

Fifth Sunday in Lent: John 8:48–59

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Preached for Holy Trinity · 2019

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of Holy Spirit.

Today presents a bit of a challenge for me as a preacher. My challenge is that today is Holy Trinity Sunday, the Sunday that begins with the liturgical verse “Blessed be the Holy Trinity and the undivided Unity,” enough of a paradox to make your head explode. Three divine Persons, one divine Being. As Dorothy Sayers once wrote: The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, the whole thing incomprehensible, echoing somewhat sarcastically the ponderous Athanasian Creed we will attempt after I’m done preaching. Needless to say, Dorothy Sayers didn’t think much of the doctrine of the Trinity. She didn’t deny it, but she thought all this verbiage was the invention of theologians with too much time on their hands, something that had little or nothing to do with the practical life of faith.

I’ll concede, she might have had something of a point. What possible use is there for this seemingly nonsensical teaching that God is three in one and one in three? You can’t even find a decent picture, illustration, or model for this, including all the triangles and intersecting circles plastered around this church named after the Holy Trinity. Arguably, the best illustration may well have been St. Patrick’s shamrock that he held forth as an illustration to the nature worshipping Celtic people, a trinity of three-lobed leaves, but even that falls flat if you push it too far. Usually the best you wind up with is a God wearing three hats – a Father hat, a Son hat, or a Holy Spirit hat. Or, if you will, a baseball analogy – the Father the starting pitcher, the Son the middle reliever who clinches the game and gets the win, and the Holy Spirit who gets the final outs and the save. Or the one I used to hear all the time – water as steam, liquid, and solid at its triple point. And all of those are, in the end, inadequate. They can even land in the ditch called “modalism” – God in three modes instead of three persons.

The problem we have is that we’re used to “being” and “person” being roughly interchangeable. You are a single being, and you are one person. Hopefully. If you think you are more than one person, you have a personality disorder, and you need to get help. And yet, the best we can make out of what Jesus has revealed to us is that He and Father are one but not

the same. And the Spirit who proceeds from them but is not the same either. We'll leave it for another time as to whether the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son in the same way. And yet these Three are all God and there are not three gods but one God. And about this time, you begin to think that Dorothy Sayers was right after all and this has nothing whatsoever to do with believing in Jesus.

If you were an OT Israelite, you had it a bit easier. Your creed said, "Hear, O Israel, the LORD, our God, the LORD alone." Of course, you had the Spirit of Yahweh and the angel of Yahweh to contend with, but basically you just dealt with Yahweh and left it at that. The loose bolt in the creedal machinery gets dropped when the Son, the second Person of the undivided Holy Trinity, becomes Flesh and dwells among us. Christmas. Now we have to deal with Father and Son. The Son prays to the Father, the Father sends the Son. Jesus claims to be the Son of the Father and the "I AM" who revealed Himself to Moses in the burning bush, Yahweh in the Flesh, to which the response is that the dogmaticians took up stones to throw at Him. Divine paradoxes are not generally well received.

To make matters even more complicated, the Son suffers, dies, and rises (as He said He would), and then forty days later disappears from sight leaving a group of disciples gaping in the clouds with the promise that He would reappear in the same way. And then ten days later, He pours out from the right hand of the Father the promised Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, the Advocate of the Son, who would hold the church to the words of Jesus and deliver the gifts of Jesus' death and resurrection in font, preaching, and Supper.

Here's my problem in a nutshell: Every other feast day and festival on the church's calendar is about some activity of the Triune God. Christmas: The Father sends the Son. Of the Father's love begotten. Happy Father's Day. Easter: The Son saves the world from Sin and Death by dying and rising. Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Pentecost: The Son breathes out the promised Spirit-breath on His Church. Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful people, and kindle them the fire of your love. Great!

And then comes Trinity Sunday. Not about the work of God but about God Himself. Not about God's work as creator, redeemer, and sanctifier, but about the mystery of the Godhead, this business of three in one and one in three that Dorothy Sayers found incomprehensible and quite unnecessary. My problem, my challenge, is that today is about a doctrine of God not a work of God.

