7 June 2020 St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
The Festival of the Holy Trinity Vienna, VA

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"No Ivory Tower God!"
Text: Genesis 1:1-2:4a; Acts 2:14a, 22-36; Matthew 28:16-20

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

I have to say . . . today, the Church seems a bit out of step. Having a Sunday to contemplate the mystery of the Holy Trinity. This while our country is still trying to get back on its feet and come out of this time of pandemic. While our country is in the throes of discord, turmoil, rioting, and protest, and the divisions among us seem to widen and deepen with each passing day. While many continue to struggle and suffer under burdens that started before all this and haven't gone away - diseases, woes, guilt, anxiety, and pain. A Sunday to contemplate the mystery of the Holy Trinity . . . well, seems a bit ivory tower, disconnected. Maybe even uncaring.

Or *maybe* it's exactly what we need.

The world and the culture do not set the agenda for the Church. Or at least, they shouldn't. But we also don't want to be tone deaf to what is happening in the world and ignore it. The Church shouldn't fiddle while the world burns. We must respond to what is going on, but <u>not</u> on the basis of how we feel about it, or how the world feels about it, or how they want us to feel about it, but on the basis of the truth. What God has said. That is what we as the Church have to say to the world. That is what we <u>must</u> say if we as the Church are being true to who we are.

And part of that is confessing that there really is a God, and just as importantly, who that God is. The one true God in the midst of a world with many gods. Not just many religions with the same god, but many gods. And that the catholic - that is, universally true, that is, only one true faith - is this (as we will say in the Athanasian Creed in just a bit): *that we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity*.

Now, why is that important?

Well, first of all, we do not have a unitary, solitary God, a loner, sitting by Himself in heaven, dispassionate, isolated, separated from us and our problems. But we also do not have a pantheon of gods, a whole bunch of gods fighting with each other, more concerned with themselves and their own pecking order than with us. We have a God who is one and yet three; three and yet one. A Trinity. Equal in glory, majesty, and power. In perfect love

and harmony. Jesus is saying this all the time in the book of John. *I am the Father are one*. One mind, one will. Separate, yet at the same time unified.

But this is not just ivory tower speculation to keep theologians busy, because who God *is* and what God *does* go together. *And in that order*. According to philosophy, what man thinks, it is the opposite - that what you do determines who you are. So, you do good things to become a good person. That's man's way. Righteousness by works, by doing good. But theology confesses the opposite: that who you *are* determines what you *do*. Luther's example was the apple tree: an apple tree grows apples not to be an apple tree, but because that's what it is.

Now, we'll get to what that means for us in a moment. But first, what does that mean for God? For the one true God who is not a unitary loner, but Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? It means this: **that God is love**. The Father who loves the Son and the Son who loves the Father in the unity and bond of the Holy Spirit. And love gives. That's what love does. And so who God is, is what God does. God loves. A love that wants the best for the other. For love is always focused outward.

And so in the beginning, God, in love, creates. The heavens and the earth, and man in His own image. And it was good, and all very good, for He is good. A loving and giving God gave and loved.

And then when the man and woman created in God's image did not be who they were, did not love and give but lusted and took, God again acted in love and gave: and this time, *Himself*. For we do not have a God we come to, vowing to change the world and make a difference for Him. We did that, actually! And the results? Well, you see them all around us. We plunged the world into sin, and we haven't yet stopped digging that hole! So no, we do not have a God we come to, vowing to change the world and make a difference for Him - **we have a God who comes to us, vowing to change us and make a difference for us!** Coming to the Garden, to the manger, to Pentecost, to the Last Day.

And so the catholic - that is, universally true, that is, only one true faith - is this: that the Father sent and *gave* His only-begotten Son, who laid down His life for the life of the world. *For God so loved the world* that He made. That is what Peter preached on that first Pentecost. That this was the loving plan of a loving God. To give of Himself in love for us. For you. For the forgiveness of your sins. For the conquering of your death. For your freedom from the grip of hell. Because that's the change *we* made in the world. That made us who we now are. That divided us from God and from one another. And all the king's horses and all the king's men - all the powers of this earth - couldn't put this world back together again!

