

*Sermon for the Festival of the Holy Trinity, 22.v.2005, 10:30 a.m.  
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Brogue, Pennsylvania  
Genesis 1:1-2:4a; Psalm 8:1-10; II Corinthians 13:11-33; Matthew 28:16-20  
Holy Communion, LBW - Setting 2*

**J. J. !**

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was and Who is to come! ✠ Amen.

God and our *doctrine* of God, our *teaching* about God, that is, not your teaching or mine but the Church's considered opinion or *dogma* are two distinct things— though, as Almighty God is our Witness and Judge, *the two had better agree!* One difference between the two is that God *is* and the Church's doctrine *becomes*. The living God Who disclosed Himself to Moses as 'I am Who am' is self-existent, He Who eternally is and was and will be. The Church's dogma, teaching, doctrine takes time.

Just look how long it took the first Disciples to understand who Jesus really was. Even after the Resurrection, some still did not apprehend, let alone comprehend, the One Who was God and was with God from all eternity, Who was born of a virgin daughter of God's chosen people, Israel, Who really lived and wanted to live as we live, Who really suffered and Who really died, Who really was

raised as God's Son triumphant over death in the fullness of His humanity, in His glorified flesh and blood. It took the Church nearly three centuries to find the words to talk about all that, and another century for good measure to find language for the One God Who was, is and will be forever Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

All the signs are therein the New Testament, as in today's Gospel, that the very earliest Christian community used those words, 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit,' to preach, teach about the God revealed in Jesus Christ and to pray. The early Christian rule for prayer was to address ourselves to God in petition, intercession, praise and thanksgiving using the following formula: 'to the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit.' You will find this pattern of the Holy Trinity that preserves what was called the 'monarchy' of God— Father first, Son second and Holy Spirit third, but all God— in the most ancient prayers of the Church, especially in what used to be called the 'Collect,' the Prayer of the Day.

Just as it takes people who love each other and are faithful to one another years, a whole lifetime, to truly know each other and to celebrate their love for each other, so, too, the Church's liturgy, as

well as her theology, took time to develop ways to proclaim and glorify our Triune God. In the Western Church, in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century, Spanish monks began singing the creed to glorify Christ as God's Incarnate Word and to glorify the unity of God and the three divine Persons of the Holy Trinity in the form we have in the Athanasian Creed, which you may find, read and pray at pages 54 and 55 of the *Lutheran Book of Worship*. This is the Third Ecumenical Creed of the Church, accepted in both East and West, and is one of the foundational doctrinal writings of our Evangelical Lutheran Church. Three centuries later, in the 9<sup>th</sup> Century, French Abbots and Abbesses began setting aside the First Sunday after Pentecost, this Sunday, in order to honor the Triune nature of God with great solemnity in their monasteries. This practice grew until, five centuries later, in that century almost without hope for the people of Europe living under the constant scourge of warfare and plague, a general Council of the Church declared Trinity Sunday to be a solemnity throughout the Western Church. There, in the darkest night of faith, when society and civilization seemed to be falling apart, Christians were called to remember that community itself is grounded in the very life of God

Who is always God in community, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. For nearly a thousand years thereafter, the Western Church would count the Sundays of summer and autumn as 'Sundays after Trinity,' as the Evangelical Lutheran Churches of Germany and certain other Churches still do.

In the Eastern Church, Saint John Chrysostom and others developed a whole liturgical music around a musical image for the Holy Trinity, the three-part chord or 'Divine Triad.' To this day, if you attend the Divine Liturgy in a Greek or other Eastern Orthodox Catholic Church, you will hear that constant element in the liturgy as chanted by the people and choir, by the deacons and priests. For reasons I have never understood, certain Western theologians took exception with this way of speaking and thinking about the Holy Trinity, but to me, this musical image of the Triad conveys the Triune nature of God Who is in three distinct Persons, like the distinct tones of the three-part chord, while being absolutely unified in a sound that is more than the sum total of its parts. Triangles and trefoils— that symbol that looks like a three-leaf clover as well as the pretzel that was designed to look like it— all leave me a little cold, as do diagrams

which I find more confusing than helpful. But the Holy Trinity as the Divine Triad, the eternal three-part harmony of God, sings to my own soul and faith, as I hope it might to yours.