Now don't get me wrong. Doctrine is important and we need to stick to what the apostle Paul calls "the pattern of sound words." Sloppy speech about God does not hallow God's Name by any stretch. We're not just making this stuff up on the fly here. That's why we have the creeds – the Apostles, Nicene, and Athanasian. They are the pattern of sound words to keep our thinking and vocabulary straight. Doctrine is the boundary lines, the fences around the playing field, keeping us from straying out of bounds with our own crazy notions of how God should be. Imagine a soccer match that had no boundary lines, no rules, no goal lines. Could you even have a game? Of course not! The most you could do is run around an open field and kick a ball, which is pretty much what soccer looks like to my untrained eye anyway.

But the boundary lines and the referees and the rule book are not the game. The game is played on the field, within the boundary lines, sometimes toeing the line. Sometimes incurring a yellow card. The "game," if you will, is faith. Union with Christ by faith. Being justified before God by faith. Trust in the promises of God worked in Jesus Christ His only-begotten Son. Faith is a relationship, a dynamic and intimate relationship with the God who creates us, saves us, and makes us holy.

I could tell you my wife biography – where she was born, where she went to school, who her parents were. I could give you all sorts of information about her. I won't, but I could. (I think.) But even with all that information about Karen, would you really say that you knew her? Of course not! You can read a biography of a person without knowing that person. You may know a thing or two about that person, but you really don't know him or her.

You can recite the creeds by heart, even the Athanasian Creed, if you are so inclined, all the uncreateds and incomprehensibles, but do you really know God? No. You know some things about God that God has revealed about Himself, and to be very frank, they don't make a lot of sense. You can recite the Faith that is believed and yet not have the faith that believes.

The Creeds are a boundary line surrounding the field of worship and faith. "Whoever desires to be saved must, above all, hold the catholic faith. Whoever does not keep it whole and undefiled will without doubt perish eternally." Now there's a boundary line for you! It would be easy to write this off as so much power politics invading the Body of Christ. Toe the doctrinal line or you go to hell. And maybe that's what they meant when whoever they were wrote the Athanasian Creed in the 5th century to test the orthodoxy of their clergy. And you know, you can never trust the clergy to stay inside the boundary lines.

The Athanasian Creed was written at a time and place that was beset by Arianism, the ancient ancestor of our Jehovah's Witnesses friends. The problem wasn't that they were leafleting the neighborhoods, but they were claiming "there was when the Son was not." In other words, before Jesus was born, there was no Son. Not the pattern of sound words about who Jesus is as the Son of God and Son of Man.

That brings us closer to the heart of the matter. What we say about the Father and the Holy Spirit reflects what we believe concerning Jesus Christ, the Son. And if we claim to be disciples of the Lord Jesus, followers of His teaching, baptized into His death and life with His mind being our mind, His heart being our heart, His life being our life, then we are going to follow Him when He speaks about His Father (and our Father in heaven) and the Holy Spirit who speaks on His behalf. In other word, to claim Christ as your Savior is also to claim the Father as your Father and the Spirit as your Guardian and Guide.

When you love someone, you can't stop talking about them, thinking about them, wanting to understand them deeply, to know and be known by them. And you want to speak accurately and truthfully. You see, it's not that a bunch of old and crabby theologians got together to inflict the miseries of creeds and confessions on simple believers. That's not it at all. Jesus has opened the door to the most profound Mystery of our existence, the very nature of God Himself. He has revealed the love of God as the Beloved Son and brought us into communion with the Father, with Himself, with the Spirit. And it's out of the depths of that love that embraces and holds us, that forgives and renews us, that makes us new creatures in Christ, that we search for words and phrases that describe what cannot be described and express what cannot be expressed.

