

22 May 2016
Festival of the Holy Trinity

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Not Logic, but Grace”

Text: John 8:48-59 (Proverbs 8; Acts 2)

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

The Jews didn't get Jesus. They couldn't figure Him out. This son of Mary and Joseph, conceived and born before they were even married, was making Himself out to be God. But surely God would not have come from such poor folks and from such an illicit union. So He must be *a Samaritan and demon possessed*. A Samaritan, because the Jews knew all Samaritans were liars, and *demon possessed* would explain the things He was able to do. It was the only *logical* explanation.

So how does Jesus respond to such accusations? Well, He doesn't retreat. *I do not have a demon*, He says. And then He doubles down! He doesn't just make claims for Himself, but *truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death*.

Now they *know* He has a demon - that's crazy talk. Everyone dies. Abraham died, the prophets all died . . . and they were going to make sure He died! He was too dangerous to let live. So they would make sure He tasted death. And not just any death, but a horrible one, an agonizing one, a humiliating one. They would see Him hang . . . on a cross. Then we'll see what becomes of His words . . . making Himself out as greater than our father Abraham.

Ah yes. Father Abraham. They staked everything on the fact that they were physical descendants of Abraham. For that's how inheritances work - promises are passed on from father to son - and they were sons of Abraham and therefore inheritors of the promises God gave to him. So Jesus pushed that button, too. *My Father*, He says, is not Abraham, but the one *of whom you say, "He is our God."* That is the Father who glorifies me, not just father Abraham. In fact, while you rejoice over Abraham, Abraham rejoiced over me!

Well the Jews are completely flabbergasted now! This all just keeps getting crazier and crazier. Jesus wasn't even fifty years old, and He's talking about *Abraham seeing Him?* . . . And then Jesus throws the bomb: *Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am*. I AM. The divine name. The name no Jew would ever speak. It was too holy, too sacred. And for Jesus to not only speak it, but put it on Himself . . . there was only one way to respond to that! And it wasn't with words, it was with stones.

That's how the conversation in the Holy Gospel went. It went the only place such a conversation could have gone. Because applying worldly, scientific, logical, reasonable, human arguments to God doesn't work. God is above and beyond such categories. He created them, but is not limited to them or bound by them. Who God is and what He does doesn't fit so neatly into our boxes. And, I would argue, that is good. Very good.

And today we are celebrating one of those humanly-illogical truths: that God is three persons in one God, and one God in three persons. The Holy Trinity is the name the Church has given to this reality that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each 100% God, and yet there are not three gods but one God, as we just confessed in the Athanasian Creed.

Just as humanly-illogical is the truth that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God in human flesh - the same God that was before all things and created all things, as the reading from Proverbs described. The same God who was before Abraham and who chose Abraham is walking among them as a man. 100% man and 100% God, yet only one person. The Jews didn't get it, couldn't figure Him out, and so thought Him crazy at best and demon-possessed at worst.

But if who God *is* is tough to figure out, what He *does* is even more. That the holy God would come and hang out with sinners. Even more, that He would *love* sinners. Even more, that He would *die* for sinners. And even more, that He would *forgive* sinners. And not just little sinners. Big sinners. Prostitutes. Murderers. Drug dealers. Adulterers. Pornographers. Thieves. Rapists. Terrorists. Child abusers. There is no sin too big, no sin too small. He bore them all, took them all, paid for them all, to redeem all. To purchase *these kinds* of men and women to be His own.

What kind of God would do that? Only the true One. No God of human devising would. No, our god would make them earn it, do something to deserve it. Redeem themselves with some good work first, something to show they have some redeeming quality, show some hope, show that they're worth it. And then there would be those just too bad, too evil, to be redeemed. A special place in hell for those really, really bad folks. You know the ones. That's how we think.

And that's why God is so utterly, humanly illogical. 'Cause He isn't like that at all. There is no special place in hell for those really, really bad folks - **there is a special place in heaven for them**. Not because of what they've done, of course, but because of what God has come and done for them; because that's where God wants them - yes, with Him, in His kingdom. And so He sent His Son to descend and redeem them, and then ascend to prepare a place for them (John 14). The really bad ones. And that's good, because that means there's a place in heaven for you, too. And me.

If you don't get that, as the Jews didn't get that, stop thinking so humanly-logically and start thinking *graciously*. Because that's the key to understanding God - who He is and what He does: **grace**. That He gives what we do not deserve. He gives us life, He gives us His Son, He gives us His forgiveness, and He gives us family, talents, vocations, joys, and even discipline to keep us close to Him. All gifts, from Him to you.

So that's what Peter preached that first Pentecost, the first Christian sermon we have on record. That Jesus was God's gift. Yes, they killed Him, but that was part of the ***definite plan and foreknowledge of God***. So the gift was *not just* the man Jesus and the miracles He performed (that's human-logical thinking) - His death and resurrection were the gift. *That's grace thinking*. **That God's gift was exactly in the slaying of His Son to give life to the world**. Life, for He did not stay in the grave. Life in the forgiveness of sins - even for those no-good, hate-filled scoundrels who crucified Him. And life not just here and now, for a while, but life with Him forever. God had spelled it all out in the Old Testament, Peter said, **and He did it**. Gift promised, gift delivered. Gift so far above and beyond what human beings would ever do.

And now gift here for you. Jesus here for you. The Father still giving life through His Son and by His Spirit. To make you His child precisely because of who you are and what you have done. Not because you're so good or at least better than most, **but because the big ball of sin sitting in your seat has no other hope**. And if Peter were here today, that's what he would point out, like he did in his sermon on that first Pentecost. That you are like Old Testament Israel, grumbling and rebellious. That you too often think of God with human-logical thinking instead of grace thinking. That you like grace when you get it, but don't like it when others do. That you think too little of what God has given you and think too much - and too highly - of what you do for God. That your faith too often crumbles into doubt and throwing stones at God, and your love for others too often runs cold and resentful and throwing stones at them. And that these things are not out of character for you, but who you truly are if you drill down to the bottom of your heart.

Once you realize that, then you begin to understand how wondrous the gifts here are. And how wondrous that God has a special place in heaven for you too. How wondrous that in baptism, you are made not just a child of father Abraham, but a child of *our Father who art in heaven*. How wondrous that the simple words of Absolution really do take away your biggest sins. How wondrous that God speaks to you here through His Word; that He is not a God too high for you or too busy for you but here for you. And how wondrous that the Body and Blood of Jesus that ***did not see corruption*** are now given to you, to give you an incorruptible and eternal life too. And how wondrous that this is all here . . . for sinners like us.

Human-logical thinking thinks that a bunch of hooey - that we must be ***Samaritans and demon-possessed*** to think and believe such things. But God gives us a heart and mind to think *graciously*, not logically, and so know Him as He is. A giving Father who gives us

life and forgiveness. Who gives us His Son and His Spirit. Who gives us His very self. That as Peter said, ***all the world may know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.***

And such giving has very practical implications. For imagine such a world where not human-logical thinking but grace-thinking ruled the hearts and lives of all people. Where the norm was forgiveness not revenge, giving not demanding, service not selfishness, you not me. That is the life graciously given and begun in you. The life of Christ. The life of a child of God with His Spirit.

And that's what we confess this day. Not just who God is, but what God *does* - for the two always go together. For us, they don't always - we don't always do as we are; we act out of character. But not so God. So if you know Him as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then you know that He is your Father, you are His son, and He has given you His Spirit. And you will say as we did in the Introit today: ***Blessed be the Holy Trinity*** [the three] ***and the undivided Unity*** [in one]. ***Let us give glory to him - why? - because he has shown his mercy to us.***

And let us give glory to Him by being who we are, who God has made you; and showing that mercy to others.

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.