

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Holy Trinity Sunday - Year B

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Isaiah 6:1-8

Psalm 29

Romans 8:12-17

John 3:1-17

05/27/2018

### **Gospel**

The Holy Gospel according to St. John:

1Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 2He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." 3Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." 4Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" 5Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 8The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of

the Spirit.” 9Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” 10Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

11“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. 12If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

16“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

17“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

The Gospel of our Lord.

### **Prayer**

Let us pray,

Amen

### **The Athanasian Creed and The Holy Trinity**

Good morning! The pressure is on today. I’ve been very vocal that my favorite Sunday of the church year is Holy Trinity Sunday. I jumped at the chance to preach on this day during internship and when it came time to submit a sermon for my approval essay for the ELCA I

picked that Trinity Sunday sermon. Bill Tew, who sometimes substitutes for us as an organist, told me last year that my sermon where I covered the doctrine was the greatest Trinity sermon he had ever heard, which doesn't speak well for the state of Trinitarian sermons. So, you can imagine the anxiety I felt this week as I began preparing for sermon number three on the Holy Trinity.

One author writes the following on this often confusing doctrine:

*“Inquiring minds — both Christian and non-Christian — can hardly be blamed for wondering, three what and one what? And is this a contradiction? ... Unfortunately, some Christians have become so exasperated by the seeming confusion surrounding belief in the Trinity — that God is one divine being eternally existing as three distinct persons — that they have functionally given up on it. They may be members of a church with the word Trinity in its name; they may pay lip service to belief in something called Trinity if asked; they may sing a hymn about God’s triunity now and then in worship. But fewer and fewer Christians seem actually to embrace the belief known throughout Christian history as Trinity. As one modern Catholic thinker has said, modern Christians tend to be functionally unitarian.”<sup>1</sup>*

But I refuse to let St. Paul’s become one of those churches! In fact, we have seen a huge resurgence of writing and work on the topic of the Trinity in the last few years. The Trinity should take place front and center in our lives. And that all begins with the creeds.

The creeds are our confessions of faith. In the Apostles, Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds we see and hear the tenets of our faith. I’m not usually one for broad demanding statements like

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<sup>1</sup>Olson, Roger E. *The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity and Diversity*. Downers Grove, Ill. Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press Apollos, 2002. pp. 133-134.

this but if you don't believe what we confess in our creeds, you don't believe in the Christian faith. The creeds were developed at different times and in different places to help people answer questions about the faith.

The Book of Concord, the book that becomes a norm and rule for Lutheranism, begins with the three creeds. Of all the Christian churches in the world only a handful still use the Athanasian Creed, or as many call it, "the long one." The Anglicans, Lutherans, and Catholics are the only ones that still confess this creed. Interestingly, in a Church Council in the mid-to-late 500's the bishops concluded that *"If any priest or deacon or cleric cannot recite without mistake the creed which, inspired by the Holy Spirit, the apostles handed down, and the Faith of the holy primate Athanasius, he should be censured by the bishops."*<sup>2</sup>

We first see mention of what we call the Athanasian Creed (it has a long Latin name that even Sue didn't want to try and pronounce, you can read it on page 54 in the Lutheran Book of Worship) in the early 500's from a Bishop named Caesarius in Arles in Gaul. It grew in popularity but by the ninth century had started to see a decline. It was at this time that they began using the creed in worship services.<sup>3</sup>

It got the name we know it by, the Athanasian Creed, because of an early church Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria in Egypt during the fourth century. This guy basically devoted his entire life to defending the Trinity. The entire creed was written to help develop and explain what the doctrine of the trinity is and is not. It owes a great deal of its theology to St. Augustine. The creed helped us to fight off the heresy of Arianism. This heresy argued that Jesus Christ was not

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<sup>2</sup>Wilken, Robert L. 1979. "Introducing the Athanasian Creed." *Currents In Theology And Mission* 6, no. 1: 4-10. ATLASerials, Religion Collection, EBSCOhost (accessed May 24, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, pp. 6

fully God, but a sort of adopted man who became God-like. This creed helps us to assert the fully divinity of Jesus Christ. We “make absolutely clear how important it is to maintain the distinctness of each person of the Trinity, yet to maintain their oneness (to avoid polytheism)...”<sup>4</sup>

The problem and challenge with the Trinity is that the words we use to define it don't necessarily mean the same thing now as they did then. So we hear things like persons, and begotten, and we just get confused trying to make sense of it all. Which is maybe a good thing, cause this isn't something I think that we can ever truly understand. But let's start with some simple misconceptions. We don't believe in a God who is also the Trinity, it's not that God is sometimes God and then we use the Trinity to help us see that God can do different things. We believe in a God who IS Trinity. This isn't just a description of God like Lord or King. This is God. It isn't something we can pick up and dust off when we want; it's the fullness of God revealed to us.

If all of this seems too confusing, let's try something different. The Trinity is God revealed to us in relationship, God as invitation. That was the game changer for me. Take a look at the icon on the Table, in it we see the three persons of the Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, sitting at a table. On the table we see the lamb, the Lamb of God. And the coolest part is that there is another place at the table! The Holy Trinity is inviting us to take part in the Holy Sacrament, to be part of the joyous celebration that puts an end to the things that separate us from God.

What's even more amazing is that it's an invitation to more than just me, it's an invitation for all of us! We can all come sit at the table! We can all put an end to the things that make us

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid. pp. 7

only care about ourselves. At that table, with God and with one another, we put aside our differences as points of conflict and celebrate together. I say this all the time, but it's true, it's as if the Trinity is inviting us to come together, to come see this wonderful, amazing, and beautiful thing that is a relationship with God! And it serves as a model for our own lives. We need relationships just as much as food and water and shelter. The God of the entire universe comes to us together, so what makes you think you we should cut off one another? Another example that is often used to explain the Trinity is the dance. As the three persons of the Trinity dance together, weaving a path of salvation and hope, God invites us to join in! To dance together with all of humanity, sharing in the joy of a relationship so pure and holy that you can't help but grab someone else by the arm and join in on the song.

So... do you get the Trinity yet? Not sure? Well, why don't you come with me and let's find out together. Amen.