

Sermon by Rev. Paul Graves, for First Congregational UCC of Hillsboro
September 28, 2025

Witness of Ancient Wisdom:

Israel's history began about 1600 BCE with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. From that time, the early Israelites were determined to resist any images of God as they encountered other cultures during their journey to the Promised Land.

That was still true after they were captured during the Babylonian Exile in 586. It was during that exile, about 1000 years after Israel began, that the book of Genesis was actually written down. And the story ran counter to that - 1000 years of rejecting any image of God. There is one way to imagine God, and that is through humankind.

Romans 7:14-17, 22-25 is a traditional reminder from St. Paul about the contradiction that seems embedded in our DNA. We often fight against that contradiction in our humanity. Paul admits that reality and affirms how we can live with the paradoxes of being human.

Genesis 1:26-28, 31, The Message

God spoke: "Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature, so they can be responsible for the fish in the sea, the birds in the air, the cattle, and yes, Earth itself, and every animal that moves on the face of the Earth."

God created human beings; he created them godlike, reflecting God's nature. He created them male and female. God blessed them: "Prosper! Reproduce! Fill Earth! Take charge! Be responsible for fish in the sea and birds in the air, for every living thing that moves on the face of the Earth."

...God looked over everything he had made; it was so good, so very

good! It was evening, it was morning – Day Six.

Romans 7:14-17, 22-25, NRSV

“For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now, if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me...

For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?

Witness of Modern Wisdom

Retired United Methodist pastor Martin Thielen reminds us that having heretical thoughts about orthodox beliefs began shortly after Jesus died.

Our spiritual questions just may be the “refugia” we need today.

“Early (1 st and 2 nd century) “orthodox” Christians exclusively used masculine language and images to describe God. Early “heretical” Christians used masculine and feminine language and images to describe God. At the same time, they warned against literalizing anthropomorphic views of God, and encouraged believers to embrace divine mystery and ambiguity.

Early “orthodox” Christians insisted that people could only experience God externally, through Jesus Christ, Scripture, and the church. Early “heretical” Christians said people could also find God internally, through self-discovery of God’s image embedded within them.”

(Martin Thielen, “The Early Heretics”, in The Doubters’ Parish Newsletter, Sept. 2, 2025)

God is still speaking, **and we are still listening. Thanks be to God!**

Sermon

I’m a person who enjoys words, especially words that are fun to say: like Refugia, Spizzerinctum and Sprezzatura! But they aren’t easy words to work into every day, normal conversation. So I decided to work them into a sermon instead!

Let’s begin with the word Adam has introduced us to, “Refugia”. (It’s the plural version of “Refugium”.)

In biological terms, refugia can be small pockets of water in a desert, simple dandelions sprouting in an asphalt driveway – or as Heather saw recently, small vegetative growths in the aftermath of St. Helen’s volcanic blast 45 years ago.

Refugia seem to have 2 functions: they are areas that provide some kind of refuge, shelter, sanctuary from adverse conditions. But they also nurture growth for tenacious species.

Those areas are not just biological.

They can be emotional, spiritual, and cultural as well. We are living in – enduring in – what many of us believe is a seriously hostile cultural environment that challenges us emotionally, spiritually, and interpersonally.

We seek refugia. We seek comfort, safety, confidence that who we are and what we do can make a difference. Refugia can mean those things. We look for shelters where we can catch our breath.

But refugia also need to be shelters where we can prepare to step up to practice our faith in ways that do justice to being Jesus followers. That’s a tall order these days. We can assume refugia is only for comfort and safety. But it’s much more.

Do you think a clump of flowers on St. Helen’s grew only because it lives in a comfortable space? Or did the dandelion in your driveway grow because it felt safe?

I don't think so! I contend that refugia survive – and even thrive – in their environments because they also embody both **Spizzerinctum** and **Sprezzatura**!

Spizzerinctum...Sprezzatura. I'm not sure I'd like to meet these guys in a dark alley. Would you?

So maybe I'd better do a bit of word-definition. Spizzerinctum is an old Appalachian (or southeastern U.S.) slang term for spunk. "That boy has some Spizzerinctum, but it will sure get him in trouble with his folks."

In his provocative and irreverent book "The Gospel According to Starbucks", Leonard Sweet likens Spizzerinctum to the Jewish word Chutzpah, but without the negative tone that the word often implies. Chutzpah can be good or bad:

"audacity, courage, brashness, cheekiness, confidence." **Refugia need Spizzerinctum to survive – and then thrive.**

Thrust into the context of the Church and spirituality, Leonard Sweet interprets the word as "holy boldness". I see that holy boldness the more I look at the parables, the stories, and the actions of Jesus in the Gospels.

There is a thumb-nosing, subversive undertone to Jesus in most everything he did as he confronted the religious rules and leaders. When those rules denied human dignity and value to the common people, Jesus' Spizzerinctum went into action. His unwavering self-honesty and trust in God pushed him to bold words and bolder action.

Our personal journeys and the collective journey of our church are likewise served well by holy boldness, by Spizzerinctum. But where does that holy boldness begin?

I personally believe we do well to remember we were created "blessed" and "good" from the very beginning.

