

26 May 2013
The Festival of the Holy Trinity

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“God For You”

Text: John 8:48-59; Acts 2:14a, 22-36; 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.

I read a newspaper article recently about two folks who had gotten married. They had met and fell in love, but they were two different religions. He was a Christian of some stripe, but she was something else. It didn't matter to them until they got more serious and decided to marry. What would they do? Well, after thinking about it a bit, the man decided that he would become what she was and give up his Christian faith because, he finally concluded, it didn't matter *what* you believe, as long as you believe . . . *something*.

I wish I could say that kind of thinking is rare and unusual, but unfortunately it's not. I've seen stories like that quite a bit, and more and more. But it's an opinion that makes no sense, really. I believe that aliens planted us here. I believe that the sky is green. I believe that goats should run the country - we'll pass whatever bills the goats eat into law. It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you believe. *Really?*

But contrast that statement to what we confessed in the Athanasian Creed just a moment ago: *Whoever desires to be saved must believe this*. It matters. And then all those things that were said - quite a list. One God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity. Equal in glory and majesty. Uncreated, infinite, eternal, almighty. The Son not created but begotten. The Holy Spirit neither created nor begotten, but proceeding. And then Jesus Christ, the Son of God, born a son of man, who suffered, died, and rose for our salvation, ascended into heaven, and will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. That's the truth, we confess. And it matters.

But why does it matter? That's a question many are asking these days. And, some would say, *it doesn't matter!* It doesn't matter to the folks in Moore, Oklahoma right now, who have lost everything and are trying to get back on their feet. *It doesn't matter*, some would say, to those who on this Memorial Day weekend are mourning the loss of a spouse or child or parent in the war, and don't know how they're going to make ends meet. *It doesn't matter* to those who had their legs blown off at the Boston marathon. Cold, hard facts like the Athanasian Creed don't matter when the rubber of faith meets the hard road of life. The Church needs to be

more loving and less doctrinal, some would say.

But on the contrary, it is exactly for all those reasons that all of this does matter. Love and doctrine aren't opposites (or at least they shouldn't be!). For if the Scriptures are right (which, of course, we believe) when they tell us that God is love (1 John 4), then to know God is to know love. And to know what God has done for us is to know what love does and to be drawn into that love. For love isn't the ooey-goey, ishy-squishy feelings that it is often pawned off to be. Love is much deeper than that. Real love is based on *knowing* the beloved. That's why real love lasts beyond the ooey-goey, ishy-squishy feelings. That's why real love grows stronger over time, even when looks fade and skin grows wrinkly.

And so when the Athanasian Creed says *whoever desires to be saved must believe this*, it says that not because you have to be able to pass a test and have all the right knowledge in order to get into heaven . . . though that's probably how it sounds sometimes. No, it matters because to know who God is is to know who that man on the cross is. To know that the man hanging on the cross isn't just a man, but the God-man, fully God and fully man. To know that God died - *in love* - for you and me. For Christianity isn't about good people doing good things in good ways for a good life. It's about God dying on the cross for sinners. It's about a good God doing good things. It's about the Father giving His Son who gives us the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit joining us to the Son who takes us to the Father. That's who God is and that's what God does. The two go together. And you either have *both* or you have *neither*.

That's why it matters, and why we cannot give up this Christian, trinitarian faith. It's not just a matter of life and death, like so many other things in this world - it's a matter of *eternal* life and *eternal* death. If God only loves us when we're good, *that matters*. If that wasn't God dying on the cross for our sins, *that matters*. If there are many ways to get to heaven and so Jesus didn't *really* have to die on the cross for us, *that matters*. But (on the other hand) if God has come for us to save us, if He sent His Son to rescue us from our greatest need - death, if He sends His Spirit to be with us and keep us now through the trials and troubles of this life, *that matters too*. That matters when death comes upon us suddenly. That matters when tragedy comes upon us suddenly.

It matters that we know who God is. I think of the man in Cleveland in the news lately who had kidnapped and held those girls for ten years - the neighbors all thought they knew him and that he was a pretty good guy. But they didn't know him, they didn't know who he really was and therefore what he was capable of doing, and what he did. **But we know God.** Not just because we know the facts - but because of what He did; because of the cross. There God shows us who He is. There God shows us His love. There God shows us that He will never leave us or

forsake us, no matter how bad things get. If He was going to, He would have. Jesus would have jumped down from the cross and said: *forget that! I'm not doin' this for a bunch of stiff-necked, ungrateful, unloveable sinners!* But He didn't. He stayed *for you*. He suffered *for you*. He laid down His life *for you*. And that matters.

And that was the plan from before the foundation of the world. It's who God is and so what God does. We heard in the reading from Proverbs that the Son was there with the Father at creation. They delighted in and loved one another, and they delighted in and love their creation. And then Peter (in his Pentecost sermon) spelled out how God's plan to redeem His creation from sin and death had been revealed long ago, and then accomplished by Jesus. Jesus - the God of Abraham in the flesh. Jesus - showing us the Father and His love for us. And now the Holy Spirit given, to unite us in that love. Yet that's exactly what the Pharisees couldn't wrap their minds around: *this love of God for us*. That God would be this. That God would do this.

But if God is not this, and if God *does* not this, then we must. We must bear our own sin. We must find our own way to eternal life. The Pharisees thought they could, but every time they sparred with Jesus, their wisdom, their deeds, their life, never could match His, could it? So what the Athanasian Creed is confessing is really this: sin, death, and hell are powerful; more powerful than you and I. So powerful that only an uncreated, infinite, eternal, almighty person could defeat and overcome them. **And we have such a person in Jesus.**

And that matters. It matters when death is staring you in the face that you have been baptized into this one, this Jesus, who defeated death and the grave for you, so that death will not be the end for you, but that you will pass through death to life with Him.

It matters when the trials and tumult of this world are flung upon you that you have received the Body and Blood of this one, this Jesus, who endured it all with you, who knows it, and who has promised to be with you through it.

It matters when satan floods your mind with the thought of all your sins and failures and shortcomings and shows you how unworthy you really are that you hear the absolution of this one, this Jesus, who loves you anyway; who came and died for your sins and unworthiness; and says to you: *I took care of all that. I forgive you. I love you. Satan's words, his accusations, are true. But my words are true, too. I forgive you all your sins.*

And if all that from Jesus, then all that from the Father and the Spirit also. For all are one God, one Lord. A Trinity in Unity and Unity in Trinity. **God for you.** The Athanasian Creed confessed that too by using the word "catholic" - catholic with a

little "c" which means *universal*; which means it's for everyone, not just for some. God did this for all people, for you.

So when the last day comes, when all the dead are raised and the Judgment takes place, you will not be alone. So it's a day you need not fear, for you will have **God for you** then, too. And by grace through faith in Jesus your Saviour, in Jesus the Son of the Father, in Jesus the sender of the Spirit to you, in Jesus who took your sin and evil and dealt with it and who delights in and remembers your good - on that day you will receive, body and soul, the gift of eternal life.

For He is **God for you**. This God for you. That matters. That's something (as the Athanasian Creed says) to **keep** - to guard, to treasure, to hold onto tightly and not give it up. On this Memorial Day weekend, we do that with the memory of those who took the bullet for us in war. How much moreso for the One who took the bullet for all of us on the cross. It matters. He matters. Come now and receive Him, His Body and Blood for you. For He comes not only on the Last Day. He comes here. He comes now. He comes for you. That you may live: forgiven, free, and forever.

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.