When we're done reciting the creed – be it the wonderfully brief Apostles, the poetically crafted Nicene, or the ponderous Athanasian creed – we dare not claim to understand God or have completely described Him or really even scratched the divine surface. Words cannot contain God. Our thoughts cannot contain God. Our heads cannot contain God. Our lives cannot contain God. And yet, God in Christ deigns to dwell among us, and with us, and in us. The Infinite Holy in the finite.

As long as I'm rehearsing my anxieties, and probably expressing your anxieties, over this creed dedicated to Athanasius, the great bishop and defender of the Nicene Creed, let's jump to the second to last verse that troubles every Lutheran who reads it: "At His coming all people will

rise again with their bodies and give an account concerning their own deeds. And those who have done good will enter into eternal life, and those who have done evil into eternal fire.”

Now before you write this off – and I’ll be the first admit that if this were a modern creed written some contemporary worship, it would likely fail our synod’s doctrinal review – remember that this is essentially a quote fused out of two passages of Scripture. St. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians that we must all give an account for the deeds done in the body. And the words of Jesus in John’s gospel, that those who have done good will rise to the resurrection of life, and those who practice evil to the resurrection of judgement (John 5:29).

Did the Athanasian Creed get it wrong? It could have done better, in my theological opinion. Sometimes the referees deserve a yellow card, if not a red card, for interfering too much with the game. But remember, to do good is faith, and to do evil is unbelief. If you refuse the judgement of Christ on the cross in your place, there is only the judgment of the Law against you. And remember that as a baptized believer in Jesus Christ, you no longer live but Christ lives in you, and the life you now live in this flesh, you live by faith in the Son of God who loves you and gave himself up for you. You have the mind and will of Christ at work in you. You have the Spirit’s fruit always there for you: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. You have the Father’s love and blessing as His child. And so whatever good you do as a child of God, is a good that God has done in you.

If I had my druthers, and I don’t get to have them, but if I did, I would have written the first and last sentences of the Athanasian Creed in the positive: This is the catholic faith: whoever believes it faithfully and firmly will be saved. That’s God’s desire, His heart, that all would be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. And while it’s fine to threaten the clergy, and probably necessary too, when we take the Faith once delivered out into the world, let’s take it as a gracious invitation to the world’s prodigal sons and daughters to come home to their waiting Father, to know the embrace of the Son, to bask in the fire of the Spirit rather than threatening them with an eternal fire that wasn’t even prepared for them in the first place.

Today is a day of a lot of words. Ironically, most fathers, like my own, tended to be men of few words. Joseph, Jesus’ surrogate father, doesn’t have a single sentence of his recorded in the Scriptures. He just did what the Lord told him to do.

Augustine, arguably the greatest Christian thinker in the West, a prolific writer of the 4th century (before the Athanasian creed), wrote a massive tome on the Trinity, twenty five books

in all. At the end, in the last chapter of the last book, Augustine prays. He asks forgiveness for writing so much. He prays that whatever is correct be received, and whatever is wrong be forgotten. He admits that for all his words on the Trinity, he cannot claim to understand God. He sees through a glass but dimly. Here are the last sentences of Augustine's prayer. Let it be our prayer on this Sunday of the Holy Trinity:

When the wise man spoke of You in his book, which is now called by the special name of Ecclesiasticus, "We speak," he said, "much, and yet come short; and in sum of words, He is all." When, therefore, we shall have come to You, these very many things that we speak, and yet come short, will cease; and You, as One, will remain "all in all." And we shall say one thing without end, in praising You in One, ourselves also made one in You. O Lord the one God, God the Trinity, whatever I have said in these books that is of Yours, may they acknowledge who are Yours; if anything of my own, may it be pardoned both by You and by those who are Yours.

Today is a day we bow our minds and hearts in worship of what we do not fully comprehend, recognizing that to confess the Mystery of the Trinity is to worship the Lord our God, with all our mind, no matter how inadequate that might be.

Blessed be the Holy Trinity and the Undivided Unity. Let us give glory to him because he has shown his mercy to us.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

SOURCE

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