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Festival of the Holy Trinity Series C 2016

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Feast of Holy Trinity, May 22 (Armed Forces Sunday)

We wondered, based on a question from a parishioner, why is the Trinity just three “males” and is there not a woman/female in that lot? For many Catholics, it seems that Mary fills that role. Why is God always depicted as male? Is the Bible really just chauvinistic? Is this simply a cultural thing? If God was writing the OT and NT today would he have included more women and would have he revealed himself with both masculine and feminine attributes?

First of all, I think we need to acknowledge that God really does transcend gender. He is not masculine or feminine. But he did reveal himself as male. Does that simply mean a cultural reality? Perhaps. It could be however that there is something to maleness? Some have postulated that there is something innate about being male. (*Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus*) Is the masculine characteristic simply more congruous with God? That is not politically correct and it may not even be correct period, but that argument is out there.

Does it matter that Devil is also usually depicted as male? Was it just a masculine cultural thing or is there also something congruent with demonic and male?

We surely need to continue to think about and keep ourselves from rigidity when it comes to our gender conversations in this climate.

For many years the Trinity was an obscure field of study which only strange academic sorts actually cared about. All this has changed in the recent decades. There has been a revival of interest in the doctrine of the Trinity and its history. What was once an arcane theological subject, has for a variety of reasons come to be a “hot” topic. Some of them are seeking rationalistic explanations and are well on their way to Unitarianism or some other form of ancient heresy. Others, however, are looking for the opportunity to reconnect to the very roots of their Christianity. I personally think that the erosion of Modernity’s arrogant lock on how we come to know things. People are much more comfortable with ambiguity and the idea that there are some things we will never fully understand.

This festival is unique in the Church year in that it celebrates a doctrine, a doctrine that was subscribed to at what can be thought of as the mother of all voters meetings, the councils of Nicaea and Constantinople in the years 325 and 381 respectively. Since this is a while ago, perhaps a bit of review is in order.

We were struck that this took over 300 years to resolve. We have changed the practice of marriage and the approach to homosexuality with breathtaking speed in the last twenty years. How is it that they took so long?

The Bible had referenced all three members of the Trinity in a number of places, but the relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit had never really been explicitly stated in Scripture, at least not in a way that everyone could agree to. We know that this was an issue for

some in the first centuries of the Church because as early as Tertullian in the late second century and Origen in the 3rd century, there are statements about the Trinity. This simmered along for some time. It was not that the Church did not care about such things, but it was making the transition from movement to institution and for several decades in here it was facing brutal persecution by the Roman Empire. Other matters seem to have occupied them, naturally.

But by the time Constantine ascended to the throne, he needed to deal with this. In some large cities the Trinitarian debate was spilling out of the Church and into the streets, with various proponents of one or another teaching about Christ's relationship to the Father nearly rioting. Constantine summoned the bishops to his new capitol city in order to solve this problem. He needed a united empire behind him as he stood in the gap against the barbarians. But that is what the historians say. It is also quite likely that Constantine genuinely wanted a solution to this for religious reasons as well. He seems to have been a genuinely religious and pious fellow in some ways.

When the bishops gathered (a peculiar tradition says that there were 318, the same number as the number of servants which Abraham mustered to rescue Lot in Genesis 14) everyone was concerned that they maintain continuity with the Old Testament where it was clearly stated that there was only one God (Deut 6:4, Is 40-43, etc) But how did one then account for the Son and the Father? Two God's was out, but what were they if not a singular One?

All of this would revolve around the cross. The question really was who died there and that made this important. If Jesus was not God, was he death sufficient? If he was God, how does he relate to the Father to whom prayed on that cross? Get this answer wrong or muddy it up, and people's salvation would be at stake. How can we trust that the death of another creature could save us from sin? And how does the Holy Spirit fit into all this?

Building on John's Logos theology, Apollonarius had suggested that Jesus was a human body with a divine soul. This was a problem. Without a human soul, Jesus would not have been a human being. Did he really take up humanity's sin if he was not a human? Almost no one agreed with him, and we are not sure that he even really thought this way, but this would often be held up as a negative position. "We don't want to say what Apollonarius did!" An early suggestion would come from the West primarily in the form of Sabellianism or Modalism. The modalists held that there was only one God who appeared at various times in different modes of being. Sometimes he was the Father, other times the Son, etc. The Son really was the One God, but in a different mode than when he appeared as the Father. This would lead to the charge of Patripassionism or that the Father suffered on the cross which had clear problems in Scripture. Who was Jesus praying to on the cross? Who raised Jesus from the dead? If he did it himself, was he really dead? The Western church because of language issues will often be accused of this heresy and will be prone to falling into it. Our language continues to suffer from this. We say One God with Three Persons, but the term "persona" in Latin can indicate the mask that an actor

assumes when he takes the stage as another person. It is really the formulation of the Unitarians today and was also held by Peter Abelard, a medieval scholastic among others.

In the East, in response to Sabellianism, Arius proposed that in fact there was only one God and that was the Father. The Logos and the Spirit were the first creations of the Father, but they were in essence not really God. His big motto was “There was a time when he was not.” (It really does sound better in Greek.) He couched his whole appeal on the idea that he was preserving Christianity from polytheism on one hand and from sabellian patripassionism on the other hand, the idea that that the Father suffered on the cross.

