

The First Presbyterian Church  
Charlotte, North Carolina  
Roland P. Perdue, Interim Pastor  
Sunday, July 29, 2012

**O, I GOT A ZOO!**  
Hebrews 11:17—12:1-3, 12-13

There is a wolf in me...fangs pointed for tearing gashes ... a red tongue for raw mean... and the hot lapping of blood – I keep this wolf because the wilderness give it to me ant wilderness will not let it go.

There is a fox in me... a silver-gray fox...I sniff and guess... I pick things out of the wind an air... I nose in the dark night and take sleepers and eat them and hide the feathers ... I circle and loop and double-cross.

There is a hog in me... a snout and a belly ... machinery for eating and grunting... machinery for sleeping satisfied in the sun – I got this too from the wilderness and the wilderness will not let it go.

There is a fish in me... I know I came from salt-blue water gates... I scurried with shoals of herring ... I blew waterspouts with porpoise ... before land was ... before the water went down, before Noah ... before the first chapter of Genesis.

There is a baboon in me... clammering-clawed ... dogfaced... hairy under the armpits... I keep the baboon because the wilderness says so.

There is an eagle in me and a mockingbird... and the eagle flies among the Rocky Mountains of my dreams and fights among the Sierra crags of what I want... and the mockingbird warbles in the early forenoon before the dew is gone, warbles in the underbrush of my Chattanongas of hope, gushes over the blue Ozarks foothills of my wishes – an I got the eagle and the mockingbird from the wilderness.

O, I got a zoo, I got a menagerie, inside my ribs, under my bony head, under my red-valve hearts – an I got something else: it is a man-child heart, a woman-child heart: it is a father and mother and lover: it came from God-Knows-Where: it is going to God-Knows-Where – For I am the keeper of the zoo... I came from the wilderness.

“O, I got a zoo, I got a menagerie, inside my ribs...” The poet Carl Sandburg is right. His poem, *Wilderness*, encourages us to face the great complexity of our selves, the rich diversity dwelling within and beneath our boney heads and our red-valved hearts. We come, Sandburg claims, from the wilderness and we never leave it far behind.

**OUR COMPLEXITY IS ACCEPTED AND AFFIRMED.** The preacher whose sermon we know as the book of Hebrews in the New Testament, encourages us, “Therefore... let us lay aside every weight and sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.”

For too long too many of us have thought that meant we were being told to lay aside our complexity, what Sandburg refers to as the gifts we got from the wilderness. Not at all! The underbrush of my Chattanoogas of hope, the blue Ozark foothills of my wishes, the very path our Risen Lord invites us to run is an acceptance and an affirmation of our complexity, is an embracing of our many and varied selves. Indeed, the sin to fling away – to rip off your back like a damp t-shirt all sweaty after an afternoon jog – the weight to toss away is any attempt to reject or to deny our many selves. I am complex. You are complex. We are complex. We are zoo, menagerie, and multitude.

Do not run from that. To run from our complexity is to run from our Lord who make us and who embraces us in all our complexity and diversity. Let us rather sing with the psalmist who exults, “It was You (O Lord) who created my inmost self, and put me together in my mother’s womb; for all these mysteries I thank you: *for the wonder of myself (I thank you, O Lord)!*”

An old Zuni parable tells about a kachina who emerged from a cave attached back-to-back to a person from an alien world – neither one could understand the other because neither could see the other. (Strong In the Broken Places, p. 1067). We are attached to other aspects of ourselves which we need to turn around and see; we have darker shadow sides of our personalities which can be helpful as they are redeemed for Christ. The only hope of turning our alien thoughts and actions around is to face them – to embrace them as living parts of our many and complex selves.

Let me give you – at least some of you – a practical suggestion, for an example. Some of us have not developed the ability not to stare at fellow and sister worshippers who dress more casually than we do. From up here, it was almost funny to watch some of you staring at a person who was sitting in the front row several weeks ago. You simply could not take your eyes off of him. I wonder what you will do as this church becomes more and more welcome to our urban surroundings. Try looking at one another and all others as if they were Jesus Christ. Indeed, you have an opportunity to see him in them. The question is: can they see him in you?

**OUR COMPLEXITY IS ALSO ACTUALIZED.** After telling us to lay aside the weight which drags us back, to cast aside the sin which clings, the old preacher says, “Therefore lift your dropping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but be healed.”

And the point, I think, to be made to a church about to enter the long, hard path of the transitional period as you get used to your new pastor is just this: remember that the race is a long one, a marathon, and most of all remember that the path you are making for your feet is not just for your feet alone! Other travelers will come this way, walk and run the path you have made. You and I are complex and we do not merely live for ourselves alone. We are here. I have been here, for others – for the sake of those coming after us. We have blazed a trail, cut a path so that others, hopefully, won’t throw their hips out of joint when they come with or after us.

Let me make another practical suggestion for this church during the transition period of your new pastor. If you will love and support your new pastor, First Presbyterian will have a successful and happy ministry. If you do not love and support him, First Presbyterian will not be for Christ in the Heart of Charlotte. It’s largely up to you and your reaction to the new thing God is doing.

God uses our complexity, our wilderness selves, to make for ministry. God accepts our complexity and then uses it for the sake of Christ in this place and at this time. The purpose and goal – the mission statement of the church and of the individual Christian life is not to be good or God-like, it is not the creation of lives of beauty, truth and goodness, not the pursuit of high flying spirituality. The purpose of the Christian faith is so to live that God comes to life in us; to

allow beauty, truth and goodness to come to consciousness in us and do their best work in us (a paraphrase of *Strong in the Broken Places*).

Remember the rock'em, sock'em TV series *All in the Family*? Archie and Edith, Meathead and Gloria?

Edith: Archie, do you love me?

Archie: Edith, where in the... are you getting these questions from?

Edith: "Fiddler on the Roof." (She asks him singing")

"Do you love me?" I heard it today on the radio. And the man in the song, he couldn't answer her directly either.

Archie: Well, I ain't no Fiddler on the roof! I answer that question every day – by the fact that I live with you and take care of you. I go to work and come home, go to work, and come home...

Do we love the Lord? Do we love his church? We answer that question every day – every day as we share the load, clean the ring out of the tub, pay the bill, sing the hymn, invite someone to come with us on the path we have leveled and made straight.

I thank God for the wonder of myself. I thank God for the wonder that you are. I am complex. You are complex. Our complexity is accepted, affirmed and actualized by God.

There is a wolf in me, a fox too, a hog and baboon. Cain too is there, jealous of his brother. And Able, dying at the feet of all those who are their sisters' and their brothers' keepers. And there is Thomas, standing shrouded in doubt. And Judas in despair, smearing his name forever with shame. And Mary and the other women, spices dripping at their feet as they stare into the emptiness of the tomb. I am – O, I got a zoo, I got a menagerie! I come from the wilderness and the wilderness will not let me go!

And neither will God!

Amen.