But the King's *Son* could! So the Son came, unifying Himself, in love, with us. And not just part of us, but with all of sinful humanity. To rescue us, to raise us, to re-create us and make

us good again. As we were in the beginning. So He went to the cross bearing all the sin of all humanity. The sins from way back when, the sins you see today, and the sin yet to come. The sins of Jew and Gentile, of every race and nationality. He loves all and so He died for all. Even for you and your sins and your false gods.

And what of your false gods? Oh, there's the usual litany of them - money, sex, and power, and more. Things we love and trust and live for because we fear losing them. But perhaps these last few weeks and months have exposed some others?

Like maybe protecting and preserving your own life has jumped to the top of the list of what you love and fear losing. That we've become so afraid of death that we've become afraid to live. Every man for himself instead of loving my neighbor as myself.

Or maybe it's comfort, ignoring what is happening in our world because I don't want to be bothered; because it's not happening in my backyard - or my front yard; because my business isn't affected. And so we lack love for those who *are* affected. Because I love my comfort more than them, and don't want to lose it.

Or what about pride? At least I'm not like that! Like them! But you are like that! It's just that the sin in you manifests itself, comes out of you, in different ways. So in this time when we're all wearing masks, it's good to remember that we've actually all been wearing masks for a very long time - hiding ourselves and our sins, covering up who we really are, trying to get away with it. *But what if those masks were taken away?*

So today it's race dividing us. But it's also gender, sexuality, political views, life views, and more. But if you drill down beneath all that, all those things, it's not really those things that are dividing us, *but satan himself*. Satan with *his* knee on our necks, trying to choke the life out of us all. Sowing his seeds of hate, apathy, envy, discord, rivalry, and blame. And not on only one race, gender, nationality, or those with a certain upbringing, but all. And in the midst of all that, and abetted by his co-conspirators, namely our sinful world and our own sinful flesh - in the midst of all those weeds, love may be very hard to find.

But it's here. On a cross, on a hill just outside Jerusalem. Love that didn't come from within us, but came *to* us. The God who is love who came into our world.

And who still is. And so love is found where He is. Flowing from the Font and the Pulpit and the Altar and from these out into the world. Because as with God, so with us: being and doing go together. And so united with the God of love, we who have His love begin to love as He loves. Doing good not in order to be good, but because our Saviour is making us good again. Forgiveness, re-creation, new life, love, and good - that's who you now are, in Christ. The Son sent by the Father, who sent the Spirit to bind you together in unity with Him.

Which is why Jesus sent out His disciples, as we heard in the Holy Gospel today. To all

nations, all people. To unite them to Himself. That's what baptism, which He sent them to do, is. It's not just a washing away of sin. It *is* that. But more. It is baptizing into the Triune God. Into unity with Him. It is dying with Him and rising with Him to a new life. A re-created life. A life of love. A life we had in the beginning when everything was good. And a life we have again in the one who is good.

So if that is who we are, what do we now do? We who know who this Triune God is and does and what He has done and is doing for us? We be who we are; who He has made us. The solution is not *an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*. The solution is to see the person sitting next to you, the person in the White House, the person rioting in the street, the person under someone's knee, the person who cut you off in traffic, the person sitting there in your clothes, as a person Jesus died for. To see others not as opponents, or competitors, but people to love and who need our love.

That love may mean pointing out their sin - Jesus did command the disciples to teach ALL that I have commanded you. It will also mean confessing your own sin. But it will also mean forgiveness, and serving, and laying down your life for others. For that, too, is the catholic - that is, universally true, that is, the only one true faith - to live and do the good we have been given and now are. The Athanasian Creed confesses that too. That those made good and new, do good and live new lives. Not a righteousness of works, but of works that flow from the righteousness of Christ, given - that is, gifted - to us.

So, Holy Trinity Sunday. Maybe it's not so ivory tower after all. Maybe it's exactly what our world needs right now. Because our God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - and His love, life, and forgiveness, are what we need right now. For knowing who He is, is to know what He does. And knowing what He does is to know who we were, and now are. Sinners redeemed. Dearly loved children of God. Without that, we are lost; we cannot be saved. But with this . . . this catholic - that is, universally true, that is, only one true faith - we are saved. And free. Free to live in His love.

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.