

Dominica Trinitatis

Gospel: John 3.1–17

7 & 8 June, 2009

St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

✠ In the name of Jesus ✠

Dear fellow-redeemed: grace be unto you and peace from God our heavenly Father and from the Lord Jesus. Amen.

Today is the Feast of the Holy Trinity. For many of us, it's a great time to sing some of the neat hymns we've come to love, like Holy, Holy, Holy. I asked Pr. Goetz if he'd queue up Luther's great creed hymn, 954, "We All Believe in One True God." Apparently I got vetoed. Now, admittedly, I'm a bit disappointed. But if that's all that I hoped to get out of Trinity Sunday—a rush at church—then I really missed the whole point of Trinity Sunday.

So let me put the point to you like the Athanasian Creed does: "Whoever wants to be saved should above all cling to the catholic Faith." Trinity Sunday is about this Faith; it's about how you know God—that is, it's about two questions: (a) how do you come to know God? and (b) what do you know God as? The two questions are intimately related. But let's deal with each of them individually for the time being.

Let's start with the first question. How do you come to know God? There are only two basic answers to this question. One of them's right, and one of them's wrong. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus, at least initially, comes with the wrong answer. The wrong answer says we can come to know God, basically, through the Law. If we know right from wrong and act on it, if we perfectly keep the 630-some laws, if we just *do something*, then we know God and have fellowship with Him.

Of course, the figure of Nicodemus is perennially relevant. Yes, he's a real, historical individual; but yes, he also typifies the hard-wired human approach to God, the logic of the flesh and the Law that's in all of us, that all of us fall prey to all of the time, that logic of the Law and the flesh that will plague us until we go to our graves. If we just offer ourselves up to God—whether through a moment of decision for Christ or through a selfless life of kindness toward strangers, like Albert Schweitzer, or what have you—we can come to know God.

And that resonates with us. It strikes us that there's something right really, really right about that. Measuring our selves against the perfection of God expressed in the Law, we say, "There must be something I can, should, have to do to make up the gap." And then we get busy. For sins past, we make amends to God by a double dose of sanctified living. We buy the mercy of God by striking deals: "God, if you'll just overlook what I've done, I'll go to church every Sunday the rest of my life." That's the first way to approach God—through the Law.

But there are two problems with trying to know God through the Law. The first is this and most basic: it is not God as He wants to be known, the God who wishes all men to

be saved to come to the knowledge of the truth and who Himself takes the initiative and who Himself completes the work.

The second is this: God known through His Law remains inscrutable and scary, a God of wrath. Pretend though we may to love Him, our acts of worship under the Law are driven by fear; our piety under the Law by a desire to please and appease. And love exacted by fear is no love at all. Trust conditioned on our failings leaves no ground for security. Fear that is terror is hardly respect. That's the view of God refracted through the Law and our sinful flesh: a divine terrorist promising every good and blessing if we do what He knows we cannot. As long as Nicodemus the Pharisee, as long as the Pharisee in all of us, continues to operate by the logic of the Law, neither Nicodemus nor we know God as He wants to be known.

So then how *do* we come to know God? We come to know Him only as He reveals Himself to us in His Gospel, only where He Himself draws near to us, not we to Him. In His Gospel, He is and remains the God who requires the most exacting of measures from His creatures—but then fulfills them Himself. God in His Gospel is God the Father who so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son to bear the world's sins. God in His Gospel is the Son of God who, bearing the world's sins, is tortured to death in the world's place for sins He did not commit. God in His Gospel is the Holy Spirit who descends on us through this preaching, who points to the Son of Man lifted up for the world, and who says, "That was for the world. And if it was for the world, it was for you, too." God in His Gospel is the Spirit who speaks us free of every sin through His Word, who washes us clean of every sin in baptism, and who gives us new life by pointing us to Christ crucified, just like He gave life through the bronze serpent on a pole to the Israelites bitten by venomous snakes.

That's God in His Gospel. Where it's impossible for *us through the Law* to come to know the true God, the true God descends to us, under the Law, assumes responsibility for what we do not and cannot, our sin, and comes to us with a preaching that for His own sake our sins are done away with.

Fellow redeemed, if that's how we know God, then we really know God. But if we want to know God through His Law, we don't know Him at all. The first question.