Genesis 1: 26-28, 31 (THE MESSAGE) **God spoke: "Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature, so they can be responsible for the fish in the sea, the birds in the air, the cattle, and yes, Earth itself, and every animal that moves on the face of the Earth."**

God created human beings; he created them godlike, reflecting God's

nature. He created them male and female. God blessed them: “Prosper! Reproduce! Fill the Earth! Take charge! Be responsible for fish in the sea and birds in the air, for every living thing that moves on the face of the Earth.” ...God looked over everything he had made; it was so good, so very good!

It was evening, it was morning – Day Six.

Whether we interpret the creation story literally or poetically, please don't miss the amazing affirmation that God created humanity in the image and likeness of God. This is not a physical, literal likeness and image. It has to do with the essential loving and sustaining relationship God has with all of creation. When I see folks succumb to the 4th-century belief fostered by St. Augustine that we were born into “original sin”, I remind them there is an earlier story, a biblical story, proclaiming we were born into “original blessing.” (Years ago, theological skeptic and rebel Father Matthew Fox introduced me to this holy boldness.)

We were declared “good” by God.

Why should we believe anything else?

So let's affirm that before any of humanity's show of inhumanity, wastefulness and sin, our original nature is that of blessedness, of goodness.

THAT is all the reason we need to live our lives with holy boldness, with confidence, with Spizzerinctum!

It would be so much easier if Spizzerinctum was all our refugia need. But in our daily world – the world we know from the inside – goodness and blessedness aren't all we have to contend with. So it's always important that we dig deep, and ingest a generous dose of **Sprezzatura** as well.

Leonard Sweet also introduced me to the meaning of this delightful-sounding Italian word...Sprezzatura. He says this in “The Gospel According to Starbucks”:

“The key to Sprezzatura is paradox, the audacious algebra of the spiritual, the natural language of faith. If there's one reason why the church isn't the most creative place around, it (embodies) the fear of living with contradictions...Sprezzatura is the magic word that opens heaven's doors and lets out Truth.” (p. 91)

Sprezzatura, paradox, is the “natural language of faith,” Leonard says. But

how can that be true?

Our faith is what we base our lives on, isn't it? We want certainty in our lives. We may even turn to a wide variety of teachings from many spiritual traditions, looking for certainty. Let me say this as respectfully as I can: Faith is not the same thing as certainty. You may have firmly-held, even rigidly-held beliefs based on your understanding of the spiritual tradition you hold dear.

Yet "belief" is not the same thing as Faith. Belief is most often based on our expectations that what we believe is true.

But Faith has to do with **trust**. And trust is always tested by the irritating contradictions we invariably find when we courageously examine our beliefs more closely.

Like Refugia, faith survives in, and thrives in, the world of paradox. "Paradox" comes from a Greek word, paradoxos, that means conflicting with expectations.

Some people expect God to be loving and compassionate, yet there is so much natural and human-made devastation in the world. The flip side? Other people expect God to be judgmental and vengeful, but still they see astounding acts of compassion and courage.

Where is God in those perceptions and realities? God seems to mess with our expectations. And that causes us uncertainty. Our lives are filled with contradictions, paradox. That's "Sprezzatura". Refugia need Sprezzatura!

Our rigid beliefs may shout out a rigid answer. But faith whispers a cry to God, "Can I trust you to be in the midst of my uncertainty? I want to trust you. I need to trust you."

When our beliefs are shaken, it is often because they are based on man-made expectations that we have mostly accepted and passed along as "THE TRUTH".

Faith is not man-made, my new friends. It is a God-gift that is based on a deeper level of reality that we too seldom seek. That is why an extra dose of Sprezzatura is needed to support our refugia.

As a concluding example of what I'm exploring with you, I ask you to consider "Sin as Sprezzatura". Sin is big business in the Church. Maybe that's one reason so many churches talk about it so much! The "Church" as we know it would quickly go out of business without our obsession with "Sin".

But sin is also the landscape where refugia can thrive! So let's consider the paradox of sin. As Sprezzatura, sin isn't as cut-and-dried as our moralistic tendencies of good-and-bad, right-and-wrong want sin to be.

The other side of sin, the paradox, the contraction, of sin, is expressed well by St. Paul in Rom. 7: 14-16, 22-23a (TEV "Good News")

"We know that the law is spiritual; but I am a mortal man, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do; for I don't do what I would like to do, but instead I do what I hate. Since what I do is what I don't want to do, this shows that I agree that the Law is right...My inner being delights in the law of God. But I see a different law at work in my body – a law that fights against the law which my mind approves of."

What Paul calls our **"inner being" is where our refugia thrive!** Even when the paradox of sin has power to distort our best intentions. That innermost self is our "original blessing", friends. When it is smothered with a deluge of sin-messages, we may even forget that it is there. But it is still there! It's Soul.

To be bold in what we want our personal selves and our church to be, it is imperative that we be confident in this: holy boldness (Spizzerinctum) and being even fairly comfortable with contradiction (Sprezzatura) are radically, root-deep in each of us.

Refugia may need Spizzerinctum to survive in hostile environments. But it definitely needs Sprezzatura to thrive in those hostile, paradoxical environments. Our God provides both. Our daily challenge? **To claim them for our own!**