But this idea had some problems. Another theologian of the day, Athanasias, after whom the creed will later be named, noticed something here. While Arius’ formulation does achieve what he claims over against Sabellianism and Polytheism, it can hardly be called Christian. It effectively removes God from the cross. The first creation may be a great sacrifice, but it is not the greatest sacrifice. The death of a creature on the cross cannot transcend the whole creative order and redeem the whole world. Arianism will result in a sort of Christianity which is devoid of the forgiveness of sins, its gracious core.

If you read around a little in this field, you will come across the term “economy of salvation.” It belongs here. This refers to the idea that it is only in the act of saving us from our sins that God has revealed to us the “three-ness” of his nature. Outside of the salvation act, we can only really speak of God’s unity. Who sends the rain? God does. We cannot ascribe that to Father, Son, or Spirit. We only can distinguish them in the salvation work or “economy of salvation” as it is usually stated.

At the council of Nicaea, Athanasius proposed a complex alternative: there is one essence of God that is found in three co-existing, co-eternal, co-operative, substances (the Greek word is “hypostasis”) whom we call Father, Son, and Spirit. (A hypostasis is best understood simply as the thing which is the subject of the verb in a sentence. Thus, the Father can do something the Son did not do.) This idea will actually take almost a century to work out as Athanasius and his successive theologians of the orthodox/catholic stripe continue to articulate it. Particularly important are his friends the three Cappadocian Fathers, Basil and the two Gregories.

When the bishops are summoned to the council in 318, this will be somewhat ugly. If you were to take a head count on the first day, Arius wins easily. Most of the bishops are from the East where Christianity has the greater population and they are all convinced that the greatest problem is Sabellianism. When the western bishops arrive, however, the Easterners discover that the West has also rejected Sabellianism. Arius has them afraid of a straw man. All the while, Athanasius, who cannot speak because he is only a Deacon, works through his bishop, Alexander of Alexandria. Finally he and his allies win the debate and you can read their statement in the second article of the Nicene Creed in which it describes Jesus as: “God of God, light of light, very God of very God, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made...”

Because the debate centered entirely on the person of the Son, nothing was said about the Spirit. In one of the most biggest omissions of all time, the third article of the creed simply read, “And I believe in the Holy Spirit.” While the Arians were willing to admit the divinity of the Son in sort of a binitarianism, they soon rejected the divinity of the Spirit and the whole fight broke out again. Athanasius is elevated to Bishop but dies in the 350’s. His work is carried on by the Cappadocian Fathers, Basil and the two Gregories. In 381, a new emperor, Theodosius this time, summons the Bishops to Constantinople. They chose a little different way to say it, but it is the same thing. The Spirit is the Lord “who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified...”

The actual creed we call the Athanasian won’t be written for several hundred years after this, and is part of the western tradition, not the Eastern tradition so much. For the Orthodox Church it is the Nicene Creed which they read on this day and every Sunday. They also don’t do much with the Apostles Creed.

But what does all this mean for us? First of all, the predilection toward a rationalistic approach to Trinity remains with us. Most western Christians are effectively modalists in their thinking about the Trinity and the ways in which they speak of the Trinity. To avoid this requires us to be very careful with our philosophically impoverished language. Here I strongly urge you to lose the illustrations which plague so much of our popular literature on this. I hate to say it, but the Trinity is not like an apple with a peel, flesh, and core. That is really another heresy called partialism in which it is imagined that the Father, Son, and Spirit are each part of God.

And the various heresies in this regard are particularly pernicious because they weaken the very center of the faith – forgiveness, the restoration of the creation’s relationship with the Creator. Arianism made the cross event somehow less than God dying for our sins. Modalism, however, results in the same end or even worse for God did not really die for us in modalism. The only way to make sense of modalism is to posit a Christology in which the human part of Jesus dies but the divine part does not, again creating a serious forgiveness problem as you discuss the sacrifice of Christ. If there is only One and He died on the cross, who raised Him? If He raised Himself, He did not really die, and we are back at the problem of Arianism. In order for this crucifixion to mean what Christianity has always claimed it meant, we have to say that God, in the person of Jesus Christ, tasted death, took it to himself, suffered death. If we will not say that, we are preaching an empty Gospel.

Armenio spoke of how this played out in the Latino communities. He said this was very difficult because many of them had been very poorly educated in this matter and there were many beliefs from the pre-colonial times which cling very tightly. He felt that the people of that culture sought a way to manipulate God – they flock to virgins, the baby Jesus, and other ways of talking about God or accessing him which they felt they were able to manipulate. The Trinity is just abstract for them, they want an icon, a statue, something which they can put in their car, on their desk, wear around their neck, etc. They confess the creeds, but that gets done at so many different

levels, some it seems simply read the words without making them their own. He felt that even in the Roman Catholic parishes the preaching was very different. This gets only more complex when you add in the Pentecostal Latin Americans who often emphasize the Spirit at the expense of preaching the Son.

One of the readers of the notes wanted us to address the following passages in light of what I said above about Jesus not raising himself.

Jesus answered and said unto them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. Then said the Jews, Forty and six years was this temple in building, and wilt thou rear it up in three days?

But he spake of the temple of his body. When therefore he was risen from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this unto them; and they believed the scripture, and the word which Jesus had said. (John 2:19-22)

No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father. John 10:18

The question which has to be answered here is: Who was the actor/doer of the resurrection of Jesus? These two texts seem to suggest that Jesus claims to be doing this himself, of his own accord. But if he is dead, really dead, how can he raise himself?

We could of course simply chalk this up to mystery and suggesting that we ought not delve too deeply here. But I will not punt that easily.

