

John 3:1–15 (Trinity)
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
June 12, 2022

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Trinity, where we set aside a Sunday to be reminded that God is one, yet three persons—one divine essence, one divine name, shared by three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Imagine if the doctrine of the Trinity were to disappear. How would our liturgy be affected? How would your day to day lives be affected? For many Christians, the doctrine of the Trinity simply becomes an obscure article of faith that proves our orthodoxy, or our correct teaching. Christians know from Church history that they have to confess the Trinity to be considered Christians, but does it really mean anything? In many churches, especially those who have jettisoned the historic liturgy, the Trinity has little to do with worship and life. God is praised generically, or if the Persons of the Trinity are mentioned it is as if they are detached from each other. If asked to clarify who God is, some think of the man Jesus, and then the God Jesus calls Father, and then an impersonal force called the Holy Spirit, all disconnected from each other, which as Christians we know is not the case. As we just confessed, the Father is God, Jesus is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, three persons sharing one divine name, all three equally God. The Trinity is not simply academic wrangling or a mere afterthought. The Trinity is not an abstract concept meant to trip up the uninitiated. No, the Trinity is the God we worship daily: the God who creates, redeems, and sanctifies us, the Triune God who places His name upon us in Holy Baptism and makes us part of His life.

So where do we see the Holy Trinity in our worship? Everywhere, actually! We begin the Divine Service every Sunday “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy

Spirit”—one name, three persons. I absolve, or forgive your sins in the stead and by the command of Christ and in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The Introit ends with the Doxology, praising our Triune God: “Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever.” Then we sing the Kyrie: “Lord have mercy upon us, Christ have mercy upon us, Lord have mercy upon us,” a threefold cry to a threefold God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Gloria ends in praise to the Triune God: “For thou only art holy; Thou only art the Lord. Thou only, O Christ, with the Holy Ghost, art most high in the glory of God the Father. Amen.” In the Nicene Creed we confess the Triune God every Sunday, except today, on Trinity Sunday, when we use the Athanasian Creed, which we’ll talk about in a bit. In the Sanctus we sing a threefold “Holy, holy, holy” to our Triune God and the service concludes with the threefold Aaronic benediction, the threefold blessing of our Triune God upon His true Israel: “The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious unto you. The Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace.” The Divine Service is all about the Triune God and the gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation He has for us.

And what about the Holy Trinity in your personal life? What we do on Sunday morning has an effect on every aspect of your life. The Triune God you worship here is the same Triune God you serve throughout the week. In the Small Catechism, Martin Luther encourages us to begin and end every day with the sign of the cross, invoking the name of the Triune God, and to confess our faith in the Triune God with the words of the Apostles’ Creed. Our day begins and ends with the Holy Trinity, just as our entire life is lived in the name of the Triune God, which was placed upon us in Holy Baptism. A person being baptized is marked with the sign of the cross. At Baptism, the Apostles’ Creed is confessed and the person is baptized with water “in the

name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” The rituals of Baptism are the same rituals that define our day to day existence: the sign of the cross, the name of the Triune God, and an explanation of that faith in the Triune God in the words of the Apostles’ Creed. Our corporate worship on Sunday morning and our individual worship at home have everything to do with our faith in the Triune God.

And then we have Trinity Sunday every year, the Sunday after Pentecost, and the start of the “Trinity season,” which will last until the new church year begins in Advent. Trinity Sunday is a day set aside for us to reflect on the importance of the Triune God in our worship and life, the very foundation of everything. Today, June 12th, also happens to be the commemoration of the Council of Nicea, which is so important for our articulation of the Trinity, as you know from the Nicene Creed. The Council of Nicea was convened by the Roman Emperor Constantine in early summer in the year of our Lord 325 in present-day Turkey. Constantine had legalized Christianity in the Roman Empire just a decade before, and soon public controversy disturbed the church. A priest in Egypt named Arius began teaching that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was the first of God’s creatures rather than God Himself. The council of Nicea was to settle the controversy. It leaned heavily on the works of a young deacon named Athanasius, who later in his life was exiled to the city of Trier, just an hour and a half west of here.

The Athanasian Creed, which we confess on Trinity Sunday, is named after Athanasius because it contains so clearly what he devoted his life to defending: the teaching of the Triune God and the person of Christ as drawn from Holy Scripture. It’s often pointed out that the term “Trinity” is not in the Bible. However, we and all the Church before us use the term as shorthand for how Scripture speaks about God. From the beginning of Genesis there’s God the Father who creates all things by His Word, which is God the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, is

hovering over the face of the waters. The creed of ancient Israel, the Shema, implies that God is three in one: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” The Aaronic benediction is a threefold blessing from the LORD and in the Sanctus, the song of the Seraphim from our Old Testament Lesson today, the angels sing: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts.” Three persons, one God. What we see in glimpses in the Old Testament, the New Testament spells out fully: both that God is one and that God is three, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. At the end of Matthew, Jesus commands His disciples to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Three persons, one God. When we confess the Trinity, we are simply confessing the way Scripture speaks.

So why does the doctrine of the Trinity matter to us? Besides speaking the way Scripture speaks, which is always important, the Athanasian Creed makes it clear how necessary a correct understanding of the Trinity and the Incarnation are for our salvation: “Therefore, whoever desires to be saved must think thus about the Trinity. But it is also necessary for everlasting salvation that one faithfully believe the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . This is the catholic faith; whoever does not believe it faithfully and firmly cannot be saved.” The doctrine of the Trinity is not an abstract idea about how God is ordered. The Trinity is our God, the God we worship and pray to, the God who saves us, the God into whose name we are baptized: “unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” A correct understanding of the Trinity is necessary, because without a correct understanding of the Trinity we don’t have a correct view of what the Trinity does to save us. We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, but faith is not simply believing any old thing. Faith is trusting in who God is and what He does for our salvation. If faith does not trust in the correct object, then it is not saving faith. Saving faith trusts that the Son of God, the second person of the Holy Trinity, became man, that

He took on our flesh and blood and became one of us in every way, yet without sin, so that He could die on the cross for our sins. As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so would the Son of Man be lifted up upon the cross, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life.

Apart from the Trinity there is no salvation. Apart from the Incarnation there is no salvation. Christianity rests on these two pillars. All the sins of humanity, from Adam's Fall until the end of the world, are sins not only against other people; all sins are sins against God. Our sins against others could be easily overlooked or made up for. But sins against the perfect, pure, and holy God of the universe have eternal significance. Offending the eternal God has eternal consequences. And so God in His love gave His only Son. The second person of the Holy Trinity became man to die for all the sins of the world. The true God had to take on our flesh and blood to redeem it. The true God had to take on our flesh and blood to die in our place and rise again from the dead, that we too, might rise from the dead on the Last Day.

The Holy Trinity is not about speculation, abstraction, or theological complexity. The Holy Trinity is not a man-made notion or idea. No, the Holy Trinity is the God Who reveals Himself to us in Holy Scripture. The Holy Trinity is the God who created us, the God who redeemed us, and the God who sanctifies us still today. The Holy Trinity is the God who makes us His own in the waters of Holy Baptism. When we were baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, God placed His name upon us and made us members of His family, the Church. In Baptism we are united to the death and resurrection of Christ and we are united to the Holy Trinity as we enter God's Kingdom, born of water and the Spirit. In God's Kingdom we then live our day to day lives in service to the Triune God. We intercede for the world to God the Father through God the Son and in God the Holy Spirit. By the power of the Holy Spirit we live as the Father's children in the forgiveness won for us by Jesus Christ. The Holy Trinity is not an

abstraction; the Holy Trinity is the Lord of our life and the God of our salvation, now and forevermore. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.