

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Trinity Sunday closes out the festival half of the church year. For the next six months almost exactly we will be in the long green season, also known as “ordinary time.” The festival half of the year takes us through the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, as well as his sending of the Holy Spirit on the church at Pentecost. Trinity Sunday is supposed to be a kind of wrap up and culmination of all that, a celebration of the God we have come to know through Jesus, namely the God now revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I have mentioned my father a lot in recent sermons, and I’m going to do it again now. You all didn’t get to experience this here at Grace, but when I was serving at Epiphany in Carbondale, my go-to supply preacher was my father. So they got to know him pretty well over the years. I was reminded of that recently when a number of folks down there reached out to me after my father’s death with memories of his time there. In fact, one of the pictures I ran a cross and got into the funeral slide show was of him at Epiphany with a cake marking the 50th anniversary of his ordination, which was also the 50th anniversary of my baptism. That Sunday I was in Istanbul as part of a trip to visit our oldest child in the Peace Corps. But what I am also reminded of today is that my dad did not like to preach on Trinity Sunday. He complained that it was the only church festival devoted to a doctrine rather than something in the life and work of Jesus. I didn’t do this to him on purpose, but just the way things happened and how our vacations fell, he ended up preaching a lot of Trinity Sundays for me. That came up in conversation near the end of his life and he didn’t remember being as grumpy about it as I do.

What he was reacting to, though, is how doctrine often gets treated as something that is forced upon us, something we have to believe or else, and I think he must have had his fill of that kind of approach over the years. I’m sure that that has been reinforced for many of us in the traditional annual recitation of the Athanasian Creed on Trinity Sunday. If you think the Nicene Creed is long and are looking forward to getting back to the Apostles’ Creed, you will be surely thankful that I am not having us partake in that old tradition. But its length is not the issue for me. In fact, I love the Athanasian Creed, insofar as it is a creed, a statement of what we the church believe. But there are a few sentences that make it problematic. Those sentences say that unless you believe the things said in the creed, indeed, unless you think in this particular way about God, you cannot be saved. I think that goes beyond what a creed is supposed to be. A creed is supposed to be a summation of the good news, of what God has done for us in Jesus. Those few sentences make it all about us and what we do or don’t do. They make our relationship with God conditional and transactional: if you do this thing for God – believe this information, think in this way – then God will save you from perishing. They take what is supposed good news and make it a threat. They effectively turn our relationship with God into something coercive and interfere with the Holy Spirit’s job of creating faith and trust in us.

One of my seminary theology professors used to say this about doctrine, of which creeds are examples. Doctrine, he said, is not what we need to *believe* in order to be saved. Doctrine is what we must say, what we must bear in mind, in order to proclaim Jesus as really good news for the life of the world. (I’m paraphrasing.) The believing part is actually not our job. It’s beyond our pay grade. Believing is God’s work through the Holy Spirit when Jesus is proclaimed as that good news.

Our Gospel reading this morning is helping us out with that, and there are two things that I want us to get out of it. (One of you keeps track of the numbers, noticed that last week there were four points. So I'm evening it out this week.) Here in Jesus's famous conversation with the Pharisee Nicodemus, Jesus talks about our relationship with God not as slaves to a master or servants to a king, which was a common understanding, then as now. Jesus reframes our relationship in terms of new birth, being reborn from above. (The Greek word here is intentionally ambiguous. It can mean either "from above" or "again," and that's where Nicodemus's confusion comes from.) This reference to new birth points us back to John's prolog where the purpose of the incarnation, of the word becoming flesh, is to enable us to become God's children. How do you become someone's child? There are two ways. One is adoption, and that is the image used in the other Gospels. But the other way, of course, is to be born to them, and that is the image John works with, clearly alluding to baptism. No, we can't crawl back into our mother's womb and be born again like that. But we can go down into the waters of Holy Baptism and in that way be born of "water and the Spirit," as Jesus says. That now makes us God's children. And in the ancient world, who you are is intimately connected with where you come from, who your parents are. And who your parents were determined your status and your identity. And it still works that way in many cases, doesn't it? I mean, I am a pastor largely because my father was a pastor. It's what I grew up with, what I know, and what I became. In baptism, though, *God* becomes our parent and we are given a new identity. Whoever else we might be, and whoever our earthly parents are, we are now beloved children of God.

And that brings me to the second thing to get out of this Gospel reading, God's love for us and for the world. Here is how God loved the world, by sending God's son into the world so that we might not perish, but have the life that God created us for, true life, life that endures and really is life. In Greek thought – and John is a Greek thinker – you become what you love. And that is who Jesus is: the word made flesh, God become a human being. That's how much, how deeply, God loves us. Enough to become one of us, to share our nature and our lot. And that glorious good news is what the doctrine of the Trinity is really all about. In love, God has become one of us in Jesus. But in doing so, God also nevertheless remains God. And God continues to love us in Jesus through the Holy Spirit, who is busy in our lives and in the world creating and sustaining in us the faith that connects us to God's saving love.

In a few minutes, we're going to speak the Nicene Creed. And when we do, I want that to be a joyful experience, and not just because we're not reciting the Athanasian Creed. As you speak the creed, I want you to try to think of what you are saying as a statement of really good news, of what God has done for us and for our salvation. It is a joyful and wondrous proclamation. It is assurance that the triune God revealed in Jesus Christ is fully invested in you, and not only in you, but in all of God's creation. It is a message of hope against hope, a defiant word for the worst of times, and a reassuring word in the best of times. It is a reminder of who we are and whose we are.

May we take its message to heart and live out our identity as children of God in our daily lives. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.