

30 May 2010
The Feast of the Holy Trinity

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“A Doctrine or a Life?”

Text: John 8:48-59 (Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31)

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

What is religion? What does it mean to be spiritual? There is a great deal of talk in our world today about such things, many people say they are spiritual, but what do they mean? What is true religion? What is real spirituality? *Is it about me getting God involved in my life, or is it about God getting us involved in His life?*

Popular religion and spirituality *starts* with our life. This is it – how can God make it better? How can getting God involved in your life make your marriage better? Your family better? Your job better? You better? And the focus is often on things that you can do to make God more involved in your life.

But that is not true religion. Because the things of God *never* start with us. As we heard in the reading from Proverbs, they *start* with God. With our God who was before the foundation of the world and who created all things. And so true religion is not about God getting involved in your life – it is about God getting us involved in His life. It’s not about me opening my heart and my life and inviting Jesus in – it’s about God in His mercy calling to us and drawing us to Himself and into His life. Religion and spirituality doesn’t start and end with us - it all starts and ends with Him.

And if that is the case, then who God is – the Holy Trinity – is a matter of great importance! . . . On the other hand, if religion is simply about making this life better, then who God is and which god you worship or believe in is really irrelevant, as long as he (or she!) fits and fulfills your needs and wishes and desires. And so much popular religion and spirituality today has become like a cafeteria - you pick and choose what you think is best for you and works best for your life.

But the truth is that God is not primarily interested in making your life *better* – He wants to make it *eternal*. And those are two vastly different things. For to make your life eternal is to draw you into His life – for He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. (John 14:6) Therefore the things of this life and the things of God often clash, because they have different goals, and different means to reach those goals.

An example of such a clash would be suffering. If God is supposed to make my life better, then (the thinking goes) I should not have to suffer. But God often sends suffering into our lives to work good - to direct the eyes of our hearts and minds away from the things of this world, that we focus on Him and His life.

Another example of such a clash would be wealth. If God is supposed to make my life better, then (the thinking goes) He should give me wealth. But if we have turned the things we have into idols - loving our stuff more than God, and looking to what we have for our happiness and meaning - then would not a loving God take those things away, that we look to Him and His life instead?

For the truth is that the life of God is bigger than this world and life. And so God is working in your life - not to fix *this* life – but to give you more life, true life, eternal life.

And that's what this day, the Festival of the Holy Trinity, is all about. This day is not about commemorating just a teaching or an abstract doctrine, **but life**. The life of God, the Holy Trinity, and His life that He gives to us by drawing us into Himself. And so the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is not unimportant or optional, as some would have us believe. That it is simply enough to believe in "god" without defining who that "god" is. No, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is a matter of life and death, just as we will confess in the Athanasian Creed in just a few moments: *"This is the catholic (or universal) faith; whoever does not believe it faithfully and firmly cannot be saved."*

And so to save us, or to give us life, God has not only revealed Himself to us and told us who He is – the Holy Trinity; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; three in one and one in three – He has, in fact, opened His heart and His life to us. And He has done this for us in His Son. That in Jesus, we might know Him, be reconciled to Him, and receive His life. For as Jesus said in the Holy Gospel today, He is no mere man, He is the great **I AM**. He is the God who created all things, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God who spoke to Moses from the burning bush, the God who led His people out of Egypt and into the Promised Land, the God who dwelt with His people in the Tabernacle and the Temple, the God who gave David his kingdom and Solomon his wisdom . . . and now the God who has come to us in human flesh and blood to unite Himself to us and us to Him.

Now, such a God the Jews Jesus was talking to could not understand or accept; that kind of a God didn't make sense – *a God who comes to us 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 doesn't really compute with us either. For why would a holy God love and serve sinners like you and me? Sinners who repent so little, often taken His

forgiveness for granted, and regularly profane the holy name given to us in Holy Baptism with unholy living? And while *our* stones may not be the round, hard, heavy kind, are we not acting the same way when we resist His Word and loving work in our lives today?

Yet 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 bone 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 this food of forgiveness and eternal life. For though we profane His name, He does not take that name away from us – but in divine patience and love, restores us as His children, creates in us clean hearts, and renews 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 so to believe and confess the Holy Trinity is much more than celebrating the Sunday of the Holy Trinity each year and speaking the Athanasian Creed. It is about life. To know, each and every day, that apart from this Holy Trinity, we have no life. Oh, we may live 70, 80, or 90 years, but what of it? And perhaps we may not even live that long. A stray bullet, a drunk driver, or an unseen disease may see to that. . . . Many people today are *living*, but many do not have *life*. People are working, marrying, buying lots of things, bigger houses, bigger cars. But if these are your life then you have no life. An earthquake or fire, an economic downturn, or an unexpected accident may see to that.

But the life of God is different. It is life that death cannot end. It is life that has risen from the dead and ascended into Heaven. It is life that lives for others and not for self because it has already been given all things. It is a new life. And it is the life that has been given to you when you were baptized. It is life that lives by faith, knowing that our life is not here, or in the things of this world, but that our life is hidden with Christ in God. (Col 3:3)

And so who God is matters because what God has done for us matters. The two cannot be separated. To truly know God is to know His Fatherly love, to know Him as Saviour, and to know Him as the Lord who still today makes sinners into saints.

And to believe and confess that is what it means to celebrate the Holy Trinity - the triune God who is not just *out there*, but who permeates our worship and our lives. And so each Divine Service begins and ends in this triune name. Luther recommended we begin and end each day the same. That we remember and rejoice at both the beginning and the ending of each day who God is and what He has done for us. That our life each day flows from Him. That in His great mercy and love, He has drawn us into His life. His eternal life.

That is true religion. That is what it means to be truly spiritual. And this is the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic faith. And so today, tomorrow, and always, we confess this truth with the Church of all time: *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 for Holy Trinity)

In His Name: 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.