

## Trinity Sunday

I Corinthians 8:6; John 16:12-15

A Sermon for Trinity Sunday based on the Athanasian Creed

Today is Trinity Sunday, that one Sunday each year when we focus on the fact that God is one and three in one: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. What do we make of this?

Some have said that the Trinity is like water: it can be like steam, water, ice.

Or, the Trinity is like a triangle which has three corners but it's one.

Or it can be like Augustine, the great early church father said: The Trinity is like the one who loves, the one who is loved, and the loving.

The most important thing to understand about the Trinity is if you think you have understood it, then you have misunderstood it. What do we do now?

What is it about? This Trinity, God is one and three in one.

We Lutherans hold to three ancient creeds. They are found at the beginning of our Book of Concord. They are the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed. People like the Apostles' Creed best because it's the shortest, although it is not the oldest. The Nicene Creed is the oldest. After that came the Apostles' Creed, and then finally the Athanasian Creed.

On Trinity Sunday we deal with these ancient creeds and the battle in the early church that necessitated these great confessions. Because we often deal with the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds, today we will take up the Athanasian Creed. It opens with these words: "Whoever wishes to be saved must, above all else, hold the true Christian faith. Whoever does not keep it whole and undefiled will without doubt perish for eternity." That's strong language. Whole and undefiled. Every bit of it and without wavering, in order to be saved.

That reminds us that there are some differences among these three creeds, differences significant enough that the Orthodox (230 million Christians) do not hold to either the Apostles' or the Nicene Creed in the way we do. And the Athanasian Creed is simply held by some churches in the West—Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Anglicans, Presbyterians (Reformed)—but not all of Western Christendom.

What is it that we have to believe, and what if we don't believe all exactly and totally?

When that question is put to us, we commonly back off and say: "We believe what's in the Bible." In the New Testament there are fragments of creeds from the early church. One of them is John 3:16 which is sometimes called "the little Gospel": "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

And there is 1 Corinthians 8:6: "There is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist." In this creed there is the eternal Lord and then Jesus in parallel with him.

Some people have a red-letter Bible which highlights the words we supposedly have to believe in. But as a famous Lutheran, Ernst Käsemann, said: "The New Testament is the mother of all heresies." All Christians use the Bible, but there are many ways to go astray.

Some say the rally cry for the Reformation was "Scripture alone." But that slogan did not suddenly appear in 1517. It had been used for several centuries before Luther. Although Luther used it, he didn't mean it in the way others did. For him, "Scripture alone" meant "Christ alone": *Was Christum treibet*. Whatever drives to Christ and proclaims Christ.

So what is it that we have to believe in light of those opening words of the Athanasian Creed: "Whoever wants to be saved must hold the true Christian faith and if you don't, you perish eternally." That makes it pretty serious.

People say: Cut to the chase. Just tell me. Is it John 3:16? Is it every word in the Bible? The creeds? And then there are those who say: "Just believe in Jesus." But what is that about, specifically, concretely?

There's also the problem of being earnest. You can mouth all of these things, but do you really believe them? Earnestly, from the heart. The problem with that is, of course, as Jeremiah 17:9 says: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt."

We use the word "rude" for someone who doesn't have any manners, doesn't know how to behave in public. But it's really a Latin word which means somebody who doesn't have any education, who was brought up simply.

The Roman Catholic Church teaches that an uneducated person may not understand Catholic doctrine right. After all, it's big and complicated, and someone may have this wrong or that wrong. So the real question is: "Do you intend what the church intends?" Then it's O.K. What matters is that you intend to believe what the church believes.

The problem with that is, as the saying goes: "The road to hell is paved with good intentions." When we realize intentions are a problem, we fall back on: "You just gotta believe."

Back in the Nineteenth Century there was a Roman Catholic who said (paraphrase): "I accept everything the Pope teaches is OK, and if I'm asked to believe six impossible things before breakfast, I'll do it. Just tell me; I'll believe it. Whatever it takes. Do you want me to believe that the whale swallowed Jonah? Fine! If you want that, I'll believe that Jonah swallowed the whale. Whatever you want. I will believe because it's impossible."

His stance echoes a phrase from the early church father, Tertullian, who said: "I believe because it's impossible." The trouble with that, of course, is that it is just believing in believing. And that's not what it's about.

What happens then is that we throw up our hands and say: "Hey, it's really difficult. Do whatever works for you. If it feels right for you, if it works for you, fine."

How can we know? How do we sort it out? Having gone far in "wrecking the house," that is, showing the problems, we want to build it up again.

What do we have doctrines or beliefs for? Doctrines or dogmas are like road warning markers and signs: Do not cross the center line. The shoulder of the road is here. That's for a reason, because it's dangerous if you do cross that center line or go off the shoulder. You may not see what's ahead, but you follow the rules of the road, you will likely get to your destination.

Or there's a sign on a mountainous curve which says: "Danger! Cliff ahead." And you know you don't want to drive too close to the shoulder on that curve.

Doctrines are like those signs. Doctrines are warning signs, because every generation has a tendency to be wayward, to fall into one ditch or another. But, of course, we're not saved by the warning signs. We're not saved by our theology. We're not saved by our doctrines.

That happens to be a danger for those of us raised in the Lutheran tradition because we do emphasize knowing doctrine, knowing where these warning signs are. But then we can end up holding to the signs and not what it's about. We end up just mouthing or saying "whatever." "Yeah, I'll believe this or that."

And that leads to another ditch, the ditch of many ways of salvation. A large Lutheran church in St. Paul, Minnesota has a standard funeral bulletin, the cover of which states: "If you are not a Christian, we greet you with deep respect." (Bravo, but nothing new here. All churches treat funeral attendees with respect.) But then it goes on: "We give thanks to God for the many ways that divine mystery is named and practiced."

Whoa, no! God is one. Christ is Lord, and beside him there is no other. As the Nicene Creed says: "Jesus is the only Son of God . . . God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God . . . of one Being with the Father . . ."

Those lost Lutherans have taken away the road signs and are leading others to fall off the cliff.

What do we say about those who are not Christians? We say we really do not know. We don't say they are damned. We don't say they are saved. What happens is God's business, not ours. We really do not know, and we do not speculate.

But we know the diagnosis every person faces, and it's frightening: We cannot redeem ourselves; we are each only a heartbeat away from death and on our way to nothingness (Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, 224).

As the Athanasian Creed says, it is serious business. Salvation is in Christ alone. That is basic. That is the promise. We don't know what happens to those who are outside of Christ, but for those who are in Christ, that's the promise.

Salvation is not about a set of "beliefs," nor it is about "believing" because that just means we end up believing in believing.

Rather, salvation is the fact that God in Jesus Christ saves us. That's what it's about. That he does it.

In Romans 1:16 it says: "The gospel . . . is the power of God for salvation." That's what does it.

How does this come to us? "Faith comes by hearing and hearing comes by the preaching of Christ" (Romans 10:17) And "If we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Romans 6:5).

Salvation is God's doing. We have then the relief and happiness of being certain, being sure, because it is not up to us to think it right, to do it right. Rather, God does it, he reaches down in his Word and sacraments and rescues us from the abyss, and that's the great gift which is beyond all price.

Amen