In chapter 10 of John, notice that even within the same verse it says that this is the command of the Father, Jesus does indeed claim that the life he lays down he has the power to take up again, but that is not of him, it is of the Father.

Chapter 2:19-22 also presents two opportunities. The first is simply to recognize that Jesus is speaking with a great deal of word imagery in this text. Making too strong of a theological point here may not be the best idea. But the Greek may actually do us better. In the passage which describes him as “risen from the dead” it has a middle/passive form. This can mean “he rose,: it can also mean “he was raised.”

My interlocutor on the email also brought forward another text:

And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you. Rom. 8:11

This doesn't create an issue. The usual way to talk about the resurrection the NT is to say that the Father did this, but that Paul attributes this to the Spirit is not a problem, there is great room for mystery here.

Resources for further reading:

Athanasius – On the Incarnation (written when he was just 21 years old, this is a timeless classic, there are multiple translations of this available.)

Augustine – On the Trinity (I recommend the translation from New City Press. He gets a little odd in this but you get to tag along with a brilliant mind trying to puzzle this out.)

Jensen, Robin Face to Face: portraits of the divine early Christianity Augsburg 2004 (I have not read this text but it comes recommended to me – it is on my “to read” list.)

Kelly, J. N. D., Early Christian Creeds (The third edition has been published, but is out of print – Amazon listed the hardcover new for over \$500! But look for older editions and try to borrow from your pastor’s library – frequently assigned as a text for seminary students. Kelly has written widely on this subject and is well regarded, you might find some of his other titles as well.)

Wilkin, Robert Louis The Spirit of Early Christian Thought Yale Press, 2005 (This is simply the best exploration of how the early Christians thought about all this.)

For an enjoyable few minutes, consider watching this video on YouTube in which two Irishmen castigate an iconic St. Patrick for his problematic Trinitarian analogies: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KQLfgaUoQCw>

It should disabuse you from the idea that you can use an analogy to describe the Trinity.

Collect of the Day

Almighty and everlasting God, You have given us grace to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity by the confession of a true faith and to worship the Unity in the power of the Divine Majesty. Keep us steadfast in this faith and defend us from all adversities; for You, O Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, live and reign, One God, now and forever.

God has given us grace to acknowledge...that phrase always interests me. Perhaps it is because I am a teacher at heart, but the idea that my acknowledgment of God is an act of his grace, to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity, is really worth thinking about a little more. We go to school for various reason, we take classes, we get training, we are regularly watching the news on TV or listening on the radio or surfing the web. There is so much that we see and hear and think about, but always I consider myself the master of that ability to perceive, think about, and act upon that information. If I was, for instance, taking an organic chemistry class or perhaps some higher level physics or mathematics, I might find that I could not understand the concepts. I would understand that to be my own failure of preparation, effort, or simply a lack of intelligence on my part.

This first line of the collect really turns that on its head. My acknowledgement of the Holy Trinity is an act of God, a gift from above. It is not my doing. What is more, it is not even the understanding that I fail at, it is the simply acknowledgement of its existence, forget understanding it. That I can stand here and scratch my head as I ponder this mystery is even a gift of God. It is so deep and inscrutable that it would not even be on my radar.

The second piece of that then comes that I am able to worship Unity in the power of the divine majesty. Even my worship is something that I cannot claim. Again, notice how this affronts our human presumption. We believe worship is something I do, not something I am given.

The other piece that is fascinating is the way the collect describes the matter. We acknowledge the glory of the Trinity and worship the Unity in the power of the Divine Majesty. This verbiage is actually quite important and strives to keep us from the errors described in the too lengthy essay above. If this doesn't make sense, this is the point. The Trinity is not supposed to make sense, in fact if you think it does, then you have a problem (see the YouTube video clip I suggested.) You might still have a problem if you don't understand it, but I know you have a problem if you think you do.

The mind can acknowledge the Trinity, but we worship the Unity. Our prayers ascend to one God, but in the economy of his great salvation, we notice the work of a Father, a Son, and the Spirit. We acknowledge what each of them has done in that, but our prayers ascend to One. It is not easy, remember it is not supposed to be.

After this theologically rich ascription, the prayer finally gets down to business with a request. We want God to keep us steadfast in this faith and preserve us from all adversities. The real question with this request is which sense of the word faith do we mean? Do we mean the faith which believes or the faith which is believed? The faith which believes is the relationship in which we call God "Father" and in which we are loved by God and love Him in return. The faith which is believed is the creeds, the confessions, the statements of our faith which we can learn in catechisms and doctrinal texts.

If we meant the faith which believes, this becomes an appeal to keep us in the relationship. If it is the faith which is believed, we are asking him to keep our doctrine pure. Both are important and worthy of prayer and fit this day. Which one we ourselves pray in this collect will be important for us to think about as we come to this sermon.

Notice the marvelously fresh way to end the collect. It is worth emphasizing as you pray it.

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31

Does not wisdom call?

Does not understanding raise her voice?

