

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
5/26/2013, Trinity Sunday
Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31, Psalm 8, Romans 5:1-5, John 16:12-15
The Holy Trinity's Delight in Humanity

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

This is Trinity Sunday. Let's begin this morning's sermon by lifting up a passage from this morning's Psalm — Psalm 8. I love this particular passage because it so beautifully expresses the Lord's delight in humanity.¹

⁴When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars you have set in their courses,
⁵what is man that you should be mindful of him,
the son of man that you should seek him out?
⁶You have made him but little lower than the angels;
you adorn him with glory and honor; (Psalm 8:4-6, LBW)

The theme of my sermon, then, is that all three divine persons Father, Son, and Holy Spirit delight in humanity and cherish us. Therefore, we are not overlooked in this world. We are dearly beloved to the Holy Trinity.

LUTHER

Let's focus our discussion of the Triune God's goodwill toward us by speaking of Martin Luther and his love for the doctrine of the Trinity.

When Martin Luther was forty-four years old, he thought he was dying. That can happen, even to a young man. You can begin to feel that death approaches. Luther was wrong about that. He went ahead and lived for almost two more decades. But in his forty-fourth year, Luther suffered such an

¹ Pastor Fryer: Our LBW translation uses the traditional word "man" in this translation, but it does not mean "man" as in "male," but "man" as in "humanity." But even "humanity" might fall short of what the Bible means, especially if we interpret Psalm 8 in light of Genesis 1: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." (Genesis 1:27, RSV). Here the word "man" seems to mean humanity in its structure as "male and female" — not just humanity as made up of both men and women, but rather humanity as structured by "male and female," so that humanity is unfulfilled without one or the other of the genders.

accumulation of blows that he was put in mind of his deathbed. Reformation scholar Robert Fischer tells us about those days:

The year 1527 was one of the most difficult in Luther's life. During the summer he experienced... so sudden and severe an attack of illness that he expected to die, and his recovery was very slow. In August the plague struck Wittenberg, and when the university moved to Jena, Luther, who remained behind with Bugenhagen [his pastor], was burdened with extra pastoral duties. In great discomfort his wife was expecting another child in December, and near that time his little son Hans fell ill. Meanwhile other demands were crowding in on Luther: the Elector was demanding his assistance with the church visitation of Saxony, he was trying to proceed with his translation of the Old Testament prophets, he was called to settle a feud between John Agricola and Melanchthon, and he had to write a letter against Karlstadt's latest trouble-making activity. (LW 37: "Confession Concerning Christ's Supper," 1528)

Besides these things, Luther was also pre-occupied with his Eucharistic treatises against Zwingli and Oecolampadius. Those two theologians were teaching what is called the "symbolic presence of Christ in the Supper." Luther opposed them with some of his most brilliant theological writing. Luther stood up for the traditional catholic teaching of the "real presence" of Christ in the sacrament—not a symbolic presence. As Luther said again and again, in the night in which our Lord was betrayed, he said "This *is* my body" – not "This *represents* my body." Luther had already written sermons and treatises in defense of the traditional teaching. Now, he was about to write his masterpiece on the subject: his great *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper* of 1528.

A very moving thing about this great *Confession* is that in the last part of the treatise—Part III—Luther puts down in writing his fundamental convictions. Seven years earlier, when his death was surely at risk at the Diet of Worms, Luther had "taken his stand" on his Reformation teachings:

...I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me, Amen.

Now, in 1528, he takes his stand again. Life is fragile. He introduces this final section by saying that he wants to put down in writing what he really believes so that after his death people cannot misrepresent him. His goal is...

...to confess all the articles of my faith in opposition to this and every other new heresy, so that neither during my lifetime nor after my death will they be able to claim that Luther agreed with them—as they have already done in certain instances.

He goes ahead and confesses his faith. Then he ends with these words:

I pray that all godly hearts will bear me witness of this, and pray for me that I may persevere firmly in this faith to the end of my life. For if in the assault of temptation or the pangs of death I should say something different—which God forbid—let it be disregarded; herewith I declare publicly that it would be incorrect, spoken under the devil's influence. In this may my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ assist me: blessed be he for ever, Amen.

I trust that you can see that we are dealing with solemn words here. While he is still living, Luther puts down in writing what he believes with all his heart about the holy Gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. In this belief, he intends to live out his remaining days and then to stand before the judgment seat of God.

LUTHER BEGINS WITH THE CREED

What, then, do you think Luther says? When he wants to express his most fundamental convictions, how does he do it? How does he go about framing his thoughts?

Well, Luther is famous for his emphasis on the doctrine of Justification by Faith. So you might suppose that Luther would begin by quoting the words of St. Paul:

For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law. (Romans 3:28, RSV)

These are the mighty words we read aloud every Reformation Sunday: we are justified by faith apart from works of the law.