So now we've come to our second question: What is that we know God as? God has revealed Himself to the world as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But God through the Law is not and cannot be God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, because listen to how Scripture defines what it means to be God the Father: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." What it means to be God the Father is to decree in eternity *not* to consign His creatures to eternal hell by leaving them under the curse of the Law. But that's what God as He is known through His Law does. He says, "Do this perfectly and you shall live." And lacking the perfection demanded, we must perish. But not God the Father, the God who reveals Himself in His Gospel. That God looks with undeserved pity and mercy, moved only by love, on a fallen creation running headlong to its own death and hell and says to His Son, "Now go, bright jewel of My crown, and bring to men salvation." He doesn't demand that we approach Him, but God

the Father as He is approaches us, in His Son, and reveals that He is moved sheerly by undeserved love.

God through the Law is not, cannot be, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Listen again to how Scripture defines what it means to be God the Son: God the Son so faithfully fulfills His Father's wishes that He becomes to the world what the serpent was in the wilderness. In the place of creatures reeling under the death-sentence of the Law, in obedience to His Father's wishes, He is born under the same Law that condemns us and He bears in our place the condemnation of that Law. Though He is the Son of God, ruling in equal majesty with His Father, He doesn't play the majesty card, but in sheer mercy and in deepest humility He humbles Himself to death, even the death on the cross. And there, in a single word that expresses the momentousness of what He has done, He says, "It is finished.' The debt is paid. And anyone who trusts in Me—who trusts that *I* have paid down the debt owed to the Law—anyone who trust in *Me*, will not perish, but will have everlasting life."

God through the Law is not, and cannot be, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Listen again to how Scripture defines what it means to be God the Holy Spirit. God the Holy Spirit is the God who *gives* you new birth to eternal life through the water of Baptism and through the preaching of His Word. Whenever and wherever the quiet winds of the Gospel blow, whenever and wherever Christ is preached, whenever and wherever a child is baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, whenever and wherever Jesus comes in His Word and Sacraments, there the Holy Spirit *gives* new birth. The logic of the Law tells us something else. It tells us that we have to get our house straight. It tells us that we have to invite Jesus into our hearts. It tells us we must do something to turn off the natural resistance we have to God.

Nicodemus gets how impossible it is when he asks Jesus, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" See who's doing the doing here? Nicodemus lays it on himself: how am *I* supposed re-enter my mother's womb? How am *I* supposed to control this?

Jesus' response is that you have as little control over your own conversion as you did over your own birth. Your birth was in the control of your mother—you had nothing to do with it. It happened to you. So also your conversion. You have no control over it. Who can say that she knows why Christ is preached here, at St. John's in Topeka, Kansas, on 7 June, 2009? If you know, tell me! Who can say that he knows why as child he was baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit? You can't. The wind blows where it wants to and no one knows where it's coming from or where it's going. You can do nothing to arrest the wind, to make it come, to make it stop, to make it change direction. The point is this: the Holy Spirit gives new, spiritual birth to you through water and the Word. It happens to you.

But a God known through the Law, a God who asks *you* to approach *Him*, who asks *you* to make restitution for your own sins, who asks *you* to turn yourself, to give yourself over to Him, to do what the Law demands of you on your own—fear, love, and trust in

Him above all things—that God is not the true God as He reveals Himself, He is not the Holy Trinity.

So what is the point of Trinity Sunday? Yes, it's about getting some things right. Yes, it's about proclaiming the orthodox, Scriptural faith that “the Father is God; the Son is God; the Holy Spirit is God: And yet there are not three gods, but one God.” Yes, it's about honoring the faithful contenders for the creed, St. Athanasius, St. Basil, the Sts. Gregory, St. Hilary, St. Augustine, St. Ambrose, and all the others who staked life and limb on this confession. Yes, it's even about singing some great hymns.

But even more, it's about the well-known saying that ideas have consequences—to deny the Trinity is to have a God warped by the Law; to have a God warped by the Law is not to have the Blessed Trinity. And these are ideas with eternal consequences. Because what the Athanasian Creed says is true, “Whoever wants to be saved should above all cling to the catholic Faith.” Whoever wants to be saved should cling to this: that the one God in three equal but distinct persons has done everything for your salvation. Whoever wants to be saved should stake it all on this God, the Father who so loved the world that He gave the only-begotten God, His Son, that whosoever is given new birth to faith in Him by God the Holy Spirit should not perish but have everlasting life.

God the Father grant it through the Holy Spirit for the sake of Jesus Christ His Son, our Lord. Amen.

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