² On the heights beside the way,

at the crossroads she takes her stand;
³ beside the gates in front of the town,
at the entrance of the portals she cries aloud:
⁴ “To you, O men, I call,
and my cry is to the children of man.
⁵ *O simple ones, learn prudence;
O fools, learn sense.*
⁶ *Hear, for I will speak noble things,
and from my lips will come what is right,*
⁷ *for my mouth will utter truth;
wickedness is an abomination to my lips.*
⁸ *All the words of my mouth are righteous;
there is nothing twisted or crooked in them.*
⁹ *They are all straight to him who understands,
and right to those who find knowledge.*
¹⁰ *Take my instruction instead of silver,
and knowledge rather than choice gold,*
¹¹ *for wisdom is better than jewels,
and all that you may desire cannot compare with her.*
¹² *“I, wisdom, dwell with prudence,
and I find knowledge and discretion.*
¹³ *The fear of the LORD is hatred of evil.
Pride and arrogance and the way of evil
and perverted speech I hate.*
¹⁴ *I have counsel and sound wisdom;
I have insight; I have strength.*
¹⁵ *By me kings reign,
and rulers decree what is just;*
¹⁶ *by me princes rule,
and nobles, all who govern justly.*
¹⁷ *I love those who love me,
and those who seek me diligently find me.*
¹⁸ *Riches and honor are with me,
enduring wealth and righteousness.*
¹⁹ *My fruit is better than gold, even fine gold,
and my yield than choice silver.*
²⁰ *I walk in the way of righteousness,
in the paths of justice,*

²¹ *granting an inheritance to those who love me,
and filling their treasuries.*

²² *“The LORD possessed me at the beginning of his work,
the first of his acts of old.*

²³ *Ages ago I was set up,
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.*

²⁴ *When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no springs abounding with water.*

²⁵ *Before the mountains had been shaped,
before the hills, I was brought forth,*

²⁶ *before he had made the earth with its fields,
or the first of the dust of the world.*

²⁷ *When he established the heavens, I was there;
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,*

²⁸ *when he made firm the skies above,
when he established the fountains of the deep,*

²⁹ *when he assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress his command,
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,*

³⁰ *then I was beside him, like a master workman,
and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,*

³¹ *rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the children of man.*

At first this passage seems to play into the hands of the folks who deny the divinity of Jesus and would insist with Arius that he is another of God’s creations. They read verse 22 to mean that God possessed wisdom as his first creation and Jesus is that wisdom personified. In fact, the JW’s make this very point with this passage.

This is probably why it is here and is helpful for us to remember why it is that the ancients had a bit of a dustup when it came to settling the whole Trinity question. It is not easy. The Biblical record is not crystal clear; it could be read in other ways. For us the question is how will we read this in terms of the Trinity? If we don’t, then by definition we really cannot call ourselves Christians. (This whole Trinity thing can get a little pugnacious that way.)

Who is this “Wisdom” who calls to people to be educated? Many have taken this to be Jesus. I would really like it to be Jesus, especially when it comes to the last verse when Wisdom speaks about delighting in people. I would like to think that is Jesus who looks at humanity and delights in them so much he was willing to become one.

And there is nothing in the description of Wisdom which precludes a classic understanding of Trinity, but we also have to admit that this is not what it seems to say on the face of it. Verses 22-24 are the ones which seem to give us the most problems. What does it mean to be set up and brought forth? Does that really imply that there was a time when he was not, as Arius would say? But this is not as large of an issue as we might make it out to be. Even the “begotten” language in the creeds, “begotten before all worlds” seems to be taken right out of this passage. We have to remember that no human language will comprehend God. My words will always be limited by my finitude, my limitations. I will never speak about God in a way that can be called “Truth!” I can only speak about God in ways that are more and less true.

The preacher who attempts this passage will need to preach that good theologians are always humble before this. Trinity is our best lens for viewing God, but we cannot assert that this is the final word. Indeed, the ancients seemed to understand it as a field. There were limits/fences to the field. You could not deny the unity or the three-ness of God. But between those positions is a considerable space for people to speak and work.

Is it the identification of this as the second person of the Trinity that is the problem? Is the Wisdom discussed here really the Logos? Most ancient interpreters of this passage thought so, and indeed the idea that this day calls for wisdom is not a bad idea. Perhaps wisdom in this instance is simply to say that there are mysteries here which I do not understand or perhaps it is wisdom not to overanalyze a text.

This only gets more interesting when you consider the language issues. The earliest Christians did not use the Hebrew text of the OT, but the Greek translation of the text. In fact, Augustine thought Jerome made a mistake in learning Hebrew and translating the vulgate from Hebrew into Latin. He thought Jerome should have stuck to the Christian version of the OT, which is in the Greek. The texts actually read somewhat differently in the Greek, far more problematically in the Hebrew which is translated here.

John seems to be using this to write his introduction to the Gospel. We might want to use his text as a commentary on this.

The Gospel seems to be found in the last verse – his delight is in the people – us!

What will we do with this text? This is one of the few times the pericope preacher gets to preach on the book of Proverbs. It would be a shame never to do so.

Psalm 8

O LORD, our Lord,

how majestic is your name in all the earth!

You have set your glory above the heavens.

² Out of the mouth of babies and infants,

you have established strength because of your foes,
to still the enemy and the avenger.

³ When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,

⁴ what is man that you are mindful of him,
and the son of man that you care for him?

⁵ Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
and crowned him with glory and honor.

⁶ You have given him dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under his feet,

⁷ all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,

⁸ the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

⁹ O LORD, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

The psalter is a fascinating study. It is a very programmatic sort of a collection which invites the reader to pay attention to strange symmetries. Most commentators believe that the first two psalms belong to a sort of introduction. If you bracket those two out and start the enumeration with the Psalm 3, this is then really the sixth Psalm. The sixth Psalm from the end, Psalm 144, asks this very same question, creating a sort of bookending effect, which is also found in other ways as well.

