

15 June 2003
Festival of the Holy Trinity

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

“Our God of Love”

Text: John 3:16

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

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”

Some time ago I had the privilege of talking to a man named Oscar. He was an old man, who had lived a full life, and he was going to die soon. He had a family, whom he had cared for and raised as best he could. He had many friends. . . . Oscar didn't believe in God. His whole life he had never believed in God. But as you near death, I guess you start thinking. And Oscar started thinking about God. . . . He had heard about God over the years, from friends and other family, but didn't really know who God was. He didn't really know about the doctrine of the Holy Trinity – which we remember and celebrate today – that God is one God in three persons and three persons in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. . . . He really had just one question about God, and it was this: if there is a God, why would He want or care about him? He was an old man. He wasn't good for anything anymore. He couldn't do anything anymore. He hadn't done anything for God his whole life. He wasn't the worst human being in the world, he said, but he had made a lot of mistakes – *a lot* of mistakes. . . . And so I think Oscar had reached the conclusion that whether there was a God or not really didn't matter much. God wouldn't want him anyway.

Oscar was a smart man. He had it nailed. He was right – at least partly. God didn't need him. There was nothing he could do for God that God couldn't do for Himself. There was nothing he could give to God that God doesn't already have. He had made a lot of mistakes, which was Oscar's way of confessing his sin and his sinfulness. . . . I also think Oscar began to accept the fact that God was the Holy Trinity. He did not debate my speaking about God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He did not debate the fact that the Son of God had come down to earth and took on our human nature in the person of Jesus. He couldn't understand it all, but that was alright by him – there were a lot of things he couldn't understand in this world. . . . But Oscar just couldn't understand why God would want or care about him. Oscar just couldn't understand why God would love him. There was just no reason for it!

Well again, Oscar got it right. The greatest mystery of our God is not the fact that He is a Trinity, and it's not the fact of His incarnation – it is the mystery of His love for us. The mystery of His unfailing, steadfast love. That He would want us. That He would care about us. That He would send His Son, His only Son, to die on the cross for us. There's just no reason for it!

That's why all the other religions in the world make God's love, and salvation, and eternal life in Heaven or someplace else *conditional*. There has to be a *reason*. And so there must be something you have to do. There must be some way for you to show your worth. There must be something, *anything*, even the very littlest thing, that would create a reason, that would make sense of God's love and care! And this sense is so strong in us – because that's how our human nature is, and that's how our world operates – that even some Christian churches teach in this direction. There must be a reason!

But no, there's not! God's love does not depend on anything in this world. It doesn't depend on anything in you. There are no conditions, no strings attached. God lays down His life for sinners, for rebels. God loves those who do not love Him. God loves those who are unworthy of Him and His love – even people like Oscar who live their whole lives not really thinking much about God. . . . And God showed that love, He lived it. And so God comes to us and lives with us that we might live with Him. The penalty for sin is death, and so in love He dies our death. Justice demands condemnation for sin, and so in love He is condemned in our place. All God's anger and wrath against sin is, in love, accepted and poured out upon Himself. . . . All to save people like Oscar. To save rebels, sinners, murderers, adulterers, thieves, gossips, liars, deceivers, cheaters, pornographers, rapists, abortionists, swindlers, gamblers, abusers, despots, dictators, terrorists, and whoever else you can think of that this world we be better without. To save us – yes, we are in that list! Yet He want us, with Him, in Heaven. Not because there's a reason, but because of the mystery of His love.

