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Holy Trinity - Year B

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Isaiah 6:1-8

Psalms 29

Romans 8:12-17

John 3:1-17

05/26/2024

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

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Trinity Sunday!

Good morning! A life of faith is one that naturally finds places and times of special significance. Camp Luther has always been one of those places for me. Many of my sermon intros have been filled with stories about that wonderful place in the hills of West Virginia. But have I ever told you about my rock? Every year at Camp Luther graduating seniors get a rock to commemorate their time. The rocks are elaborately painted and decorated by a person in the class below them and then presented on the final night of camp in a send off/roast type event. My friend Phil has a rock I painted for him, and my friend Emily is responsible for painting my own rock. This chunk of sediment is one of the most important things I own, and it would be something I tried to grab were the place on fire.

50 years ago there was a fad I'm sure some of you are familiar with, the pet rock. Well that trend somehow made its way into Camp Luther and

sparked a tradition that's been going on ever since. My rock is a very important part of my faith, but we'll have to come back to this.

Because today is Holy Trinity Sunday! It's my favorite Sunday of the year, but that also means it comes along with a great deal of confusion and anxiety. Augustine, one of the greatest Christian theologians of all time famously said "*whoever denies the Trinity is in danger of losing his salvation; whoever tries to understand the Trinity is in danger of losing his mind.*"¹ Even Martin Luther, who wrote and said a lot about everything said this: "*In all this God has revealed more to us than we can ever accomplish. But for the rest — for instance, how the Trinity can be but one God... That you must not try to understand; you must believe it. Leave it to God...*"²

The challenge is that it is often easier to describe what the Holy Trinity is NOT, rather than what it IS. Its complexity means that this Sunday also goes by another nickname. Heresy Sunday. Pastors, Sunday school teachers, preachers and those doing children's sermons will most likely get an explanation wrong, inviting criticism that instead of helping us reach a deeper understanding has only meant that we remain silent. This silence means that the problem only grows worse, with less and less of us even trying. Karl Rahner, a famous 20th century theologian, wrote that "*should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged.*"³ Rahner is lamenting that we have dropped the ball on something so important.

¹ Olson, Roger E. 2002. *The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity & Diversity*. IVP Academic. p. 146.

² Luther, Martin, and Jaroslav Pelikan. *Luther's Works*. Vol. 22. St. Louis Miss: Concordia Pub. House, 1957. pp. 314-315

³ Rahner, Karl. *The Trinity*. New York: Herder and Herder, 1970. pp. 10-11.

Because the Trinity is the CORE of what makes Christianity the faith that it is! One scholar writes “*the dogma of the Trinity has become the unifying and identifying belief of Christianity throughout the centuries. Some version of it... has nearly always been held and affirmed by every major Christian Church father and Reformer as well as but all major Christian traditions and denominations. Without it and apart from it Christianity becomes just another monotheistic religion.*”⁴

One of the bigger mistakes is that we think the Trinity is just an analogy for how vast God is, an intellectual attempt to try and explain the vastness of God. We often think of “God” as this being above it all, with the “Trinity” as just another description or example of God, just another name. But what our faith confesses and believes is that the Holy Trinity is the full revelation of God. The Trinity is God’s description of who God is. This is how God has chosen to reveal Godself to us.

I don’t want to leave us without any attempt at understanding, so here is what a scholar wrote that I think can help us. He writes “*...faith is often summed up as belief that God is one substance, and three persons. Or expressed more informally, it might be said that God is one ‘what’ and three ‘whos.’*”⁵

Now, the danger is that final part. We talk about the Trinity as three persons. Or, as the scholar said, three “whos.” But in the original language the word we translate as “persons” did not have the strong individualistic connotations that word has now. Somehow those three persons can exist

⁴ Olson, Roger E. 2002. *The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity & Diversity*. IVP Academic. p. 141.

⁵ Olson, Roger E. 2002. *The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity & Diversity*. IVP Academic. p. 147.

together in a way that just isn't possible for us to understand. Which begs the question... well what do we do? Where do we go from here?

I would like to propose a different option, and this is certainly not my own original idea. Think of the Trinity as a dance. A perfect dance. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit move effortlessly and gracefully on the dance floor, moving back and forth, between the three partners in something so beautiful that it might bring us to tears.

For me, this is what faith is. Witnessing this dance. Because God does something miraculous, God invites all of us to join in that dance! We join on the dance floor and take part in something wonderful and bigger than all of us! This dance becomes about community, about inviting others to come see this amazing dance. Not for any selfish reasons, not because we want more seats in worship or more money in a plate. It becomes a dance that is so wonderful, so life changing that we run to our friends and family and try and drag them to this dance simply because they can't miss out on something this good! "You have to come see this joy and wonder!" we exclaim.

The Triune God continues to dance. Never making any of the mistakes we will. Never stepping on anyone's toes or missing a move. We might be dancing too, but this is GOD'S song. By witnessing it we are invited and saved by a being that never gives up, never stops, and always seeks to invite others.

But you may be asking, what in the world does all this have to do with his rock? Well... it's not really about my rock. The rock is just, well a rock. It's what it represents. A community that first showed me the dance. A community that invited me because they loved me. A place where I first really understood that I was meeting the Triune God. This rock is a symbol

of what I think community should be, and it's a reminder for when I fall short. It gives me something to work towards for those days when it all seems too confusing and overwhelming. This rock reminds me to just stop and take a breath, to enjoy the dance, and see where God is taking me. Amen.