The question which is posed by the psalmist here is repeated in Psalm 144, but with different casting to the query. Here the psalmist marvels that the mighty God would consider the lowly human being, but God has clearly done so, elevating the human being and putting over all the creation. In Psalm 144, it is much darker. There the psalmist is a warrior trained by God who marvels that God has paid any attention to him, for his life is really like a vapor which is quickly dispelled. The psalmist cannot do anything lasting, but God can make the mountains smoke and his lightning can scatter the enemies.

What does this mean for the preacher? I am not sure, but if you are considering using the psalm, I would read them both and ask what the psalmist is saying about God in each, and from which perspective the psalmist is writing/singing.

Acts 2:14a, 22-36 (We continue with Peter's Pentecost proclamation – this is the completion of the sermon we read last week on the Feast of Pentecost.)

But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them: *“Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words...”*

²²“Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—²³ this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. ²⁴ God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it. ²⁵ For David says concerning him,

“I saw the Lord always before me,
for he is at my right hand that I may not be shaken;
²⁶ therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced;
my flesh also will dwell in hope.
²⁷ For you will not abandon my soul to Hades,
or let your Holy One see corruption.
²⁸ You have made known to me the paths of life;
you will make me full of gladness with your presence.’

²⁹“Brothers, I may say to you with confidence about the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. ³⁰ Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, ³¹ he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. ³² This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. ³³ 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. ³⁴ For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says,

“The Lord said to my Lord,
“Sit at my right hand,
³⁵ until I make your enemies your footstool.”

³⁶ Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

³⁷*Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”* ³⁸*And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.”* ⁴⁰*And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation.”* ⁴¹*So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.*

(I thought they ended this passage too soon, I like to hear what happened next so I included it here.)

What is striking about the discussion of Jesus in the New Testament is that a bunch of Palestinian Jews kept calling him Lord. We are so used to the term we don't think a thing about it, but it really was remarkable. The Jews of the first century had been given special dispensation to practice their religion because the Romans thought them simply odd in this regard. Not only did they have some special rules about diet and a day off every week, but they insisted on no images and the worship of only one God. The Romans knew about other folks who had strange diets imposed on them by their gods, but their world was very visual and filled with images of the gods. Even more so, they understood that there were many gods. They knew people who only worshiped one god, but these people did not insist that all the others were frauds. But the Jews did make such a claim and they were positively unruly about it. The Romans really thought them odd for this.

Listen carefully to the end of Peter's speech and what he is calling Jesus. He calls him Lord, for a Jew that was a term religiously speaking that one only spoke of YHWH, the true God, who parted the Red Sea and who sent the prophets. Peter is making an astounding claim, a claim which is repeated many times in the NT. Jesus is Lord. We are so accustomed to hearing this, it no longer shocks us, but the whole NT narrative really can be said to revolve around this claim. This first sermon of Christendom is really the beginning of the proclamation of Trinity. It is not clearly expressed here, but the earliest of Christian witnesses attests that there is the Father and another who gets the same name. I am not sure even Peter understood how that will all sort out, but he makes the claim right here.

It is also interesting to hear Peter preach the resurrection here. He preaches the resurrection in every one of his NT sermons, but most of the time it is bad news for the guys who are listening. "You tried to kill him, but God brought him back from the dead." If I was really one of the guys who tried to kill him and discovered that my effort had been undone by God, this would not be good news, and it apparently was not for these guys either. They are cut to the heart and ask what must be done. They realize that they have worked at cross purposes to God (pun intended) and now they have a pretty substantial God problem.

You might also want to draw attention to verses 32-33. There we see the three actions of the members of the Trinity discussed. The Father raises the Son who died and who in turn now pours out the Spirit.

John 8:48-59

⁴⁸ The Jews answered him, "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?" ⁴⁹ Jesus answered, "I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me. ⁵⁰ Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the judge. ⁵¹ Truly,

truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.”⁵² The Jews said to him, “Now we know that you have a demon! Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, ‘If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.’”⁵³ Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?”⁵⁴ Jesus answered, “If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, ‘He is our God.’”⁵⁵ But you have not known him. I know him. If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and I keep his word.⁵⁶ Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.”⁵⁷ So the Jews said to him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?”⁵⁸ Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.”⁵⁹ So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

“Are we not right...” No, frankly they are not. They have gotten it terribly wrong. Jesus is not a Samaritan and he does not have a demon, rather the demons acknowledge him with fear. What is more, by this point in the book, John is aware that you know it too. He is about to discuss the great mystery of Jesus, the incarnation, and he wants you to be aware of just how far you have come since the first chapters of his book. He does this by putting forward this mistake by the Pharisees in a way that every reader can correct. Voicing the correction, verbalizing the “No!” is part of the process of theological formation. John seems to know it and regularly puts these places in his text.

Jesus honors the Father but they dishonor Jesus. This would have been really offensive to Jesus’ contemporaries who had staked so much of their identity on the fact that they had gotten it right where their pre-exilic forefathers had gotten it wrong. But in a much more terrible sense, they are about to get it far more wrong. Where their fathers had murdered the prophets, they are about to murder the Son. It is that claim which we want to pay attention to on Trinity Sunday.

The Jews say that his message is that of a demon. He claims to be the one for whom Abraham longed and indeed whom Abraham saw. They are stuck trying to get their heads around the chronology, but Jesus shrugs it off with a claim to eternity and takes the divine name to himself, the “I AM” of Exodus 3. To God all times are present tense – there is no past or future for God, all time is now.

