

“Goodness,” by Rev. Dr. Mark Caggiano, May 31, 2026

Genesis 1:1-10; Matthew 28:16-20

*When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.*

Everything begins in chaos. Or as it is written in the King James translation: the earth was without form, and void. No structure, just emptiness. We might say a whole lot of nothing.

*Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. And God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness.*

We find the beginning of order, of something we might recognize. But not just order. Not just the opposites of light and darkness. But a judgment by God, that light is good. Does that make darkness bad? Not necessarily. Darkness simply was all that there was before.

There was darkness and there was water. Water was formless and now God sought to impose another form of order. God made the sky above the waters and stilled the raging water below.

*And God said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good.*

Again, we hear of goodness, though this time it is more general. The land is good and the sea is good. The world is good. These passages continue with God creating and then evaluating. The plants and trees are good. The sun and moon are good. The creatures of the sea and of the land are good. And then God creates human beings, steps back, and makes a final assessment.

*God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good.*

We do not always hear that, that creation is good. That the world around us is good. That we are good.

The Hebrew word used here is “tob” [tov], meaning good or pleasant, agreeable or right. In religious conversations, you more often hear about things being bad or unpleasant, disagreeable or sinful. That the world is a place of dangers and wickedness. You might hear such ideas, depending upon who you hang around with religiously. But at least in the first chapter of the Book of Genesis, we are told that the world is good. And we are good.

Today is a special day on the church calendar, known as Trinity Sunday. This is why we heard a famous passage from the Bible, when Jesus tells the disciples how they are to baptize new members: *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”*

That is what they were supposed to do, and it is what we are supposed to say to new followers of Jesus. The baptismal formula.

When I perform a baptize someone, I say, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” That is the same language if you are Catholic or Episcopalian or Unitarian. As long as you are Christian. Why? Because Jesus said so. That is all there is to it.

Now some of you might ask, if that is what you are supposed to say, how then can people calling themselves “Unitarian” use a reference to the Trinity to initiate new people into the fold?

Someone recently asked me about this, about what it means to be a Unitarian versus some other group. The dictionary definition of a Unitarian often includes a description of someone who does not believe in the Trinity, meaning the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And I will tell you that this is not entirely accurate definition of what a Unitarian is, meaning a Unitarian Christian, at least as I understand the term.

Traditional Unitarians did not believe in the Trinity as enshrined in the Nicene Creed. So, I am going to go through the Nicene Creed – take that as a trigger warning if you need one. Some of you will know the creed. There might be some differences as it is translated from Latin and people in different traditions place emphasis in different ways. This is the version from the 1928 Book of Common Prayer, which is probably the most harmonious language with our Anglican style of liturgy last changed in 1923. I have kept it Elizabethan.

*I BELIEVE in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, And of all things visible and invisible:*

*And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God; Begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of very God; Begotten, not made; Being of one substance with the Father; By whom all things were made:*

*Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, And was made man:*

*And was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried:*

*And the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures:*

*And ascended into heaven, And sitteth on the right hand of the Father: And he shall come again, with glory, to judge both the quick and the dead; Whose kingdom, shall have no end.*

*And I believe in the Holy Ghost, The Lord, and Giver of Life, Who proceedeth from the Father and the Son; Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; Who spake by the Prophets:*

*And I believe one Catholic and Apostolic Church: I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins: And I look for the Resurrection of the dead: And the Life of the world to come. Amen.*

That is the prayer. Which parts, then, do Unitarians disagree with? Those in the past and those now?

Well, you would need to ask them. You would need to read what Unitarians said back then, and you would need to turn to the Unitarians around you right now. Because one of the most sacred traditions of Unitarianism is the right to disagree. To disagree with what someone has declared to be true but which another person finds unreasonable, meaning beyond their rational understanding. For reason is *the* foundation of Unitarianism.

The name Unitarian comes from a specific dispute over the idea of the Trinity as described by many traditional Christians. The Trinity implies that God exists in three distinct but unified

persons, meaning the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (or Holy Ghost if you prefer). They have different roles but the same substance and nature. Three in one.

