

Trinity Sunday, May 30, 2021
John 3:1-17

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

Today is Trinity Sunday. It marks the end of the festival half of the church year, and the beginning of ordinary time, which I wrote about in my newsletter article for June. You can have a look at that to find out what “ordinary time” actually means. Among all of the festivals of the church year, this is the only one devoted not to an event in the life of Jesus or of the church, but to a doctrine. When I was growing up it was not uncommon on this Sunday to recite the Athanasian Creed. Some of you, I am sure, remember doing that. It is our longest creed, and that’s probably what you remember most. It goes into great detail about nature of the Trinity and the status of its three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The very lengthy first part of that creed can be summed up by two of its sentences “The Father is God; the Son is God; and the Holy Spirit is God. And yet there are not three Gods, but one.” The Athanasian Creed was included in our previous hymnal, the Lutheran Book of Worship, but it was left out of the new Evangelical Lutheran Worship. I don’t know why, for sure, but I can guess. I think it has to do not so much with what the creed confesses, as with how it is cast. It says in three different places that in order to be saved a person must think and believe about God in *this* particular way. And that changes it from what a creed is supposed to be – a statement of belief, a declaration of what the church trusts and confesses about God’s gift of life in Jesus Christ – and turns it instead in to a list of demands, a set of requirements for attaining salvation. And that is problematic. It runs counter to the Reformation insistence that salvation is freely given, and not earned in any way, not even by thinking the right things.

Unfortunately, that has been how the church has often treated this doctrine throughout its history, even among Lutherans who should presumably know better. But even when we haven’t so directly violated the spirit of the Reformation, we have at least given the impression that the Trinity is a piece information about God that we just need to know, and even if we can’t understand it, we just have to take it on faith.

I want to suggest today that a better way to approach the Trinity is rather as a summing up of the gospel, the Good News of what God has done and continues to do for us and for our salvation. It is a way of proclaiming that God created the world out of love, that out of love God joins us in our creaturely existence, and that out of love God continues to be faithfully committed to us as God brings us and all of creation to completion. I think the those who put together the lectionary were thinking along those lines when they chose the first part of John chapter 3 as the Gospel reading for today. The Trinity is God working with Godself in the world on behalf of the world.

With this Gospel text in mind, but not working through it in detail, I want to bring out three ways the Trinity is good news for us, focusing on each person of the Trinity in turn. And I want you to notice how these ways say something more than our default conceptions of God give us. Humans seem to be hardwired with a religious instinct that points to a “higher power,” someone who is stronger, wiser than we are. Greek philosophy ran with this instinct and pushed it to its logical conclusion, conceiving of God as almighty, omniscient, and omnipresent, and influencing the writers of the New Testament, as well as theologians and hymn-writers down through the ages. The God revealed in the life of Jesus and the doctrine of the Trinity does not contradict this emphasis, but give us much more than that.

First, the Trinity proclaims a God who is self-giving. The Trinity goes beyond understanding God as merely the author of creation. It gives us a God who in creating also gives Godself to us. God as Trinity from eternity only makes sense if God intended all along to step outside of Godself on behalf of God's beloved creation. The doctrine of the Trinity tells us that this is built into who God is, that God is defined by love, as John alludes to in his Gospel and says directly in his letters. God is love, fully invested in the created world. And to love is to give oneself to another.

Second, God is dependent. This revelation is even more counterintuitive. The image of God as Father, as the source of life, we get. The image of God as son, as dependent on another for life, has caused offense from the very beginning of the Christian movement which continues right down to the present day. Throughout his earthly life, Jesus showed a radical orientation toward God and dependence upon God for everything. And in the face of death he trusted in God's will to make his death a pathway to life for himself and the whole creation. In the Trinity we have God revealed as both the one who is depended upon for everything and one who depends upon another for everything. Thus to be born above, as Jesus says in our Gospel reading today, and joined to Christ in baptism, as Paul says in Romans, is to be incorporated into this divine relationship. Jesus' dependence on God becomes our dependence on God.

Third, God is faithful to the life that God has created in us and in the world. God has not merely wound the clock – set the universe in motion and walked away. Nor has God simply come for a visit in the incarnation of the Son, and then gone back home. The Trinity reveals to us God the Holy Spirit, who remains intimately connected to us in the gifts of God's Word and Sacraments, making the risen and ascended Christ present to us by faith, to free us from our captivity to sin and death, and to make us the conduits and agents of God's self-giving love in and for the world.

In short, then: the Trinity is not some inscrutable, arcane bit of religious trivia that we are forced to affirm. It is not the fine print of the terms and conditions we sign onto when joining the Church, a mystery that we acknowledge as mystery and let it go at that. The doctrine of the Trinity is meant to be rather an encapsulation and summary of the Good News of God's love for the world in Jesus Christ, a love expressed both in the creation of the world and in our individual lives, a love that remains committed to us throughout our lives to finish in us God's good creation and enfold us in God's eternal loving embrace.

May we take that Good News to heart on this Trinity Sunday. May it animate and orient our lives. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and mind in Christ Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit, unto life everlasting. Amen