

Worshipping the Trinity in Unity and Unity in Trinity

Trinity Sun. (5/31/26) - Mt. Calvary Luth. - Past. Keith Besel

Text: Acts 2:14a, 22-36 & Athanasian Creed

Introduction

- ✘ Every year, on Trinity Sunday, we publically confess the words of the Athanasian Creed; a beautiful expression of the Christian faith that we only confess once a year. Why not more often? Not because of any fault within the Creed. No, the fault falls on us, if I'm being honest.
 - ➔ You see, this world we live in today operates primarily with short sound bites of information, which has trained our attention span to max-out, on average, at about 1-3 minutes. So, when we see something like the Athanasian Creed, many folks, when they notice that it takes up more than one page, they just check out; they disengage their brains, thinking that it doesn't matter what the words say. For them, it's not worth the effort because it will be "too hard" to stay focused upon it.
- ✘ Well, this year, we are going to do something a little bit different. We're going to break the Creed up into a few sections and confess it right here, in the midst of the sermon. (Yes, that will make the sermon longer, but not the service.) So, I'd like all of you, please, to open your hymnal up to page 319 and be ready to confess the Athanasian Creed with me as I reflect a little bit on what we are confessing in each of the sections.
 - ➔ You'll notice that the first six words really set the stage for what the issue is that we are about to address in the rest of the Creed. It says, "Whoever desires to be saved must...". Well, is there anyone here today that doesn't want to be saved? Anyone?
 - ➔ Okay, then regardless of how many words we see on the page in front of us, or the length of time it will take to say and consider them, we should all agree that it will be well worth the effort, don't you think?
- ✘ But let's take care of a few introductory things first ... and see if we can also remove one potential roadblock that seems to trip up a few folks each year.
 - ➔ To begin, the Creed is named after a 4th century theologian named Athanasius, not because he wrote the Creed, but because of his dedication to keeping the Christian Church's confession of faith pure and Scriptural. You see, there was a number of serious false teachings in the 3rd century that were trying to influence and take over the church. One big heresy was promoted by a man named Arius who denied the fact that the Son of God, Jesus, existed before His earthly conception and birth, as true God. So, he believed Jesus never could be fully God. Others rejected the entire idea of the Trinity, or the fact that Jesus was fully human in nature, or that God miraculously conceived Jesus within Mary's womb by the power of the Holy Spirit.
 - ➔ And so, as we'll see in just a bit, a major focus of this Creed is to try and clarify, from a whole bunch of different angles, what is true and what is not true about the relationship and natures of God the Father; God the Son; and God the Holy Spirit.
- ✘ And what about the "speed bump"? Well, a number of times this Creed speaks of how important it is that we "hold to" the "catholic" faith. I know, some of you may be tempted to say, "But we're Lutherans!" What we need to remember is that the word "catholic" with a small "c" simply means "universal". So it is not talking at all about the "Roman Catholic Church" with a big "C". That's just the title, or name, of one denomination. So for us to hold to the "catholic" faith means that we are confessing the same truths believed and confessed by the true Christian Church of all times and all places as we have been taught by Holy Scripture alone.
 - ➔ Okay, let's get into it. Pick up your hymnal and let's confess together the introduction of the Creed, just verses 1-2 for right now. ...

I. Explanation of the Triune God

⌘ Wow! That's a pretty ominous statement right there, isn't it? It's a statement that bumps right up against our culture that wants us all to say and believe that "It doesn't matter what you or I believe, because each person should be able to set his or her own truths, according to preferences, desires, feelings and whatever is popular at moment."

→ For many folks it sounds too exclusionary, even arrogant to say that a person will "perish eternally" unless he/she believes and confesses this one "catholic faith." But, that's not it at all; in fact just the opposite. We speak this way because we know that, according to Jesus, there is only one way for humans to be reconciled or made right with God, and that is through Jesus, who is both God and man in one undivided person.

→ And so, in a world which tries to blur distinctions, by obsessing on things like "diversity and inclusion"; by encouraging the acceptance of false beliefs, it is good for us to confess the Athanasian Creed. We don't worship a single-person god like the Muslims and Jews; nor do we believe in multiple gods like the Mormons; or in a god who is just an impersonal force in the universe like the Buddhists, Hindus or New Age types; neither do we worship a generic god like "the man upstairs" as so many of our neighbors and friends might.

⌘ No, we worship the three-in-one God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; the God who creates and sustains us; the Son of God who became the Son of Man in the flesh to deliver us from sin and death; the Holy Spirit of God who sanctifies us and creates within us the one faith that gives us everlasting life.

⌘ Because it is so important that we get all of this right, this next section of the Athanasian Creed spends a great deal of effort to describe, explain and distinguish the various nuances and applications of what it means that the One True God is, at the same time, Three Distinct Persons; or Triune; "Three in One."

→ So, allow me to highlight a few significant points in the Creed. In verse 4 of the Creed on page 319 in your hymnal, it speaks of not "confusing...nor dividing" the persons of the Trinity because many people do, in fact, confuse, blend or combine them; often unintentionally, yet still in a manner that ends up denying the truth. A great example is when someone asks, "Did God die on the cross?" Usually the quick answer is, "No, God can't die." But, is Jesus God? Yes. Yet, as we see in our reading from Acts 2:23 today, Peter clearly tells those Jews in front of him on Pentecost, "this Jesus...you crucified and killed." Think of it this way: Did God the Father die? No. Did God the Spirit die? No. But did God the Son die? Yes, in the person of Jesus Christ. We don't want to confuse them, and yet if we try to divide them, then we end up with three gods instead of the One God that is declared in Scripture.

