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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
5/31/2015, Trinity Sunday
John 3:1-17

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

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. (John 3:16, KJV)

Today is Trinity Sunday. The Doctrine of the Trinity teaches us that at the heart of reality is not randomness or absurdity or evil, but fatherly love.¹ And therefore we can afford to go ahead and do the right thing. There is no need to distrust the world, for the world is in the hands of the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each divine Person loving us with a mighty love. This is a theme I tried to teach our Catechism students. I kept trying to say to them that there is more to life than first appears – that there are three divine Persons working on their behalf, and that therefore they can afford to get up and do what needs to be done.

Again, my sermon text this morning is that golden text, John 3:16:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. (John 3:16, KJV)

It must be an overpowering love that burns in the heart of God, that he would surrender his Son for us.

My chief teacher for this go-round on John 3:16 is Martin Luther. Let me begin with one of Luther's in-your-face passages about Jesus. To set the stage for this passage, let me mention that this morning's liturgy includes the Athanasian Creed. It is a long creed, but I am glad for us to recite it from time to time because this creed includes what are called the "Christological settlements" of the early church. This creed reminds us that Jesus of Nazareth is not just a nice fellow, but is also the very Son of God. This is what Luther's striking passage says too. Luther does not hesitate to say that Jesus of Nazareth, son of Mary, is also the only begotten Son of God. The passage goes this way:

We dare not follow those heretics, the Nestorians... who alleged that only Mary's Son, not God's Son, died for us. For

¹ Robert W. Jenson, *Christian Dogmatics* Vol. 1 (p. 85). Fortress Press. Kindle Edition.

here we find it clearly stated and written: “God gave His Son for the world.” And this Son is assuredly not only Mary’s Son, born of Mary, but also the Son of God. And when Christ was delivered to Pilate to be crucified, and when Pilate led Him from the judgment hall, he took hold of the hand not only of the man Jesus but also of the Son of God, whom he crucified.²

What an image! It puts me in mind of a schoolteacher taking a child by the hand and leading that one to the principal’s office. Pilate takes the *Son of God* by the hand and leads him from the judgment hall and delivers him to be crucified.

“GOD CANNOT DIE!” AHH, BUT HE DID!

“God cannot die!” That is the primal instinct of our Greek ancestors. It is hard for us to shake it to this very day. But the Doctrine of the Trinity gazes at John 3:16 and says, God not only *can* die, he did! One of the three divine persons died, and the other two consented to it, because they were united in their love for the world. Nothing can be more alien to God than death, but the only begotten Son of God, who was from eternity, who had no beginning, did have an end. He died on that miserable cross on Golgotha. His heart stopped beating. His body cooled down. His brain stopped its myriad of functions – at least for a while during those three days before his resurrection. He died, he knew he was going to die, but he consented to it out of love for you and for me.

We believe that it was the Son who died and not the Father or the Holy Spirit. And yet, any parent who loves a child knows that the parent suffers too if the child should die. Furthermore, the love between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is so intimate and deep, that the suffering of the Father and of the Spirit must have been profound as they watched Jesus die. But they did watch him die. And so our golden text speaks of the love of God for us:

¹⁶For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16, RSV)

My subject is love – God’s love. Since this is Trinity Sunday, I want in this sermon to use the Doctrine of the Trinity to help illumine this divine love. Perhaps all love is complex. I think that the love of God that led Jesus to die is a complex love, and I think that the Doctrine of the Trinity helps us to see something of that.

After that, I hope to end by speaking of what it means for us to “believe” in Christ. Great things are promised to those who believe:

² Luther’s *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John*, LW 22:351.

...that whosoever *believeth in him* should not perish, but have everlasting life. (John 3:16, KJV)

I don't want to perish! And I don't want any of you to perish. I will feel awful on Judgment Day if Jesus has to point out to me that some of the people in my congregation perished. So, no perishing! That means we need to think some about what it means to "believe in him."

WORKS OF GOD AD EXTRA

Before getting to that, let's begin by thinking about the three-fold love of God for us. There is an old rule of dogmatic theology I have mentioned it to you before. I need to speak of it again. It goes this way:

The works of God *ad extra* are the joint work of the three divine persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

"Ad extra" means the works of God *outside* himself. There was no necessity that there be any such works at all. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit did not need us. They could have enjoyed their fellowship one with another for eternity. But they chose to make our world. And they have worked for that world. Indeed, have they worked! They have worked all the way to the death of one of them. The Son worked himself to death for us!

What *is* God? There is only one God, yes, but what *is* God. You know the answer: God is love (1 John 4:8,16). God is the love of the three divine Persons for one another and their joint love for us and for our world.

The *love of God* toward us is one of those eternal works of God *ad extra*. And therefore it involves all three of the divine Persons. We are loved in a complex way, in a threefold way by holy Persons, each loving us in a particular way. I think it goes something like this:

The love of the Father is such that he would not be without us and so grants us being. Before we were ever born, God loved us, and *therefore* we were born. God the Father created us. We are not accidental stuff floating around in an indifferent universe. Furthermore, God the Father not only *created* us, but perhaps even more astonishingly, he *creates* us. Notice the shifting of the verbs in Martin Luther's discussion of the First Article of the Creed:

"I believe in God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth."

What does this mean?

Answer: I believe that God *has created* me and all that exists; that he has given me *and still sustains* my body and soul, all my limbs and

senses, my reason and all the faculties of my mind, together with food and clothing, house and home, family and property

If ever you are feeling discouraged, lay hands on yourself, grab your own wrist, and say to yourself, “I exist! God the Father grants me being even now, even when I am feeling guilty or blue. He loves me! And that is why I am here. If no one else in the whole, wide world loves me, at least I know this: God the Father loves me. That’s why I am!”

Next, the love of the Son is striking and carried in the heart of every Christian: Christ’s cross is engraved upon our hearts and our imaginations. Jesus did not simply die. He died *for* us. He died that we might live. He became poor that we might become rich. He took on the sins of the world that we might be rendered innocent. As Saint Paul said, in our human life we know that one person can die for another, as police die for the citizens and strangers dive into the cold water trying to save a child. But Christ shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us:

While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. (Romans 5:6, RSV)

The love of God the Son is not that paltry kind that loves only the lovely. It is rather that transforming love that loves even the ungodly in hope of making them better.

And we are loved by the Holy Spirit, glad to say. Pity the poor child who is born into a home where neither mother nor father takes time to teach the child, but rather is willing to let the children grow up like weeds. That is a mean kind of love, hardly worthy of the name “love.” But the Holy Spirit loves us with a yearning that we should grow up into righteousness, beauty, nobility, even into the very image of Jesus, the Son of God. That is why the Holy Spirit gives us the Bible. The Bible is the “discourse of the Holy Spirit” whereby he sanctifies the Church and each of us. The Bible is not to be tossed to the wind. It is a powerful instrument of the Holy Spirit’s love for. It is the same with the Sacraments and with the mutual support Christians give to one another. These are not neutral or meaningless things. Rather, they are the tender care of the Holy Spirit given to us that we might become more holy.

So, when our text says that “God so loved the world,” think of this love as rich and complex – the joint love of the three persons of the Holy Trinity.

BELIEVING ON JESUS

Finally, let me say a few words about this business of “believing on Christ,” for great promises are made to those who believe:

...that whosoever *believeth in him* should not perish, but have everlasting life. (John 3:16, KJV)

We are speaking of something important: everlasting life.

In his sermon on this morning's text, Martin Luther tells a little story about a nun who believed in Jesus. His story goes this way:

This nun was very much troubled and assailed by thoughts of the devil and of sin...Now since this little nun was filled with terror at the thought of the wrath of God and wanted to be saved, she made it a habit to say whenever the devil troubled her: "Devil, let me alone. I am a Christian!" And the devil had to leave her. On the surface this seems to be simple technique and easy to learn. But it is necessary that the words be inspired by faith, as those of this little nun were. For the devil did not particularly fear the words: "I am a Christian." No, it was her faith, the fact that she firmly relied on Christ and said: "I am baptized on Christ, and I entrust myself solely to Him; for He is my Life, Salvation, and Wisdom." Wherever such words proceed from faith, they generate a completely fiery atmosphere, which burns and pains the devil so that he cannot tarry. (LW 22:357)

I think that Luther is right here when he says that the devil does not particularly fear the words "I am a Christian." Rather, what he fears is a living person who has thrown in his or her lot with Jesus, who trusts herself body and soul to him, who lives for him in morality and daily life, and who trusts her eternity over to Jesus. Such a one makes the devil tremble even if some sin and failure still clings to her, to him. Such a one makes our world better. And such a one is making the three persons of the Holy Trinity proud. This is what they are after. This is the cause for which we were granted being, saved, and are being sanctified, that this world should be adorned by people who actually walk with Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.