

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
5327 W. Washington Blvd.
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53208-1798

The Feast of the Holy Trinity
June 7, 2009
John 3:1-17

“One. Three. Three-In-One”
by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

For the second Sunday in a row, the church celebrates an important festival. As you know by now from the hymns we have sung, from the readings, from the children’s message, this is Trinity Sunday which celebrates the mystery and wonder of our Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is a celebration that was introduced relatively late in the history of the Christian Church, being established by Pope Benedict XI in 1305 A.D. on the Sunday after Pentecost. Perhaps the reason it took so long was because the Christian church in its liturgy and hymns so regularly worshipped and celebrated the Trinity that a special day seemed superfluous. That being said, it is also a rather Lutheran custom to name churches Trinity. In fact, in the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod many of the historic congregations of our synod are named Trinity–Altenburg, MO., St. Louis, Freistadt, Milwaukee.

But in our day and age, when there is confusion about God all around and when some even doubt His existence, it is most appropriate that we take the time this day to consider the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. We will do so on the basis of the three Scripture readings for today and this theme: *“One, Three, Three-in-One.* May God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit bless our meditation on his holy Word this day.

I. One

The Old Testament lesson is a vision. It is a vision of the one God. Isaiah is overwhelmed by what he sees. He sees the Lord high and lifted up. It is the Lord of hosts—the God of the heavenly armies. His train fills the temple—the fringe of his robe is so great. And above the Lord, the seraphim sing in unending praise: *“... The whole earth is full of his glory.”*

In our day too, with the “gods” which people put their reliance on whether that be the gods of technology, or finance, or the spirits of the age, we too need to be reminded that the one Lord we worship is the creator of all. There are no other gods beside Him as the first of the commandments reminds us. The Lord alone is God. In the Athanasian Creed which we will confess in a little while we will say: *“... They are not three gods but one God. ... And yet they are not three lords but one Lord.”* We worship and adore one Lord.

II. Three

Yet there is more than a hint of additional information about our God already in this lesson. Do you remember what the seraphim sang: *“Holy, holy, holy”* The trisagion in Greek. A three-fold statement about our God. And note what the Lord himself says: *“Whom shall I*

send and who will go for us." God who is one is also three.

And the second lesson surely reminds us there are also three persons. Some people maintain that there are no references to the Holy Trinity in the Scriptures or that they are very rare. Sometimes I wonder if they ever read the Scriptures for themselves. The words of this lesson are part of St. Peter's Pentecost sermon. That is appropriate on this week after Pentecost. He preaches powerfully about Jesus, the one whom they crucified. The one raised from the dead. He speaks of the prophecy of David about the holy one whose soul would not be abandoned to hell and who would not see corruption. In the very next verse we see Peter proclaiming the truth of the three persons of the Trinity--the Spirit, the Father, and Christ. Note what he says: "This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing." He speaks of Jesus, who is Lord and Christ, the Father, and the Holy Spirit. For the three are one.

III. Three-In-One

And they are also the Three-in-One. It is that phrase which comes to us in the word Trinity. Yes, the Trinity is a mystery. We cannot understand the relationships of the eternal Persons of the Godhead one to another. We cannot comprehend the height or depth or the wonders of God. We are merely his poor creatures, lowly and apparently insignificant among the wonders of creation. We are specks of dust in the universe. But we are not insignificant--we are the pinnacle of his creation. We are his own beloved children. Yet as fallen children we need the help and love of the Trinity. We are helpless without it. And that love is so beautifully expressed in the Holy Gospel for this day.

In fact, one could say that the Gospel shows the Trinity in action. We have the account of Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council, who comes to Jesus at night to ask him questions. Jesus speaks to him of the necessity to be born again. "No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." Now to Nicodemus this seems like an impossibility. Indeed it is--for how can a person when they are old be born again? How can they return to their mother's womb? To which the reply comes, "No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit." It is the Spirit who gives birth to spirit. Here we see again as in the Epistle the work of the Holy Spirit who brings new life.

But the Gospel also speaks of the work of the Father and the Son. The Son of Man who came from heaven has gone into heaven. The Son of Man will be lifted up like the snake was lifted up in the desert. In him everyone who believes will have eternal life. And in the concluding verses is the beautiful summary of the good news, John 3:16. How often have you watched a sporting event on television and seen someone in the background hold up a sign that says: John 3:16. But how many know what those numbers stand for? It is the verse that says it so well. "For God so loved the world, that He gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life." God loved us. God loved the world. God

gives his only Son. In him, by faith in him, is eternal life. Here is the work of the Holy Trinity. It is a work of salvation. It is a work that saves. For as the Gospel lesson concludes for this Trinity Sunday: "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him." Not condemnation, but salvation is found in the wonderful work of the Three-in-One, the Holy and blessed Trinity.

Conclusion

It is that three in one God who is at work most assuredly through his blessed Word, in the sacraments of the church. When we began the service in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit we were reminded again of that. When a child or an adult is baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, they received God's Holy name and his blessing.

Some people might say that the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is a very impractical thing, a difficult thing to understand or believe. Yes, it is difficult to understand, but it is not impractical. It is the very basis of our faith. For it is the Triune God who saves us. In just a few moments we will join in a custom that has become a part of the celebration of this Sunday. We will join in confessing the words of the Athanasian Creed, the third of the great universal creeds of the church. Yes, it is longer than the usual confession of faith. Yes, it is very detailed. But it confesses without a doubt our faith in the Holy Trinity.

The whole triumphant host,
Give thanks to God on high
Hail, Father, Son and Holy Ghost they ever cry.
Hail, Abram's God and mine.
I join the heavenly lays
All might and majesty are thine
And endless praise!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.