *God is love*: God loves through creating, God loves through redeeming, God loves through sustaining.
- *God is life*: God gives us life through making us, God gives us new life through Christ’s victory over sin and death. God sustains our lives through the leading of the Holy Spirit.
- *God is just*: God teaches us justice through the act of sending prophets; through embodying justice in the life of Jesus; and through inspiring us to live justly through the power of the holy spirit.

## 2) Did Jesus actually have to learn to talk?

*Rev. Bush responds:*

The theological questions I get asked by people most often relate to the “mystery” of faith. For example, the church has long professed that Jesus was fully human and fully divine, but how those two natures fit together is essentially a mystery (as Heather has just touched on). So when I’m asked “Did Jesus actually have to learn to talk?”, what’s really being asked is: If Jesus was divine, wouldn’t Jesus already know how to talk? The simple answer is that Jesus was born an infant just like every other infant. He was helpless as a child who over time learned to sit up, crawl, walk and, yes, talk, like every other child. When Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem and was found teaching and amazing the elders in the temple, it wasn’t that he possessed superhuman knowledge, but rather that he had a confidence and faith rarely seen in a young boy of twelve. And at the end of Luke 2, it says “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, in divine and human favor,” stressing that he developed and learned just like every other young person grows and learns as they get older.

But there’s a deeper point that needs to be made here. It is important to hold together both parts of the paradox “fully human, fully divine.” Jesus’ divinity relates to his oneness with God, so that in seeing Christ, we come to see the nature of the triune God. But Jesus’ humanity relates to his oneness with us, his solidarity with the whole human race. Jesus was fully like us, experiencing hunger and tiredness, needing sleep, enjoying fellowship and laughter, wondering and worrying as well as hoping and trusting, just like us. Hebrews 4:15 speaks about Jesus as the one “who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.” The early church teachers used to say if any part of human existence was not a part of Jesus’ experience, then that part remains unredeemed by Christ the Savior. Therefore, Jesus was fully like us. He lived a life of joy and sadness, laughter and tears, so that we humans might truly trust in Christ who knows, intimately, what it means to walk on this earth.

## 3) What’s your favorite part of the church?

*Rev. Bush responds:*

Of course I love the sanctuary, especially looking down at it from the rear balcony. But my favorite spot is the garth (courtyard). It’s an amazing, sacred place of quiet tucked within the heart of our church. I love looking down into it from the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor balcony, or standing outside the chapel walls looking at its trees rising up toward the sky. And the fact that I can still hear the buses and cars go by reminds me that we’re a church of the city, worshipping the God who comes both to our busy streets and quiet courtyards.

*Rev. Schoenewolf responds:*

The Jerusalem Cross in the Chancel. Especially when it is the middle of the night and we sit up here in our jeans and t-shirts with candles lit and pray together.

#### **4) Who made God?**

*Rev. Schoenewolf responds:*

The short answer to this question is to lean on our understanding of God as eternal and quote scripture about the "...the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come..." (Revelation 1.8) Or to hear the words of God in scripture, "I am who am" (Exodus 3.14), or "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (Revelation 22.13). Well, if God is eternal, God always was. The answer then: no one made God. God just is.

But to take this question to the next level requires us to think a bit about ourselves, and our relationship to God. See, we understand our world through our experiences. And a lot of times we use our own experiences to try to understand God. We were, after all, created in God's image. But we have to remember that we can't contain the whole of God within our experiences – or even within the experiences of the human race. God was not created in our image after all. We are creatures. God is creator. While we might know things about ourselves through our knowledge of God – that we are relational, good, creative – we limit God when we try to know the whole of God through ourselves, or even through creation. We put on God the limitation of a finite creation. We think that God's origins must be like ours because as creatures we know that we had to come from somewhere. But God is creator – not the created. And so, while the answer to this question may point us more toward mystery than understanding, it can be an opportunity to celebrate the wholly otherness of God even as we celebrate the immanence of God with us through Christ.

#### **5) What if Jesus never existed or was never crucified?**

*Rev. Bush responds:*

I hear this question to be asking, "Did Jesus have to come to earth?" Well, let's ask a related question: "Do human beings always do what is right?" No, we don't. We have wars; we fight; we lie; we spoil the environment and on and on. That's common knowledge. But it's also common knowledge that we do all these things even though Jesus did exist and was crucified for us. So what difference did Jesus make? To me, Jesus makes a difference concerning the depth and height of life as we know it. You can imagine a life without God, but it is a life without depth – a life where fate determines all things, might makes right, and survival of the fittest is the only rule. By Jesus existing, life has a foundation – a solid depth and bedrock – upon which we can stand, a foundation that says that the holy and spiritual and divine are also part of the formula of life. Jesus came to connect us with God and the foundational God-reality in our world. In addition to this, Jesus died and was raised to give our lives height; a heaven-reaching hope. For in his life, history itself was given a center point – a moment when heaven and earth came together. And through the cross and Easter resurrection, life is no longer a narrow stretch from birth to the grave. It is instead wide open, reaching towards the eternal and stretching forward and upward with a hope that nothing can conquer. Sure, you can live as if Jesus never existed – but why would you?

