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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, May 17, 2020
1st Sunday After Pentecost /Trinity/Year A
First Reading: Genesis 1:1—2:4a
Second Reading: 2 Corinthians 13:11-13
Gospel Reading: Matthew 28:16-20
Sermon Title: “The Heart of Our Faith”

Theme

After his resurrection, Jesus summons his remaining disciples and commissions them to baptize and teach all nations in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Text

¹⁶Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Sermon

Today is the 1st Sunday after Pentecost, but it also has another name, The Holy Trinity. I'm not sure why the Church has decided that this concept of the Holy Trinity gets a day of its own, but I will discuss it a little bit as we go along.

There are lots of ideas around the world about who God is. Believe it or not, I've had a couple of members of Lutheran churches I've served who had differing ideas about who God is. I, as the trained, called, and ordained have a responsibility to teach the orthodox Christian faith. By "orthodox" I don't mean those church bodies of eastern Europe. My use of the word "orthodox" means,

"conforming to the Christian faith as represented in the creeds of the early church." (Dictionary.com #5)

We Lutheran Christians declare our faith creedally, meaning that the basic doctrines of the faith are covered in the Apostles and Nicene Creeds that we confess in worship. And these basic doctrines include among others:

- **Theology - the doctrine of God the Father**
- **Christology – the doctrine of the Son, Jesus Christ**
- **Pneumatology – the doctrine of the Holy Spirit**

So, to the people I ministered to who didn't believe in the doctrine of the Resurrection or Ascension, for example, I simply said, "you are not an orthodox Christian; you are an *ala carte* Christian," and by that, I meant that they were picking and choosing which parts of orthodox Christianity they believed. I think that is a dangerous path to go down and I might be giving them too much leeway. I probably shouldn't have allowed them to call themselves Christians at all.

Back in the '70s when I was a kid, it appeared to me that there was less tolerance for this *ala carte* style of Christian faith. If someone didn't subscribe to one of the mainline denominations, then we accused them of being in a cult. Remember that?

When is the last time you heard the word, "cult"? Hardly ever, and I think that is because in the 90's we grew more tolerant, and decided if someone wanted to worship the moon, for example, what business is that of ours? And in the land of

religious freedom in which I don't want anyone telling us Lutherans how to worship, I have to be tolerant of moon worshipers, I guess.

Well, that was fun. What does this have to do with the Trinity? I'm so glad you asked. You do realize that in the 1st Century, Christianity was considered a cult. Yes, and the idea that God became a man, and a man was God, and the man/God's presence after he mysteriously disappeared was a holy ghost, yea, that's easy to grasp! Remember when we used to call the Holy Spirit the Holy Ghost? Ish!

Anyway, imagine how difficult that would have been to understand. And when I think about how difficult that would be to understand, I am amazed that we are here today in this church. And that fact alone is a tribute to the certainty of the Holy Spirit. For had it not inspired those first Apostles, we wouldn't be here. But let us not lose sight that this was all a part of God's plan all along.

Today, as you know, is known as The Holy Trinity Sunday and so we have the opportunity to look at the genius of God. Trinity is not a word that shows up anywhere in scripture, human beings gave God that name because that was the best we could do to "fear and love" God, the three in one and one in three.

I don't want to turn this sermon into a lecture on the doctrine of the Trinity, but allow me to simply say that in the genius of God, that is how God gets all the godly work done that God wants to get done.

The fact is, there has been a movement afloat for several years by feminists who would prefer the church get rid of the masculine pronouns and in its place, use Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier, which is more descriptive. But the traditionalists have dug in their heels and, for the most part, continue to use the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Personally, I think both serve a purpose and both are equally inaccurate. But I digress.

I entitled the sermon for today, "The Heart of Our Faith," because orthodox Christianity insists that the Trinity is the way that God has revealed God's self, and so any discussion on issues of faith begins there.

I've already mentioned the powerful work of the Holy Spirit in propelling the first Apostles to go and spread the Good News of the Gospel throughout the world. We

heard the beginning of that in the Gospel Reading according to Matthew moments ago.

Today, I dare say, there are very few places in the world where the inhabitants have not had the opportunity to hear the Gospel. Christianity is certainly not the prevailing religion in many parts of the world, but rejection of the prevailing religion is a difficult thing, as the Apostles wrote about in the New Testament.

But I would like to speak a little bit about the work of the Holy Spirit right where we are. I mentioned in last week's sermon, that Christian leaders agree that the United States is the largest mission field in the world. I've wondered about that, and I've concluded that we, in the US, are more educated and wealthier and our culture is more religiously free than most places in the world, and while those are benefits and rights we hold dear, we know we have problems. Not everyone experiences education, wealth, and freedom the same in these United States.

Recently, our nation has been on fire over the murder of yet another African American man, George Floyd. There are systemic problems in our culture that prevent African American people from thriving in this country. Oh yes, there are exceptions, but generally, African Americans are poorer and less educated than the majority Anglo American population.

Does the church, your Lutheran church have anything to say about that? Well, you should know that the ELCA is a very liberal denomination, more liberal than your pastor is on many issues, but on this issue, we can look past the current leadership of the ELCA to the founder of our faith tradition, Martin Luther, who may have never seen a black person.

God has spoken against the crime of murder in the 5th Commandment: "You shall not kill." says the LORD.

Martin Luther wrote the following about the 5th Commandment in his Small Catechism:

We should fear and love God, and so we should not endanger our neighbor's life, nor cause him any harm, but help and befriend him in every necessity of life.

The thing I love about Martin Luther and his pattern of explaining the Commandments is that he began by writing that the keeping of all the commandments is our fearful and loving response to our God. God is our God and out of respect and love, we ought to do what God says. And then Luther wrote on, that killing is not limited to murder, but also includes endangering and causing harm to our neighbor. And he didn't stop there! Not only are we not supposed to kill, endanger, or cause harm to our neighbor, but we are also supposed to do just the opposite! We are to "help and befriend him in every necessity of life."

And let us not get legalistic about the term "neighbor." Maybe you don't have any African Americans in your neighborhood. I don't either and that is probably because in our culture we mostly live among our kind. There are exceptions, but generally, that is how it is.

So then I cannot say that because I live in Canfield, where very few African Americans live, the killing of a black man in Youngstown or Minneapolis, isn't my problem, because I have *not* "helped and befriended him in every necessity of life."

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

Brothers and sisters in Christ, I know as a white man, that it is difficult to see my responsibility in race relations in our country. That is the work of my sinful self. And that is why we need the Holy Spirit. If we allow it, the Holy Spirit of the Living God can soften our hearts and raise us up to do something! "Do what Pastor?" you ask. I don't know, I'm not the Holy Spirit. But seek the will of God for your life, and you will get an answer.

For example, this week, I texted my friend and colleague, Pastor Kevin Carson from NBOM, and we decided to have lunch on Thursday and talk about what we can do.

But know this, God loves us enough to allow us to stubbornly turn our backs on him. But to do nothing is to be complicit because, as Martin Luther said, to do nothing is to NOT "help and befriend our neighbor in every necessity of life."

So today as we celebrate our God revealed through the Holy Trinity, we also ought to bow down and listen to it, and more than listen to it, respond to it with the living of our lives.

We can do this. God through the Holy Spirit is here to inspire and help us understand what we are to do.

Prayer

Fearsome and loving God, because of our sinful nature, we don't always know the right thing to do. So we call upon your Holy Spirit to enter our consciousness's in new and different ways to inspire us and to help us understand your will. Then, LORD, we pray that we would have the will to go and do as your Son has led the way. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen