

# Trinity Sunday

## May 30, 2021

**Our Savior's Way Lutheran Church**

**Pastor David Labuhn**

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There is only one day in the church year that intentionally identifies and expounds on a specific doctrine of the church – that day is today. Today, we focus on who our God is. We already know much about our God because we are at the mid-point of the church year calendar and we have finished with the festival season. The festival season is highlighted by Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. At each of those seasons and days, we learn who our God is.

At Christmas, we learn that God, our Father, and Creator, sent the gift of His son to live with us, to teach us, and to die for us. Christmas is the day of God the Father who creates and sustains us by His great love. At Easter, we learn that God the Son, who in His obedience to God the Father and love for us, died for us and arose. In His love, Jesus acted to forgive our sins, defeat death, and defeat Satan, giving us the hope of life in heaven. Easter is the day of God the Son. Last Sunday, we learned that God the Holy Spirit came to fill the apostles' faith and the power to share the knowledge of God with others. By the love of the Holy Spirit, we have faith and are sanctified (made holy) in the sight of God. Last Sunday was the day of God the Holy Spirit.

Today, after seeing the actions of our God, we recognize that our God is a God of love and relationships. The focus of this "Trinity Sunday" is to acknowledge that our God is One but at the same time three persons. We acknowledge this by singing, Holy, holy, holy, - three holies. We acknowledged it when we began our service this morning invoking or appealing for the Triune God to be among us saying, "*In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit*" - the Trinity. We received absolution for our confession in the name of the Trinity and we pray in the name of the Trinity through Jesus. We will close the service with a three-part blessing. Last week we baptized three souls here at Our Savior's Way in the name of the Trinity. It is easy for us to see the actions of our Triune God and to

celebrate them. Yet the concept of the Trinity is one of the most difficult doctrines to comprehend; it is the mystery of mysteries. It is the hardest doctrine for non-Christians to accept. But it is one that marks us as Christians. Now, if trying to understand God is not easy; try to preach on Trinity Sunday, which is even harder.

You all know the basic tenant of the doctrine: There is one God. But, while there is one God, our God is at the same time three, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thus The Holy Trinity exists in Unity. Our ONE God exists in the form of three distinct persons who are all distinct but at the same time One God. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are separate but our one single God.

This doctrine defies human logic. And we have tried in our non-divine human thinking to construct a means of describing our Triune God using the world around us. We compare our Triune God to an egg that is composed of a shell, yolk, and albumen (the white) – an egg has three different parts but it is all one egg. Another typical example is an equilateral triangle. You often see that as the applique on altar paraments. An equilateral triangle has three distinct angles and sides that are all equal but they are all one triangle. A circle is often placed around the triangle or you see three linked circles. St. Patrick used the example of a three-leaved shamrock. The Lutheran missionary, Hans Egende, used the example of water which has three forms: vapor, liquid, and solid (mist, a river, and ice). But that is the problem, when we try to apply our human minds to the mystery of the divine, we fail and that leads to heresy (untrue beliefs). Each example fails to be accurate and can mislead us.

On Trinity Sunday we are reminded that God is not like anything we know in this world. Our God cannot be fitted into the mental capacities of the human brain. We can use all the examples from mathematics and geometry and science and philosophy; we can take all the ideas from art and from literature; we can take all of the human knowledge and put it together and we would still not have God. We can believe falsely in our destruction. That has happened, is happening, in some churches that call themselves Christian today.

So, we turn to the source of all truth about God, His Word, the Bible. But we do not find the word "*Trinity*" in the Bible. It is not used. It first came

into use in the 3rd Century when the church father Tertullian used the word *“Trinitus”* to describe God.

The Old Testament is less direct than the New Testament in its treatment of the Trinity. Yet at the Creation, we hear about God the Father, the Creator, and in the SECOND verse of the very FIRST chapter of Genesis at creation, we hear that ***“the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.”*** That was on the first day of Creation. God spoke words and we learn from the Gospel of John the first verse, ***“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God”*** and that everything was made through Him. That was Jesus. The Trinity in unity was creating. More importantly, in Genesis 1:26, ***“God said, ‘Let US make man in OUR image...’”*** A clear reference to the Trinity. But did you see - it seems that we once had the same triune image of God? Maybe the vestiges of it, now terribly denigrated by sin, are our Mind, Body, and Spirit. Continuing in Genesis, in the 3rd chapter after the Fall, God says, ***“Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil....”*** In Genesis 11, at the building of the Tower of Babel, God says, ***“Come, let US go down there and confuse their language....”*** All these are plurals and refer to the Trinity indirectly.

Now, in the New Testament, the most vivid description of the Trinity is at the Baptism of Jesus. Jesus, God the Son is present, God the Father speaks declaring Jesus as His beloved Son, and God the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus in the form of a dove. Throughout His ministry, Jesus talks about the Trinity with terms like My Father, the Son of Man, and the Spirit or Comforter. And just as in His baptism, in our Baptism, the Trinity is present too. AND we baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Now the truth of God is found in His Word and so as we study His Word, we gain more and more understanding of Him as He pours out His Wisdom to us. The love of God and the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus, are described to us through the power of the Holy Spirit who comes to us by our rebirth in Baptism. The powerful act of the Trinity becomes apparent to us even if we cannot see the Trinity or even comprehend the Trinity because we *“see”* through the eyes of faith. We begin to see the love God has for us in all the persons of the Trinity. Through our baptism, God acts to reclaim His image in us now mired in our sinful selves. In doing so, He allows us a glimpse of

the Kingdom of God and ultimately makes it possible for us to come into that heaven that Jesus described to Nicodemus in our Gospel for today.

In the Gospel, St. John describes a meeting between Nicodemus and Jesus at night. Nicodemus, according to the Jewish historian Josephus, was one of the richest men in Jerusalem. He may have been the one who owned the upper room that Jesus used to institute the Lord's Supper on the night He was betrayed. Nicodemus was a devout Pharisee who was legalists. As a member of the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus pointed out that a person (in the case of Jesus) could not be judged without a hearing. Nicodemus was also at the crucifixion of Jesus. He provided 75 pounds of spices for the burial of Jesus' body and assisted Joseph of Arimathea in preparing the body and entombing it. He came to Jesus at night, perhaps fearing retribution from his fellow Pharisees. He had heard of Jesus and knew Jesus' miracles. He wanted to know more. Jesus told Nicodemus that he could only know more by being baptized. Jesus was implying that Nicodemus needed the blessing of the Trinity.

In the discourse between Jesus and Nicodemus, all three persons of the Trinity are cited. The Father is the One that Nicodemus addresses as **"God"**, when he says, **"Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."** Jesus also speaks of the Father, as He speaks about God and the Kingdom of God. Since Nicodemus acknowledged Jesus was from God, Nicodemus implied that Jesus was closely related to the divine.

The Gospel also speaks of the Spirit, when Jesus describes the work of the Spirit in verses 5 and 6. Jesus says, **"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit."** Jesus also, spoke about the **"Son of Man"** who is also the Son of God, in verse 16 when He says, **"For God so loved the world, that He (God) gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life."**

The whole Trinity was described along with their work as Jesus explained the importance of baptism to Nicodemus. By the power of the Trinity, baptism is a means to faith. Baptism becomes the means by which we have our eyes and hearts opened to the truth of God and who He is.

We may not understand the Triune God completely just as Nicodemus did not understand the words of Jesus at first. (You probably noticed that Nicodemus was trying to understand Jesus' description of "rebirth" in human terms and not in spiritual terms.) So, Jesus did not address this outright but made a comparison. Jesus referenced the time when Moses held the snake up in the wilderness as a means of healing for the people who looked at it in faith. The true meaning was not clear immediately to those Old Testament people because the significance of that act was well beyond that moment in the future. But Jesus made that act become crystal clear when He explained that He, "**the Son of Man**" would be lifted up and those who believed in Him would have eternal life. Jesus knew that the eyes of Nicodemus would be opened by His crucifixion. Your hearts and eyes understand what Jesus was saying, too.

The truth of God is found in His Word and as we study His Word, we gain more and more understanding of Him as He pours out His Wisdom to us. The love of God and the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus, are seen by us through the power of the Holy Spirit who comes to us by our rebirth in Baptism. The powerful acts of the Trinity become apparent by faith even if we cannot see the Trinity or fully comprehend it.

Our Christian faith always demands our very best. This is not a statement of the Law, but a description of reality. Christianity means we must deal with our God, and with the truth about God and His will. Because God is God, and more than human, He can do, and say, and be, more than we can possibly learn about God. We can give it all and never quite be finished. But we need to give our faith the best that is in us, because the more we know, the more we can believe, and the more we believe, the greater our peace and comfort in the faith.

So, the Trinity is one of those things that calls for the best we can do in faith, even though it transcends our ability to fully comprehend it. The Christian faith is like the Trinity, simple and pure, and yet demanding our full abilities, our full intellect, our full attention in order to be faithful and to stand in the faith. Anything less will give the devil an opportunity to mislead us or seduce us, and so destroy us by turning us from the faith.

And when you look at it, the whole of the Christian faith is as complex and deep as the Trinity. It is spiritual and it is incarnate- physical and real and right now. There are dimensions to the faith in every Article of our Three

Ecumenical Creeds which are as complex and wonderful as God Himself. Each creed is more complex than the one before it. The simplest is the Apostles' Creed with only 111 words. It states the basic and fundamental doctrines of our faith. The Nicene Creed has 185 words and expands and develops the beliefs of the Apostles' Creed. The longest of our creeds, the Athanasian Creed, is the most complex with 663 words and addresses who the Triune God is in greater detail. We learn and grow as we confess who God is and does through each Creed.