The preacher will probably want to focus on the relationship of the Son to the Father which he elaborates in verses 54-55. He knows the Father, the Father glorifies him, hence the glory of Jesus is significant. Jesus knows him so he keeps the Father’s word. To deny this knowledge would make him a liar, like them. (I am sure that last part went over quite well with this audience, but it sounds like Jesus was already preaching to a hostile crowd.)

The response of the Jews to Jesus’ words is also important. They are ready to kill him here, but Jesus hides from their sight until another day when the time is right and they will lay hands on him in a garden. The reason they kill Jesus is because he claims to be the righteous One, the Holy One of Israel. He claims here to have known Abraham, which if you think about it would give all

of us a moment to pause. If one of us started talking about when we used to sit at Luther's house and drink beer with the Reformer, we might all wonder if he was a little deranged. The Jewish reaction is not simply pig-headedness. It is rational. It is Jesus claim that seems to be a little off the rails.

For the preacher on Trinity Sunday, this may be the handle you want. Jesus makes a claim about himself which simply does not make sense. That might be the best place to start.

Preaching the Trinity

It seems that the preacher has several routes he can take this day, as usual. Trinity can present a problem for the preacher. How do you preach a theology which no one can say the really understand and make it Gospel?

1. He can preach the work of the Spirit. (Acts 2) This really builds on the Pentecost festival which we celebrated last week. The idea here is that in this moment of great conflict and trial, even when people grotesquely misunderstood things, the Spirit was right there, enlightening, guiding, keeping the whole Christian Church on earth in the one true faith. This sermon will retell the story of the councils of Nicea and Constantinople, and might just apply the idea to the Synodical convention which is coming up here. It might not always be a pretty thing, but the Spirit works there too. Do we say that the councils were "inspired?"
2. He can preach the Church (Acts 2) This is similar to the preceding but instead of looking at the Spirit, looks at the work of the Spirit, the Church. The councils were not pretty affairs, they were not solemn gatherings of holy men who prayed real hard and then all serenely and chastely agreed with each other on some doctrine. They were raucous occasions which were dominated by strong personalities. There was considerable politicking, threats, state interference, and much that would offend us today. In short, it was one big ugly synodical convention. Yet, in all this, the Church of God was still his holy, catholic Church, the instrument of his grace and love to this world. It's not one of the most edifying of stories, but St. Nicolaus, the guy after whom Santa Claus is named, was at the council of Nicaea and got into a fist fight. Nick's nose was broken. We can all take some consolation from this. Our conventions and voters meets can be tense, but at least we are not punching Santa Claus.
3. He can preach the Trinity itself – Just who did die on the cross for us? It was not some creation for that would not save us, it was not the Father, for Christ prayed that the Father would receive his spirit when he died, it was God, but the second person of the trinity. In the cross God reveals his inner most self in a way we cannot fully

understand but we can marvel at and rejoice in. The Unity of God is not divided and yet we are given to see its three-ness in the salvation of the World as the Father sends the Son, the Son obeys and dies on that cross, and the Spirit is poured out by the Father and Son upon all humanity. We know precious little about God, but what we know is precious.

4. Augustine's Trinity – Augustine believed that the really interesting thing was what held the Father, Son, and Spirit together. It is love. He did not mean the mushy sentimentality which we often mean when we use the word, but he meant the great and deep mystery. We start to see it just a little when we see the mother caring for the profoundly disabled child well into adulthood. We start to see that love in an artist or craftsman who pours himself into what he/she does. We start to see that love when we take a step back and realize that our love for someone like our spouse really makes no sense, and yet, we cannot deny that it is real. Augustine would have said that all those things are really about the Trinity and the mysterious relationship which is between Father, Son, and Spirit. When we love mysteriously, graciously, unstintingly, we are reflecting the trinity.
5. He can preach the place of the Son today. (John 8) He is at the right hand of the Father, the position of power and influence, an influence which he wields with his hands punctured by a nail. This is really preaching the effects of the trinity today. Because we confess the Trinity, we are confessing that the eternal God who created us also is one with us in Christ Jesus. We are God's family now.

Law and Gospel

The preacher has an interesting challenge when it comes to Law and Gospel today. Why does anyone need this doctrine? Isn't it really the purview of theologians and academics? What does this matter to the guy who is driving a truck or the woman who is retired from teaching school to sixth graders? Actually the Trinity has much to do with all this, but it has to be laid out for them. It may come as a surprise but the reason that Constantine called the first council of Nicea was because there were riots breaking out in major cities over these issues. I suppose we can thank God that we are not rioting, but one has to wonder if our silence is born of harmony or apathy.

1. The creation of God is really messed up and we are not connected to God, the source of life, the one who is life itself. Somehow, unless we are to dissipate into the entropy of the universe, we need this connection with God. The problem is that we are completely clueless of ourselves how to do this. Like cavemen contemplating the moon, we are helpless to get there. The Trinity is really the description of how God overcomes this problem on our behalf. Without the Trinity, the closest we can come to truth is to say that

there is a God. In saving his beloved but rebellious creation, God has reached out to it and rescued it. This reveals the Trinity to us:

- a. The Father initiates by sending the second person of the Trinity, the Logos, often called the Son.
- b. The Son obeys the Father, takes up human nature himself and suffers death upon the cross, is raised up by the Father and restored to his place on heaven's throne.
- c. The Spirit, the third person revealed to us, is "poured out" upon all flesh that they be wholly connected to this act of the second person. He dwells within us and thus brings both Father and Son to us.