So we might expect Luther to begin with the doctrine of Justification by Faith. But he does not. And it is important that he not start there, for even the doctrine of Justification by Faith can be misunderstood if it is not set within the doctrine of the Holy Trinity—especially within the teaching about the Holy Spirit’s ministry to make us holy. So, Luther does not begin with the doctrine of Justification by Faith. Instead, like a child, he confesses the Creed. For you see, what Luther is happy about is that God is the triune God, and that all three persons of the Holy Trinity are peaceful-minded toward us. Indeed, they delight in humanity, as we have seen in Psalm 8:

⁵what is man that you should be mindful of him,
the son of man that you should seek him out?
⁶You have made him but little lower than the angels;
you adorn him with glory and honor; (Psalm 8:4-6, LBW)

Another passage along these happy lines can be found in this morning’s First Lesson, from Proverbs 8. The speaker in this passage is Wisdom, who accompanies God in creation—indeed who works alongside God in creation. Perhaps it is the Son, perhaps the Holy Spirit. My point is simply that the Creator is glad at his creation:

³⁰then I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was
daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, ³¹rejoicing in
his inhabited world and *delighting in the human race*.
(Proverbs 8:30-31, NRSV)

TRINITARIAN SETTLEMENTS

So, in his great Confession, Luther, though he is an eminent doctor of theology, begins like a catechism student:

First, I believe with my whole heart the sublime article of the majesty of God, that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three distinct persons, are by nature one true and genuine God, the *Maker* of heaven and earth; (LW 37:361)

In face of all of life’s troubles, and in full consciousness of the terrible threats of sin, death, and the devil, Luther begins by saying he believes that we have a Maker. He believes that the three divine persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, *want* us here. They made us. They would not have reality be without us. The world might take us for granted and think us nothing special. We ourselves might think our existence amounts to nothing important. But not so the Triune

God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They brought us into being and do not want to go on without us.

So, Luther begins by saying that he stands with the Church on the Doctrine of the Holy Trinity.

CHRISTOLOGICAL SETTLEMENTS

Then he takes his stand on the Christological settlements of the Church, affirming that Jesus Christ is “true God and true man,” and hastening on to the point of the incarnation:

I believe also that this Son of God and of Mary, our Lord Jesus Christ, suffered *for us poor sinners*, was crucified, dead, and buried, in order that he might *redeem us* from sin, death, and the eternal wrath of God by his innocent blood... (LW 37:362)

Luther loves Jesus, as every Christian should. If this morning’s Epistle Lesson had gone on just a few more verses, it would have given us Saint Paul’s great passage about the nature of the Triune God’s love for us. In these verses, Romans 5:6-8, you can hear the apostles sense of wonder, awe, astonishment, that God should love us so much:

⁶For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died *for the ungodly*. ⁷Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. ⁸But God proves his love for us in that while we *still were sinners* Christ died for us. (Romans 8:6-8, NRSV)

This is a love that leaps ahead of any goodness or even faith in us. It is a love that pours out itself even to death on the cross, not just for the saint, but also for the “ungodly.”

So, in the quiet of the night someday, if you are pondering yourself, wondering about the state of your soul, find yourself sighing and confessing to yourself, “Sometimes, I fear, I am a bit on the ungodly side,” then do not be overly discouraged by that. That confession simply places you in the population for whom our Lord Jesus died, he loves us so much.

When Luther thinks he is dying and puts pen to paper to express his fundamental faith, he speaks of Jesus. For the remainder of his days, Luther means to rejoice that the second Person of the Holy Trinity became a man, suffered and died, with the goal that he should be our Lord and Saviour. We are

not without a friend then in this world, for we have a greatest friend we could ever have, if we want him: even Jesus Christ our Lord.

THE DOCTRINE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

And then Luther confesses his belief in the Holy Spirit – the Third Person of the Holy Trinity – the one who makes us holy. Luther begins by making a very sensible point: If we did not *know* what Christ had done for us, it would not much help us in every day life. So, after speaking of Jesus, Luther speaks of the Holy Spirit:

... because this grace would benefit no one if it remained so profoundly hidden and could not come to us, the Holy Spirit comes and gives himself to us also, wholly and completely. He teaches us to understand this deed of Christ which has been manifested to us, helps us receive and preserve it, use it to our advantage and impart it to others, increase and extend it... (LW 37:366)

Luther teaches the same theme in his *Large Catechism*:

The work is finished and completed; Christ has acquired and won the treasure for us by his sufferings, death, and resurrection, etc. But if the work remained hidden so that no one knew of it, it would have been all in vain, all lost. In order that this treasure might not remain buried but be put to use and enjoyed, God has caused the Word to be published and proclaimed, in which he has given *the Holy Spirit* to offer and apply to us this treasure, this redemption. (Luther, *Large Catechism*, “The Third Article of the Creed,” Kolb-Wengert)

Luther’s teaching here about the Holy Spirit is a kind of echo of my theme in this sermon. I have been saying that the three persons of the Holy Trinity love us and take delight in us. Now, Luther is saying that it is the ministry of the Holy Spirit to so fill our hearts with Jesus that we, in turn, will love and take delight *in God*.

And the Holy Spirit has a method for doing this. In the lovely words of Luther’s *Large Catechism*, the Holy Spirit makes us holy by placing us “in the lap of the church”:

As the Father is called a Creator and the Son is called a Redeemer, so on account of his work the Holy Spirit must be called a Sanctifier, or one who makes us holy. How does such sanctifying take place? Answer: ... he first leads us into his holy community, placing us in the church's lap, where he preaches to us and brings us to Christ. (Luther, *Large Catechism*, "The Third Article of the Creed," Kolb-Wengert)

We can sum all this up with another line from Luther's *Large Catechism*:

For in all three articles God himself has revealed and opened to us the most profound depths of his fatherly heart and his pure, unutterable love. For this very purpose he created us, so that he might redeem us and make us holy... (Luther, *Large Catechism*, "The Third Article of the Creed," Kolb-Wengert)

Luther, you see, lives with a grand *vision of life*, and he means to die being true to that vision. Compared to that, what harm could the Diet of Worms do to him? Indeed, what harm can sin, death, and the devil do to him? None! And so Luther means to disregard sin, death, and the devil and all their huffing and puffing and go ahead and live out his days as any pastor would appeal to us to live out the remainder of our days: as dedicated to Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.