“For God so loved the world, that He gave [He sacrificed] His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”

You see, Oscar could believe that verse *in the abstract* – that God might, and would, die to save the world . . . but not to save him. But just as God is not some abstract idea or concept, but a real, concrete Trinity, so also God does not love or act in abstract ways, but in real, concrete ways. And so He did not come and die to save something called “the world,” He came and deliberately laid down His life for specific people, for specific individuals, for you. And not because He loves everyone the same, as if we were all interchangeable drones. No, but because He loves each of us individually, personally, specifically, according to the uniqueness of our personalities. For His love is so great and

precise that He knows the intimate details of each and every person, even counting the hairs on your head. There is nothing He does not know about you. Your secret sins, your evil desires, your pride in considering yourself better than other people. He knows – and yet still, in love, He dies for us. For all of us specific individuals that make up the whole world. Not because there is a reason, but because that's who God is. For God doesn't just do love, He is love!

And so God the Father, in love, sends His Son into this sin-filled world of sin-filled people, knowing full well what will happen. Knowing that He will be rejected, knowing that He will be abused, knowing that He will be killed. . . .

And God the Son, in love, comes. And in love He holds back the vast armies of angels that could have come and stopped our rebellion, and the crucifixion, in an instant! And He goes through with it; in love, He allows Himself to be nailed to the cross. . . .

And as He dies, the Son gives up His Spirit, the Holy Spirit, and gives that Spirit to come and live with us. And this last, God the Holy Spirit, is not the least of the three. In love He comes to us in our sin, in our filth, in our rebellion, to lead us to the cross. To see there in that cruel instrument of death and the product of our sin, the very source of our life.

And believing, that life is yours. Not that the cross has any power or life in itself – but because the One who died on the cross for you then also rose from death for you. He takes your death and destroys it, so that in rising to life again He could then give you His life. And He does! He does, as joined with Jesus, the Son of God, by the Holy Spirit, we sinners who *were* dead in our sins are forgiven our sins, and raised to a new life – no longer named sinners, but now named sons and daughters of God. We rebels are made heirs of God's kingdom. We who deserve nothing are given everything. Not because there is a reason, but because the Holy Trinity is love. Because in love we are created, we are saved, and we are forgiven. Because in love, our Father . . . His Son, our brother Jesus . . . and the Holy Spirit want and care about you. It is a love beyond our understanding.

Oscar got that part right.

And there is a little bit of Oscar in each of us, for we cannot understand God's love for us either. We still look for a reason for God to love us, wanting to find something, *anything*, within us that makes us worthy to be Christians, sons and daughters of God, heirs of Heaven. Something we are, something we do . . . but there is nothing. There is nothing in us. We are sinners through and through. . . . Yet still God is coming to us. In love, sending His Spirit to give us all His gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation. And in love,

the Spirit continues to leads us to the source of our life, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Leading us to the waters of baptism where we are joined with Christ and adopted as sons. Leading us to God's Word of life and the forgiveness of Christ. Leading us to the body and blood of Christ in Holy Communion where we are fed by the life of Christ. . . . And thus led to Christ, our Saviour takes us to His Father, to whom we are privileged to cry "**Abba! Father!**" Because in Christ, He becomes *Our Father*.

"For God [the Father] so loved the world, that He gave [He sacrificed] His only Son, that whoever believes [by the Holy Spirit] in Him should not perish but have eternal life."

I wish I could finish this story now, and tell you that Oscar now believes in His Saviour, in the love of the Holy Trinity for him, but the truth is that I don't know. Oscar's still alive, and he may believe. But I continue to pray that he will know the love of God, that wants, and cares for, and loves even an old, dying sinner like him. Not because there's a reason, but because that's who God is. . . .

And that's who He is for you as well. Do not look to yourself for the reason, for you will not find it in that old, dying sinner sitting in your place in the pew! Look to Him. Look only to Him. Look to where He was for you – His cross and the empty tomb. And look to where He is now for you – His Table which He has set here before you. . . . There is a love you could not possibly earn or deserve, but which is *real*. The love of the Holy Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Who not only *would* do *anything*, but who has done *everything* for Oscar, and for you!

"Blessed be the Holy Trinity and the undivided Unity. Let us give glory to Him because He has shown His mercy . . . and His love . . . to us." (Introit Antiphon for Holy Trinity)

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.