

Holy Trinity Sunday • June 19, 2011

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Matthew 28:16-20

"Commissioned"

"And the catholic [lowercase "c"] faith is this, that we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the substance." Okay. "For the Father is one person, the Son is another, and the Holy Spirit is another." Check. "But the Godhead of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit is one: the glory equal, the majesty coeternal." Alright. "So the Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God; and yet there are not three Gods, but one God." Uh-huh. "The Father is not made nor created nor begotten by anyone. The Son is neither made nor created, but begotten of the Father alone. The Holy Spirit is of the Father and of the Son, neither made nor created nor begotten, but proceeding." Wait... huh? Let's hold up there for a second. All of these statements about who God is come from the Athanasian Creed, that confession of the Christian faith that we voice in the worship services this Holy Trinity weekend. But what is it that we're saying? How does confessing that we believe God to be one God but three Persons matter – and can we really even understand what we're saying? It can be kind of hard to grasp this teaching about God and how He works towards us.

The Person of God the Father we can kind of get. We have some experience with fathers. Hey – this weekend we even celebrate Father's Day, when we usually show special appreciation for our dads with cards, gifts, and *maybe* an uninterrupted Sunday afternoon nap. Being a father is a pretty huge responsibility. Truth be told, fathers are commissioned by God to serve, along with mothers, as a parent for their child. God has given fathers a duty, a trust, to care for the gift that is their son or daughter: a duty to provide, to protect, to educate, to discipline, to build up, to guide, to nurture, to love. Really, our dads are supposed to be representatives of God the Father in our lives – a high calling, indeed! But no dad, even the best of them, has been able to live up to that calling perfectly. They've all fallen short. Some fathers have done a really poor job of representing our heavenly Father, leaving their children wounded and reluctant to trust in any father-figure, maybe even God the Father. But whether you consider your father to be a good dad or a poor one, we children haven't always treated our fathers the way we should: we've fallen short, too. There have been times in each of our lives (myself included!) where we haven't given our dads the respect we owe them. Maybe we've even gone out of our way to spite them and give them grief when we've disagreed with their instruction or hopes for our lives. So it is with our relationship with our heavenly Father: we, too, have fallen short and lived like disobedient and self-centered children who don't care what Dad thinks. When we think ourselves self-sufficient and independent, "grown-ups" who don't need dear old Dad anymore, we're just deceiving ourselves and losing sight of who we are meant to be. And at some point, the harsh reality of the world will show us our foolishness. But God, the perfect Father, loves us enough to give Himself to meet our need.

It's probably easier for us to understand the second Person of the Trinity, God the Son, because He came to be with us as a human being: Jesus. All throughout his life on earth, Jesus was living out God the Father's commission. He came to do his Father's will, to take care of the problem of our sin, our separation from the God who made us. **For Jesus, every day was Father's Day.** And living out his commission meant giving up his life on the cross. In doing so, Jesus – God the Son – made it possible for us to be reunited with our Father and his Father.

God the Holy Spirit might seem the most illusive Person of the Trinity. We know fathers, and God the Son took on human nature like ours. But we can't see or touch "spirit." Even so, the Holy Spirit is always with us and always at work. Here's an illustration that I learned from one of my professors (who used it in Sunday School classes) which might help to better understand how the Persons of the Trinity interact with us. Imagine four people standing in a row, all facing towards the

end of the line. That person, there at the end, that's you and me. The other three represent God. Because of sin, people are facing away from God. It's our default position. We're charting our own course in the world, those "grown-ups" who don't need Dad anymore, remember? But at some point, the Holy Spirit takes hold of us. This taking-hold happens in Baptism, or the gospel being shared by a friend or family member. The Spirit turns us around, so that we're no longer facing out into nothingness; instead, we see the next person in line, Jesus, God the Son. The Holy Spirit brings us to Jesus, who welcomes us as his friend. The Son then serves as the bridge to the Father, reconnecting us with the created and sustains us, and the Father embraces us as His own child. And all this time, the Spirit continues to hold on to us, keeping us facing towards God, because we are constantly tempted to turn away and go back to being "independent." **Father, Son, and Holy Spirit work together to restore us as His people.**

God has acted to restore your relationship with Him. Through Jesus, the Son, you have forgiveness. You can see the Father's mercy and grace. In the Spirit, you already have new life where you are free to live out your true identity as God's child in faith.

Just as he did with his disciples while he was with them on earth, the Son continues to make known the Father's love for His children. And just as he did with his disciples, Jesus commissions you to live out the faith we share in the way that reflects his own. In those closing verses of St. Matthew's Gospel account that we heard today, Jesus sends you and me with his disciples as agents of the work that he has made possible. The Father has given the Son all authority, and the Son now calls His Church through the Holy Spirit carry out His mission of reconciliation. This is the point of the Great Commission: **you now share in the Mission of God.**

We are commissioned by Christ to make disciples, even as we are called to be disciples ourselves. That's the nature of the Church on earth until that day when Jesus comes again. Living in a restored relationship with our loving God we have the joyful duty to go, baptize, and teach all nations so that they, too, can enjoy the same. Everyone in the world who does not know the Father through His Son is lost. They're still facing away from God. Even if they are "good people," they are still dead in their separation from the life that the Holy Spirit gives. **Jesus has commissioned you for their sake.** Outside this catholic (meaning "universal") Christian faith, they cannot be saved. He has called you to be a part of His Church in carrying out the disciple-making that is at the heart of the Great Commission.

As the Church, you and I can't live up to the Great Commission if left to our own strength and ability. As we heard last week at Pentecost, the Spirit does amazing things; however He also makes everything else in the Church possible, even the "ordinary" things. When you take a look the original Greek of the New Testament, you see that the Great Commission is meant to share who we are as Christians: going, we baptize in God's name, teaching (and learning!) to become more Christ-like. Through God the Holy Spirit, these amazing things become part and parcel of our daily lives. As we live out Jesus' commission through the Spirit, we grow closer to the Father along with the rest of our fellow disciples.

Some of you might have special plans for Father's Day this weekend, but I hope that you all will enjoy getting to know your heavenly Father through His Son by His Spirit today and every day.

Amen.