But what *difference* does this all make? What difference does it make that God is God in Three Persons, Triune, instead of, well, simply *God* or *the Lord*? There are two very good reasons to be *glad* that God has been revealed in Jesus Christ as tri-personal, as *complex*, not *simplex*, not ‘just God.’ One reason is that reality— all reality, both natural and human and whatever is beyond nature and us— is itself infinitely *complex*. What a pity it would be to live in a complex universe but with a simplex, monolithic, two dimensional God Whose whole being could be summed up in just that label, ‘just plain God.’ For Christians, to speak of ‘God’ is hardly to have said anything. We only begin to do justice to the majesty of God by glorifying God as the sovereign ‘Father’ Who does not abandon His children. We have not conceived of the love, mercy and deliberate humanity of God until we have turned in our thought and prayer to the Son, our Savior and Brother. We have said nothing of the freedom and power of God to create faith and to bring the Kingdom

of God among us and through us in this world until we have included in our confession of faith the mighty wind and still small voice and fiery grace of God, the Holy Spirit, our Comforter and Advocate. The complex mystery of the Holy Trinity is more than equal to the complexity of the whole creation.

Another reason to give thanks and praise to God the Holy Trinity is that faith in the complex Triune God saves us from the tyranny of simple-minded fanatics and their fanaticism which always goes off on some extreme tangent or other, no longer interested in the whole picture of reality or in 'all sorts and conditions of people.' The Church founded on Trinitarian faith invites *all* people, out of the *complexity* of their lives with its many gray areas and boundary situations, to enter into the eternal love and life of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Fanaticism always preaches a single, simplex, unitary and absolute little god, whether that deity be a supernatural being or some tiresome but nevertheless destructive political ideology. 'Behave or be damned!' is always the battle cry of the fanatics, who are only too willing to sit in the divine judgment seat. 'There is no God but *this* god, and X, Y or Z is His prophet!' they

scream at us until we finally crack and submit . . . they hope, may it be in vain!

In a world of fanatics and self-appointed prophets, it is so blessedly good to be called by the Triune God not to be a true believer executing just punishment on the ungodly, but to be called simply to be a forgiven sinner, called to newness of life through the One Who preferred the table fellowship of public sinners to that of hypocrites, and called to treat others with that same forbearance and mercy. In a world of hard choices and moral dilemmas, it is good to turn in prayer to Wind of the Spirit Who blows where He wills, Who inspires men and women to make choices out of compassion and responsibility for others and for the coming generation rather than doing nothing so as to preserve their own immaculate moral record intact. It is good to be able to say to others and to ourselves, 'God preserves us within firm commandments and orders for our good, but living those commandments and living joyfully within those orders requires the graces of thought, strength, wisdom, insight and the willingness to risk making a mistake. *God* is infinitely complex, so why would we expect life to be any different?!

I am glad that God is Triune and that this is God's Church, the Assembly of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, above all because the imprint of that Trinity in Unity is found in our life together. We do not act alone in this Church, the one forcing something down another's throat, or the other simply walking away perturbed or bitter. As a triune people of the Triune God we need one another, and we delight in one another, living and carrying out our mission *synodically*, that means, literally, 'walking together' in both unity in Christ and in our distinctive diversity. It is fascinating to me as I work with our Constitution Revision Committee to see how that tri-personal pattern of the Triune God is replicated throughout our Lutheran Church order and polity. We need one another in Christ. We walk together— not in lock-step but in the same direction and toward the same goal— or we do not walk at all in this Church! We need one another in this three-part choir of the Triune God, need one another so that all three parts are heard, for just one tone by itself would be off-key, no matter how expertly sung.

Today we will grieve a little as we lose four singers of God's Triune praise to the larger choir which is the whole Church. We have

lived through joy and sorrow with them and they with us. We have watched not only their sons but their whole family grow and we will miss them, how much we will not notice until they are gone. But we rejoice and give thanks that Dee, Brad, Jacob and Joseph will hear and continue to sing the Triune song of God in the congregation in which they will find their Church home, and by God's grace we will sing it with them. ✍️Amen.

Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit both now and forever. ✍️Amen.

**S. D. G. !**