## 6) What do you do in heaven?

*Rev. Bush responds:*

Look for alternate routes around town when the Archangel Marathon is run every year. Short answer: It's not a question of what we will do in heaven; rather it's a question about who we are with in heaven. Heaven is about relationships – with God and with others – being restored, in communion, and home at last. When you're with those you love, what you do is always secondary.

*Rev. Schoenewolf responds:*

I don't know. Scripture tells us that we will sing God's praises, and also talks about us eating at a big banquet table that God will prepare for us in the kingdom of God. I imagine a time of joyful reunion – where we are with our God face-to-face, and where we are reunited with those we love who are held in God's loving arms. I don't know what we'll do there, but I believe that whatever we do will give us joy – more joy than we've ever known.

## 7) Do you believe in God?

*Rev. Bush responds:*

Since a young person wrote this, I imagined answering this question for my children, Ian and Charlotte. Yes, I believe in God. Why? Because it is very, very hard not to believe in God. If there is no God in this world, then life has no depth and no height (as I said earlier). We simply are born, we live, and we die. Happiness may happen, but it is a fluke and serves no real purpose. Moments of creativity may happen, but they are coincidental and quick to pass away. We may love one another, but when done without God, it's only for reasons of evolutionary self-preservation. We may sacrifice for one another, but without God such behavior is quite foolish.

I'll admit that my belief in God is more intellectual than emotional. But I will confess there are times I've glimpsed God from the corner of my eye and felt God in my heart. There are times when I finally look beyond my *self*, and am awe-struck as I consider the world. There are times when I get past my own emotional needs and am humbled by being loved by others. There are things that defy logic – the beauty in some music and art, the healing quality of true laughter. There are things that fill me with wonder – some math equations, a really good crossword puzzle, chocolate mousse, warm peach cobbler. There are stories in scripture that I've read over and over again, and yet they never grow old. And then there's Jesus – in whom so much comes together: that one life, one tragic death, one amazing Easter reappearance. Do I understand all this? No. But you can believe in something you don't understand. In fact, that's the way it's supposed to work.

I believe in one God, the Shaper and Keeper of all, whose spirit brings life and wonder every day, and whose coming to us in Jesus, the resurrected Savior, broke all the rules that I would try and hold onto in this life, so that I might simply hold on to God as best I can. And as I do so, God holds me and I become more alive than I can ever imagine. This I believe.

*Rev. Schoenewolf responds:*

Yes, I do really believe in God.

I have been blessed to have always believed in God. I heard the stories of God's love every week in church, and learned the importance of worship and prayer and sacraments in my family growing up. The good news of the Gospel was never hidden from me – it was shared as we said grace around the dinner table, as we sung in the children's choir in church, as we helped my grandmother make rosary beads for overseas missionaries. Sometime when I was very young I fell in love with a God who was described in the song I first heard in second grade, "Here I am Lord" – a God who wept for love of God's people; who healed those who were poor or injured; a God who offers the best God has to offer so that God's beloved creation might have abundant life.

I believe that God is love. I believe in one, triune God – who reveals the fullness of God's love through creating, redeeming, and sustaining us – and all of creation. I believe that through the perfect life, tragic death, and life-giving resurrection of Jesus, God overcame sin, brokenness, and death once and for all. Even though we haven't seen the fullness of this reality in our world, I believe that we will experience the fullness of God's redemptive love in the kingdom that is to come. I believe that God is with us now – always – through the power of the Holy Spirit who sustains us and teaches us. I believe that through the power of the Holy Spirit we are the Body of Christ – the church together, given unique gifts; we are called to contribute what we have to the glory of God. I believe that we forget sometimes who we are – that we were created good, even though we often choose brokenness and sin; and that we are called to partner with Christ in God's life-saving mission. I believe that God's love is so vast that it challenges us in our life together to extend mercy and compassion in ways that may seem outlandish to us. I believe that in life and in death we belong to God.

I still believe in this God and I still love this God. Yes, I have had questions but as I have grown in maturity and in faith, I have found that an unquestioned faith can be shallow. I have grown closer to God in my questioning, for I have seen God's grace and mercy at work in my quest for understanding – and in the peace and awe that has been mine in the face of a mystery.

AMEN

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