Unitarians did not accept this particular explanation of God. Why? Because first it is not in the Bible and second because it does not flow from reason. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are each in the Bible, but not the organizational chart that was developed at Nicaea in the year 325 CE. The sentence we heard this morning setting up the formula for baptism is basically the only place those concepts of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit appear together in the Bible. Jesus did not go any further and for some Unitarians, like me, that is a reasonable place to stop.

The Council of Nicaea was called by Emperor Constantine I, who helped legalize Christianity in the Roman Empire. He was tired of the bishops fighting about theological ideas, like the Trinity. He made them get into a room and make a decision. And once that decision was made, that was that. No more arguments.

One of the problems Unitarians had was that this creed was formed out of non-Biblical ideas, ideas that were thought up by bishops centuries after the life of Jesus and the writers of the Bible. Instead, Unitarian wanted, and still want, the right to use reason to make their own decisions about the nature of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit.

For example, if I said to you that Jesus was the Son of God, you probably would have no issue because we hear that term over and over in the Bible. If I then told you that Jesus was *created* by God, would that be acceptable or unacceptable? According to the Nicene Creed, Jesus was begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father.

And I must tell you that I do not have the slightest idea what that means. Begotten not made. The same but not the same. People argued over that distinction for years before the Council of Nicaea and many have argued over it ever since. Sometimes that got you excommunicated, sometimes you got burned at the stake.

As someone who considers himself to be something of a traditional Unitarian, I do not think anyone should lose their religious community, let alone their life, over an idea that can never be proven. You can imagine what God is like. You can parse out ideas set forth in the Bible or from tradition. But if someone ever had to prove their depiction of God, they would not be able to do so. And, after failing that, they would probably tell you that it was simply a matter of faith and you had to accept it because it is in the creed.

In case you ever wondered why we do not recite a creed.

For those early Unitarians, there was a big difference between having faith in the Bible, or having faith in Jesus, and having faith in a roomful of bishops arguing about the Trinity, or the number of angels that can fit on the head of a pin.

Years ago, I developed my rule of thumb that I have humbly called Caggiano's theorem of theological necessity. According to this theory, if a theological idea is essential to an understanding of God or the teachings of a religious tradition, then you should try to sort things out. But if it is not, do not worry about it. And certainly do not burn anyone over it.

Here is again the baptismal formula from Jesus: *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.*

Did Jesus teach you to accept the Trinity as defined by the Council of Nicaea in 325? Obviously not, so don't worry about it. Did Jesus say he was begotten not made one in being with the Father? Again no, so don't worry about it. There might be a few holes in our ideas and theories, some mysteries sprinkled in with the teachings of Jesus. And that's okay.

Remember how we started this morning, with a description of creation and God's assessment of creation: *God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good.*

It was very good. Heaven and earth, the seas and the sky. The plants and the animals, human beings and all the rest. They are very good.

Notice what was *not* said: *God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was perfect.*

It was not perfect, it was very good. Perfection is an ideal, something that does not exist in nature because it cannot exist in nature. We might well ask why creation cannot be perfect and I would argue that anything that changes cannot be perfect. And everything changes. Everything including heaven and earth, the seas and the sky. The plants and the animals and of course human beings. They all change.

Perfection means complete, or, basically means frozen. Not a proverbial hair out of place, not a single mistake made. The world around us is not perfect and it is not supposed to be perfect. So too, human beings are not perfect, and we are not supposed to be perfect.

And yes, oh yes, the churches we build, the religious ideas that we develop, and the people we have running things are not and will never be perfect.

Our churches are not perfect because we must change and adapt as the years go by. Our religious ideas are not perfect because we must try to understand new challenges in the ever-changing world and in our ever-changing lives. And our leaders, our ministers, our teachers, and our precious church members and friends, none of us are perfect. I have met me – and believe me when I say that I am not perfect.

Because perfection is not the point. We are not going to get everyone into a room and decide everything that is good and right and true one day in the year 325 or the year 2026. Because in the year 2027, something out there might change. Honestly, it will change. Or we will change. Or those that come after us will *seek* change. And that is just fine. As long as we hold fast to the important ideas. What might they be?