→ Verse 9 of the Creed talks about the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit being "infinite". That means each is unlimited; without beginning or end, which means, if we're honest, that each is incomprehensible to our limited way of thinking. God created us here in time and space. That's all we can handle at this point. But He is above and outside of time and space, because, well, He is God, and we are not.

→ So rightly, this humbles us all, from the greatest theologian to the unstudied layman. When we all confess this truth about God with confidence and without reservation, it places us all on the same level as God's beloved creatures who, regardless of our amount of learning or ability to reason, have all been gifted with the simple, childlike faith that joyfully embraces all of the mysteries of our God and believes that they are the undeniable truth.

⌘ So, pick up your hymnal now and let's confess responsively by verse, beginning with verse 3 and ending with verse 25. You begin with verse 3 ...

II. Salvation in Christ Alone

✘ Now with as good of a handle on the relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as we can humanly have, the Creed wants to make sure that we clearly know what is absolutely necessary for us “to be saved” (v.26).

→ For this, the Creed addresses the important relationship between what we call the “Two Natures of Christ”; the fact that, ever since His conception within Mary’s womb, Jesus is at the same time, 100% God, or Divine and 100% Man.

✘ Verse 31 of the Creed says that Jesus is “equal to the Father with respect to His divinity, less (or inferior) than the Father with respect to His humanity.”

→ This concept of “inferior” or “less” is usually thought of as being a pejorative term in our normal speech. We speak of inferior merchandise, or goods that are not just less desirable than other goods, but totally unsuitable. But the Latin word in the original language of the Creed is “parvus” which means “little”. It’s a comparative form; as in “good”, “better”, and “best”. It means “minor”. So, this verse means Jesus is fully divine, yet less than the Father as concerns His humanity because all of humanity is inferior to its Creator. This is referring to Jesus’ state of humiliation during which He did not always fully use His divine power here on earth, but He willingly laid it aside in order to take your place and mine under the Law and redeem us from the curse of the Law. At times the Bible speaks this way of Jesus; picturing Him as submitting to the Father. Luke 2:40, for example, says that Jesus “grew” in wisdom and knowledge, even while, as God, He was all-knowing from the beginning. In His human nature, Jesus often willingly humbled Himself to the limitations of His human flesh.

→ 1 Corinthians 15:27-28 speaks of this concept of Jesus submitting to the Father when Paul says, “‘God (the Father) has put all things in subjection under [Christ].’ But when [Scripture] says, ‘all things are put in subjection,’ it is plain that [the Father] is excepted who put all things in subjection under [Jesus]. When all things are subjected to [Jesus], then the Son Himself will also be subjected to [the Father] who put all things in subjection under Him, that God may be all in all.”

→ This theme of the Son’s subjection to the Father reflects their distinctive roles in carrying out the divine plan of salvation. The Father sent the Son; the Son subordinated Himself in willing obedience to the Father, who sent Him; and finally at the glorious consummation of His mission, the Son will deliver the kingdom into the hands of His Father. In no way does this distinction in roles detract from the Son’s eternal divinity or His full equality with the Father for eternity.

✘ And speaking of Jesus’ willing obedience to the Father, what is it that caused Jesus to be crucified on the cross in the first place? As we talked about in the Children’s Sermon, it is what theologians call the “Unholy Trinity.” (insert) 1st) The World: 1 John 2:15-16 says, “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world – the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions – is not from the Father but is from the world.” 2nd) The Devil: 1 Peter 5:8 tells us, “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.” And 3rd) Our Sinful Nature: Romans 3:23 is very clear, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

→ We are all guilty of sin, with evil and selfish thoughts, words and deeds every single day. And that is why Jesus was crucified, because sin-filled men in a sin-contaminated world, tempted by the devil, as Peter said in Acts 2:23, “crucified and killed” Jesus in our human flesh. This means He paid for our guilt. But Peter says in verses 32-33 (and listen for the 3 persons in the Triune God), “This Jesus God (the Father) raised up.... Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, [the Father] has poured out this (Spirit with all of His gifts) that you yourselves are seeing and hearing.”

- ⌘ Now, pick up your hymnal and confess verses 26 through 37 of the Creed responsively. This time I will begin ...

Conclusion

- ⌘ Now, before we conclude the Creed, I want to be a little proactive and dispel another potential roadblock for folks before we get there. Verses 38-39 seem to suggest that our eternal reward is based upon our good works or lack thereof. Understandably, this causes faithful Christians – especially Lutherans, who are taught that we are saved only by grace through faith in Jesus Christ and not by our works (Ephesians 2:8-9), to hesitate a bit.

➔ Jeremiah 17:10 helps us understand this Biblical way that the Creed speaks when God says, “I Yahweh search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds.” You see, what a person does in his/her life is a fruit of what is in his/her heart. Salvation is by faith, and judgment is according to works because good works flow from a believing heart (i.e. it is impossible for an unbelieving heart to do anything that is pleasing to God – Hebrews 11:6). Our hearts are made pure by the Holy Spirit on account of Jesus’ blood covering our sins and the robe of His righteousness that He wraps around us at our baptism. These works – Jesus’ works, now working inside of us, are what the Father sees when Jesus returns to judge all souls at the end.

- ⌘ Martin Luther spoke of the Athanasian Creed like this: “The Apostles (Creed) is indeed the best of all, because it contains a concise, correct, and splendid presentation of the articles of faith and is easily learned by children and the common people. ...The Athanasian Creed, is longer ... and practically amounts to an [explanation] of the first symbol.” “I do not know of any more important document of the New Testament Church since the days of the apostles” [than the Athanasian Creed]. (St. L. 10, 994; 6, 1576; E. 23, 253.)

➔ Now we conclude by confessing verses 38-40 of the Athanasian Creed together. ... Amen.