All this is Trinity. God, in saving us has revealed himself to us. Without Trinity, we don't have forgiveness or the very salvation of God. We are one of the pagans who can only identify that something is out there.

2. The modus operandi of God in all of this is most distressing. He does not come in majesty but in humility. He does not blaze like an all-consuming fire, he cries in a manger, he suffers at the hands of men, he lies cold and dead in a tomb. But as challenging as this is for our minds, it is good news. The holiness of God is an all-consuming fire. We would have no hope in his presence. With Isaiah we would have to admit our ruin or at a minimum have our lips scalded by a burning coal. But God has hidden his power and might, his glory and holiness from our eyes out of his great love. He has revealed instead his love for us.
3. This has difficult ramifications for us. We would like God's will and purposes to be accomplished, right now. We would like to see the glory of God, his holiness and majesty. We wish that we could, but for the reasons under #2 it would be disastrous for us. And so we must endure seeing God and his Church continuing to suffer at the hands of sinful men. Jesus will say to Saul of Tarsus, "Why do you persecute me?" The sufferings of God in his people are most tragic when they are self-inflicted. We rather expect the wolves to devour us, but the greater horror is when the sheep turn on one another and start devouring each other. Whether it is at Nicea or Ephesus or Chalcedon, whether it is at New Orleans in 1973 or St. Louis in 2013, we often turn our gaze upon the church of God and are appalled at what we see. Rome suffers under the cloud of sexual misconduct by priests. We fight. Others have totally lost their way and could not let the Bible set a rule for them if their life depended upon it. Yet, all this is, in a strange way, good news. God continues to hide himself, the Logos is revealed, the Son is present, mediated by the gentle Spirit. The almighty God, the Father in glory and power has not revealed himself, not yet, there is still time to preach this gospel to yet one more sinner.

1. Trinity – The Love of God Revealed (That the hearer would rejoice this day in the doctrine of the Trinity – that God has solved our deepest and most dire need by the Father sending the Son, the Son’s obedience to that command, the Spirit’s presence.)

This sermon is about the doctrine itself and argues that this is a doctrine which needs to be dear to every Christian’s heart. We may not understand it, surely we don’t but we can confess it, we can look at this strange and wonderful thing that God has done and call it true and beautiful.

Why is doctrine important? It seems to be the occasion of so many fights? There is a whole movement in the US and elsewhere which suggests that all this doctrinal talk has in fact distracted us from the truth, we are less Christian in our doctrinal conversations. Why do we say that “unless someone confess this doctrine...”? C. S. Lewis once said that he was very glad his surgeon knew how to split hairs, he could parse out the smallest elements of my body. He then went on to suggest that the surgeon at best would affect the next four or five decades of his life. But his preacher and the theologians who argued about these things were affecting his eternity. He thought it a very good thing that theologians split hairs as well.

When we use the word Creed, we also include anyone who would confess this Trinity, even if they don’t actually use the words of the creedal statements themselves. This means we also include many who are “non-credal” and yet Trinitarian.

The trinity, this strange and counter-intuitive doctrine we proclaim has importance for us. We confess it because the Trinity is all about God saving his creation, and that means you and that means me. The preacher will want to proclaim the doctrine itself, explicate it, not that the hearer fully grasp it, but that the hearer be able to gaze and wonder at it. Understanding has its limits. I understand the commandments rather well, yet I don’t do them. Do I need more understanding? It is always a good thing, don’t get me wrong, but this is not a time when we come away from this sermon saying, “I understand” as much as I see something as beautiful. There is something to understand in Trinity, but we will run into the limits of understanding.

I would think this would be a “must do” sermon if your church is named Trinity or some derivative, but also if you are at Redeemer, Our Savior, or, yes, even Love Lutheran. All of them are really expressions of the Trinity (see above material) because unless we have Trinity we don’t have redemption, we don’t have love, and we don’t have the very salvation of God. The preacher will want to put this doctrine right in the very heart of their Christianity, this is where it belongs. We are Trinitarians.

A sermon outline?

- a. What is the Question? Why is the Trinity important to us? Why do we have a whole day designated for this doctrine every year? (Perhaps we want to talk about just how wild the councils were.) When we are baptized, it is into the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Why do we do that? If you read the Athanasian creed, you might just ask, “Why did we do that?!” What a bizarre thing to say!
 - i. The real question is “Who died on the cross?” The doctrine of Trinity is really the answer to that question of real and obvious import to us. The Trinity is the doctrine that describes the relationship of the second person (the cross part) to the Godhead and the Father who sent and the Spirit who was poured out.
 - ii. The doctrine of Trinity asserts that it is God who died on that cross, and that is important. If Jesus was anything less than God, even if he was some great angelic being, he could not have died for creation as the creator. He would simply be another creature, and a creature cannot die for the whole of creation.
 - iii. On the other hand, the trinity keeps us out of another problem. If God singly died on that cross, to whom is Jesus praying when he dies? Who receives His Spirit? Who raises him from the grave? It cannot be himself, or he is not really dead.
 - iv. It is important for him to be dead, because that is the mechanism of salvation itself. Without God dying on that cross, our sins are not forgiven, the debt remains, and we are hopelessly ensnared in death.
- b. The Cross is really what makes the doctrine of Trinity important to us. Without the Trinity, our very forgiveness is at stake. Let’s look at that from the perspective of what if this is not true?
 - i. Without the Trinity, we cannot say that God died for our sins, and thus they remain. The death of Jesus of Nazareth, if he is not God, is just the death of another peasant caught up in the brutal machinery of the Roman empire. Even the death of some mighty angel is just another creature’s death.
 - ii. Without the Trinity, the Father’s love for his creation is a distant thing. By sending His Son, the Logos, the Second person of the Trinity, God has given his most precious gift, his very self. God has revealed his very heart to us. We can imagine dying for our son, we are repulsed at the idea of sending our son to die, but to send that son to die for someone who hates me, to save that hateful person, is utterly a mystery

to us – God has revealed his very heart here. In the salvation of the world, God has revealed his Three-ness, so we can see him give himself.

- iii. Without the Trinity we are also missing a companion which we desperately need. God has not sent an angel to us on Pentecost, but the Third Person of that Trinity, The Holy Spirit, who calls, gathers, enlightens, and keeps us. Without this Third Person, the cross would be utter nonsense to us, and simply a bizarre historical fact. Now, connected by that Spirit, I know that when Jesus died, I was on his mind, he died for me, because the Spirit has connected us in Baptism, Sacrament, and Word.
- c. So, The Trinity is important to us, because it reveals the heart of God to us, the love which sent Jesus to the Cross, the love which obeyed the Father's command, the Love which did not leave us as orphans but poured out that Spirit so we might be in communion with God, the Three in One
 - i. We confess it, without have to understand all of it. The real message is that this is about God loving me. I can get that part.
 - ii. We rejoice in it today. This is a love letter from God. It is hard to understand, but then again, I find it hard to understand that some people love me. God's great love should be a little perplexing to us. We should not really expect to understand it fully. But we can rejoice in it.
 - iii. It is good to worship a complex God. He has the hard questions handled for us. Know and rejoice that the Father has sent the Son for you, That Son has obeyed and paid sin's terrible price, and now, with the Gift of the Spirit, we are one with God, the Three in One.

It might be a good idea to put this into a handout, an outline, or an insert which your folks can take home with them.

- 2. The Church – God's Instrument of Grace (Despite what we often see and how it must disappoint him, God really does love his Church. It is the instrument, despite its weakness, to bring his love to a broken world.)

This sermon might just start out with the line from the creed: I believe in the holy Christian Church.

Here we might really want to highlight the good things that are happening with the Church in Oklahoma this week. Don't preach a triumphalistic sermon here.

Remember the last time a tornado hit Moore (1999) and what happened to St John Lutheran. It was spared in the tornado, many called it the miracle of Moore, but in fixing the roof a workman set down his blowtorch and burned it to the ground.

This sermon remembers the painful, sometimes ugly but also fruitful way in which this doctrine came to us. It remembers that history records, in the words of Luther, the footprints of God. We learn something about God and can take a great promise from him home today by looking at his Church and its tortured past.

This might be exactly the sort of sermon which you want to preach if you happen to serve congregation which has had a few rough voters meetings in its day. It can be really discouraging for folks and they might think that this cannot be a Spiritual place if it has fought so much. Of course, we don't want to say that harsh words or anger are positive things, but it is also not a sign that God has left or us that the Spirit has stopped working here. Even when we do the wrong thing, He is working to make something good and beautiful of it. When sinners repent and forgiveness is spoken, the church often comes out of that much stronger.

This did not stop in the fourth century with the end of the Trinitarian councils. Just think of the poor Saxons who had to deal with the terror of Martin Stephan's sexual infidelity. Out of that came Walther and marvelous ministry. How many congregations are not born of splits and divisions?

Here the preacher may want to point out that strange working of God. In our weaknesses he often shows his strength. The Trinity here becomes an expression of the cross. God has the power, all of it. But he sets that aside, reveals himself in his Son, poor, weak, wrapped in swaddling clothes, hanging on a cross, lying cold and dead in a tomb. He eats fish with his disciples to prove his resurrection and bears the scars of crucifixion which Thomas read like braille. He was not revealing his power here, the power which would destroy, but his love which would heal us and the whole world.

The Church, this strange vessel for the proclamation of Christ and His Kingdom, is really the only way to do it. For God would not bully us in to some assent, but he would love us in to faith. To do that he must humble himself and make his appeal through us, just as he made it through Peter that first Pentecost. Remember, Peter had denied Jesus just a few short weeks prior. He makes that appeal through us today, the weak and broken vessels that we are.

3. So you believe in the Trinity? I hope you look good on wood! (The Festival: that the hearer would be moved by the Spirit to a bold confession of the Father who sends, the Son who saves, the Spirit who energizes us.)

This is a sermon on the confession of the Trinity. The preacher will want to tell the history of this strange doctrine. It has often engendered passionate opinions and words both inside and outside of Christianity. Look at the essay at the beginning to see some of the discussion of the riots that took place. But you might also want to point out Saul of Tarsus who was willing to persecute the people who followed this Jesus, this Way.

This doctrine today unifies Christians around the world of all sorts of confessions and denominations. Every Christian prays to this God who reveals himself to us this way. But this is a dangerous confession. It continues to be a risky thing to say that you believe in this Trinitarian God in certain parts of the world, and it may be dangerous again in other parts of the world.

The Trinity engenders humility in the Christian. We don't understand God. The Trinity is deep and profound, and we cannot imagine that we have him figured out. That humility in turn engenders in us a willingness to talk and learn from others. We have a lens through which we see God.