There is a story about the great theologian, Augustine of Hippo. One day after he had been writing about the Trinity for a while, he decided to take a break and go walk along the beach. He came across a boy who had a bucket. The boy would fill up the bucket, run up the dune next to the beach, and dump the water into the sand at the top. He did this over and over until finally St. Augustine stopped the boy and asked, *"What are you doing?"* The boy said, *"I am draining the sea into the sand."* St. Augustine pointed out the futility of the task and the boy replied, *"Yes, but I will drain the sea before you understand the Trinity."*

Now, if the great theologian St. Augustine couldn't figure it out, none of us are going to do so either. But that did not stop Augustine from learning about God. And neither should we. And, if we ignore the doctrine of the Trinity because it seems too hard to understand, in effect we are denying God and who He is. And denial means abandoning our faith as Christians. And abandoning our faith dooms us to eternal damnation.

The Athanasian Creed begins with the words ***"Whoever desires to be saved must, above all, have the true catholic (or universal) faith. Whoever does not keep it whole and undefiled will without a doubt perish eternally. And the catholic or universal faith is this, that we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity. Neither confusing the persons or the substance."***

The Triune God – Three in One and One in three is difficult for us to understand because it violates the law of non-contradiction. For example, if you asked a married couple if they were having a baby and one said yes and the other said no, you may react with a few conclusions:

No one knows something the other does not, so one of them is lying, or one of them is mistaken. You would never think they are both correct, this is the law of non-contradiction. Something cannot be (A) and (B) at exactly the same time in exactly the same way. So the term "Trinity" means "Tri-

Unity” and that is an attempt to try and explain the biblical principles of God’s oneness (Greek word “Ousia”) and His Threeness (Greek word “Hypostases”). And that defies the law of non-contradiction.

Sometimes a story helps. Several centuries ago, the Pope announced that all the Jews living in Italy had to leave. This announcement caused a massive angry outburst from the Jewish community. In response, the Pope announced a proposal: he would enter a debate with the most distinguished rabbi of the Jewish community in Italy. If the rabbi won the debate, the Jews could stay. If the Pope won the debate the Jews would have to leave. There was only one problem. The distinguished rabbi chosen for the debate could not speak Latin and the Pope could not speak Hebrew. A solution was found. The entire debate would take place in silence using hand gestures.

On the day of the great debate, an expectant crowd gathered to see the debate. The Pope and the distinguished rabbi sat on opposite sides of each other for several minutes. Then, the Pope raised his hand and held up three fingers. The rabbi looked back and raised one finger. The Pope looked puzzled. He paused and for his next gesture, he waved his finger around his head. The rabbi responded immediately by pointing to the ground where he sat. After another pause, the Pope took out a communion wafer and a chalice of wine. The rabbi responded by taking out an apple. At that moment, the Pope stood up and shouted in Latin, *“I concede the debate. This man has out-performed me. The Jews may remain in Italy.”* And then, he retired to the Vatican.

In the Vatican, the cardinals gathered around the Pope and asked for an explanation of what had happened. The Pope said, *“Well, I started by holding up three fingers to represent the Trinity. He responded by holding up one finger to remind me that there was still one God affirmed by both Jews and Christians. After much thought, I then waved my finger around me to show him that God is all around us. He responded by pointing to the ground to show that God was right there with us at the debate. Two good responses. So, next, I took out a wafer and the wine to show that God absolves us of our sins. His response was excellent. He took out an apple to remind me of his original sin. He had an answer or everything. What could I possibly do? I conceded.”*

Meanwhile, at the synagogue in the Jewish community, the people crowded around the distinguished rabbi and asked what had happened. *"Well,"* the rabbi said, *"first he said to me, 'You Jews have three days to get out of here.' So to put it bluntly, I showed him my finger. Then, he waved his hand around telling me that the whole city would be cleared of Jews. So I said to him, 'Listen here Mr. Pope, the Jews....we are staying right here!'"* *"And then what?"* asked a community leader. The distinguished rabbi looked puzzled and said, *"Who knows? He pulled out his packed lunch and so did I."* Then, he conceded.

At first, this story seems totally funny, but if you reflect on it, you will see that it is the outcome that is important. The Jewish were not deported. They remained.

Talking about the Trinity can be a little like the gestures in a conversation between a distinguished rabbi and the Pope. We find it difficult to explain. BUT, in the end, the Trinity is a part of the logic of the Incarnation. If God was in Christ and God is simultaneously sustaining creation, then there must be at least two aspects of God. And then the Scriptures reveal to us, and reveals for us, the Holy Spirit. So we arrive at the Holy Trinity. Jesus is at the center and by the love of God He brings us grace to everlasting life and we are saved. By faith in the Unity of our Triune God, the gates of heaven are opened to us. We can see that the love of our Triune God as He acts to save us from ourselves. In love, our Triune God seeks to return us to Him and share His presence with us just as He intended in the Garden of Eden.

On this Trinity Sunday, none of us may be able to understand the Trinity, but by our faith, we can see the acts of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and knowing these, have the comfort and hope of eternal life with Him.

In the name to the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and to their glory. Amen.