I was reading recently a book entitled "A Brief History of Thought," by Luc Ferry, a French philosopher. And he was describing three of the significant contributions of Christianity to the realm of European thought.

First, there is the idea of *free will*. Free will, meaning that human beings have the power and the right to make choices in this life. Choices not dictated by social hierarchies or imposed power structures, like in a monarchy or dictatorship. This means that we are in control of our destinies and that we should be judged by the merits of what we do rather than the circumstances into which we were born.

The second idea is that *inner conscience* can take priority over outer forms of law. We can morally object to some worldly situation because of the inner voices we use as moral or ethical guides. When Jesus said to the crowd seeking to stone the adulterous woman, "He said let he

who is without sin cast the first stone.” By the way, that woman was guilty, but Jesus sought to foster forgiveness rather than rigid adherence to the law. In other words, Christianity calls for mercy rather than merely law and order. Mercy even when someone does not deserve it, just like the mercy of God is to be granted (hopefully) for our own trespasses and transgressions.

And finally, *humanity* is a common condition. Human beings owe one another respect and dignity because we are alike, we are all formed in the image of God, even those not following Jesus. And for these reasons there is no difference between friend and enemy, alien and stranger. We are all neighbors because of our common origin and common nature.

We are saved not by the powers of temples and priests, kings and queens, laws or government, but through the power of love. The power of love which is entirely in our control.

The teachings of Jesus are unusual in the Bible because he avoided hard and fast rules. He taught rules of thumb to be applied by us as needed. For example, he taught us to love God and love one another. And how we go about loving one another will certainly change given the circumstances.

Sometimes it is easy to love someone. Like my ridiculous granddaughters who simply want to laugh and play. Who run and giggle and, yes, make a mess once in a while. Quite loveable.

Sometimes it takes extra work to love your neighbor. Someone like your literal neighbor who might drive you crazy. Or someone like a loved one, or a boss, or a co-worker. Or a random stranger driving too slowly on Route 9.

If everything was perfect, you would wander through the world feeling nothing but bliss and satisfaction every day. No aggravation. No difficult personalities or troublesome moments. I will assume that some of you have had different encounters with reality than the bliss-filled perfection I have described. And that is because the world is not perfect. And people are not perfect. But the world is good, it is very good.

And people by nature are good. Not perfect. Not always their best selves. And not always good in every moment. Jesus offered to us his teachings to prepare us to be good in the sense of being better than we are, better than we have been in the past. Better than when our tempers flare up at loved ones or cranky neighbors or slow-moving drivers on the highway.

Last weekend, I traveled to see my granddaughters. I drove through the mountains of New Hampshire. As I was driving up, it was cold and rainy. Pretty miserable honestly. It was slow going and there were some accidents along the way. When I got up there, and it was lovely. The people, not the weather. That was nasty. We stayed inside. I read books and played games and listened to the rain falling outside.

For me that was perfect. But for the guy in the accident on the highway, it was not perfect. For the poor guy driving the tow truck in the rain and the cop by the side of the road, it was not perfect.

The world and our lives will not be perfect. And if they were perfect, it would be hideously boring, if I could offer my opinion. Yes, there will be days like yesterday when the wind and rain will knock power out in the church –that happened. Yes, there will be days when we want to be somewhere else, somewhere warmer or cooler or quieter or some other sought after change. Yes, there will be days when our bodies are not cooperating, or pain rears its ugly head.

And yes, there will be disagreements among people. There will be arguments about matters, great and small, important and insignificant. That has always been the case. And that will always be the case.

The world we have been given and the lives we have been offered are not perfect. That is to be assumed. If human beings have free will, they are free to choose, rightly or wrongly. If human beings have a conscience, that inner voice will be called upon to speak up when something seems wrong to us and that assumes we will disagree with someone else.

And if human beings share a common sense of humanity, that shared nature will be needed when we disagree. That will be needed when we are called upon by Jesus to love one another, friend and enemy alike. The teachings of Jesus are not about living in a perfect world but about living better lives in the world we have been given.

A world that we have been told is very good. Among people that are also good by nature, if not in every moment. We must then use the gift of creation and the gifts of humanity to make this an ever better world. Not perfect, but better. Not perfect, but very, very good. Amen.