

3 June 2007
The Festival of the Holy Trinity

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Great, Merciful I AM”

Text: John 8:48-59

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

I read a little magazine article recently that asked the question: *Does the Church want people with problems?*

Perhaps we think (or have been given the impression) that the answer to that question is no. The Church is made up of folks who *used* to have problems, who *used* to be sinners, but are *now* happy and carefree in Christ. Therefore we hide our struggles with sin, our problems and weaknesses, our weak faith and doubts. We try to look strong and sure and good and like we have it all together, for that’s what Christians – *real* Christians – are like, after all.

Maybe we have been on the other side of that as well, and *given* the impression that the Church does not want people with problems. Sending that sometimes not-so-subtle message in how we carry ourselves, or in our slowness to help, our reluctance to listen, or our impatience and preoccupation with our own lives. Preferring to substitute our involvement by simply giving money instead, so that I don’t really have to be inconvenienced and bothered; so that someone else do the work.

Of all of this *I* am guilty, and I suspect (to some degree or another) so are all of you. And we need to repent . . . but not only of our failure to love and help our neighbors, and not only of our pride and delusions of goodness, but most importantly, *of what all this in us communicates and teaches others about God*. **That if the Church does not want people with problems, then it must also be true that neither does God.** And so the message becomes: you better clean up your act, get your life together, and measure up, in order to come before the holy and righteous God.

And that this is the message that has been communicated to the world, just think: how many think the message of the Church is about living up to God's standards instead of about receiving God's forgiveness? How many think the Church is full of hypocrites, because they see us living one way but teaching another? The truth is that we who bear God's holy name have not kept it holy.

But what a different picture we see in the Holy Gospel today, in Jesus. For there in flesh and blood is the eternal God come to be with His problem-filled, sin-enslaved people, exactly *because* they are problem-filled, sin-enslaved people, *in order to* set us problem-filled, sin-enslaved people free. To defeat the enemies that have defeated us – namely, sin, death, and the devil – and restore us with His forgiveness, life, and salvation. **And He does so because this is who He is.** Unlike us, with God words and deeds are *not* two different things – who He is is what He does, and what He does is who He is. And so in Jesus we see God as He truly is – our God who wants people with problems . . . because He wants and loves us.

And on this Holy Trinity Sunday, we remember and confess that this is who God is and has always been, for He is a God who does not change. And so for us and for our salvation He has *always* been working . . . from the very beginning. And that is what Jesus is saying when He tells the Jews: “*Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.*”

Jesus is telling them that I AM the one who created all things.

The one who confronted Adam and Eve after they sinned.

The one who told Noah to build an ark.

The one who not only *saw* Abraham and *knew* him, but *called* him and made a covenant with him.

The one who tested Abraham, and who wrestled with Jacob.

I AM the one who spoke to Moses out of the burning bush, and told Him this name, *my name*.

I AM the one who brought the people of Israel out of Egypt.

The one who led them in the pillar of cloud and fire.

The one who divided the Red Sea, fed them with manna, and gave them water from

a rock to drink in the wilderness.

The one who gave them the Promised Land and fought for them.

I AM the one who dwelt with them in the Tabernacle and the Temple.

The one who gave Solomon his wisdom.

The one who consumed Elijah's sacrifice before the priests of Baal on Mt. Carmel.

The one who Isaiah saw and trembled before.

And now - now - I AM with you in flesh and blood. *Your* flesh and blood. That just as I have served you and kept you for so long, so now I have come to join myself to you and save you. Once and for all. To take your sin and its penalty upon myself. To take your place under the Law and fulfill it. To take your place in death and destroy its power in my resurrection. That all of you problem-filled, sin-enslaved people may live - forgiven and free, both now and forever.

Such a God the Jews Jesus was talking to could not understand or accept; that kind of a God doesn't make sense - *a God who comes and serves us!* - and so they called Him a hated Samaritan, demon possessed and mad, and picked up stones to kill Him. . . . But do not judge those Jews, for we must confess that such a God does not make sense to us either. For why would a holy God love lawbreakers, serve sinners, and die for deviants like you and me? Who repent so little and try to earn so much? Who take His forgiveness for granted? Who profane the holy name given to us? *Our* stones may not be the hard, heavy kind, but are we not the same when we resist His Word and love today?

Yet look! What divine patience and love Jesus shows - with the Jews then, and with us today - not leaving them to the demons they accused Him of having, nor throwing stones in return, nor condemning us in our unbelief . . . but bearing with us. Patiently, lovingly, that what we sinners cannot understand, we might yet - through the power of the Holy Spirit - *believe*. That such selfless love is possible, and that God shows us His glory not by remaining up in Heaven, but in coming down from Heaven to save us. Showing His strength by becoming weak. Showing His greatness by coming to serve. . . .

And so the Father sends His Son into the world, to bear our sin and be our Saviour. And the Son send the Spirit into the world, to give us the gift of faith and be our

Teacher. And yet as we will confess, there are not three gods, but one God. One God in three persons and three persons in one God, **working as one** for us and for our salvation. For this is who He is. Not only our Creator, but also our Redeemer and Sanctifier.

And this great God, the great I AM, who came in our flesh and blood and ascended the cross to shed His blood and die on that altar of wood for the forgiveness of our sins, is the same God who now comes to us in His flesh and blood on this altar, that we may eat His body and drink His blood and receive that forgiveness of sins. Feeding and filling us with Himself. Strengthening us who are so weak. That though we profane His name given to us in Holy Baptism, He does not take that name away from us – but in divine patience and love, restores us as His children; creating in us clean hearts, and renewing a *right* spirit within us. (Ps 51) His Spirit. That the devil, the world, and our sinful nature have power over us no more, but that we live and be who we are: children of our Father, redeemed by the Son, in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

And that we then be who we are not just here, but in the world. Not hiding our struggles and weakness, but rejoicing His strength. Not insisting on our goodness, but praising His forgiveness. Not begrudging others our love and forgiveness and help, but giving to others what has been given to us. Confessing the name that has been given to us in both word *and* deed. That all may know who our God is! Not a God who doesn't want people with problems, or who insists that we fix ourselves – but a God who is love, who loves you, and so has come in love **for you**. To free you not *for* sin, but *from* sin. To make you His own. And so you are.

And so may what we confess with our lips this day be true in our lives everyday:
Blessed be the Holy Trinity and the undivided Unity. Let us give glory to Him because He has shown His mercy to us. (Introit Antiphon)

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 through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.