

By Faith
Sunday, Holy Trinity, Year B
Isaiah 6:1-8; Acts 2:14a, 22-36; John 3:1-17
May 30, 2021

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

Today we said the Athanasian Creed. What a mouthful that thing is. But, it wasn't concocted to torture us with a long and laborious confession of our faith. No, instead, it came out of a hard fought war. Not a physical war, though there were riots and protests, but a war of words, ideas, philosophies, and doctrine.

It wasn't just a war that would be dismissed, like the differences between Lutherans, Baptists, Methodists, and the like. It was a war for the very heart of Christianity herself. And it began, at the Council of Nicaea, just outside of Constantinople.

And it was a war with battles and skirmishes still raging today.

It is the difference between Christianity, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Unitarians, and other cults and false understandings of Christianity.

This war had to do with the very nature of God.

There were some who taught that God and Jesus were exactly the same person, but who revealed Himself in different roles. Much like an actor who plays different parts or roles.

Sometimes we see Him as the Son, sometimes as the Father. This is called Modalism, as God is revealed in different 'modes.' This is very similar to the Unitarians of today.

Some believed that Jesus was not God, but was united with God in purpose. They believed that Jesus was the first creation of God, and that, as the first creation, the rest of creation came through Him.

So, they said, Jesus was a creature, the first creature that God created. But, He was not God. This view was being promoted by a deacon named Arius. Today, it is known as the heresy of Arianism and is the basic understanding of God found with the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses today.

These differences are why we do not consider Unitarians, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses or anyone who denies the Triune God to be Christian. They are heretics.

This is why the Athanasian Creed states boldly and plainly, "*Whoever desires to be saved must, above all, hold the catholic faith.*" And then goes into a great diatribe of what Trinitarian theology is.

Now, understand, the word catholic here does not mean Roman Catholic, as this creed was written before the formation of that line of Christianity, but means, simply, universal. Or, we could use the word 'orthodox'.

While the Athanasian Creed is a mouthful, and is the longest of the three creeds accepted in all of Christianity, it was terribly, and unfortunately, necessary.

This creed was named after, not a bishop, pastor or priest, but a deacon who was not allowed to speak in the Council that met to discuss this matter. His name was Athanasius.

Athanasius was a Coptic Christian. The Coptics are from Africa, and are considered to be the oldest 'sect' or 'denomination' of Christianity.

The story of Athanasius is a neat one. I won't detail his entire life, but he was, as I said a deacon, not a pastor. Basically, what we call an 'elder' in our congregation.

Being small in stature, he was often, affectionately, known as the "black dwarf". But, he made up for it in his grasp of Scripture and theology.

He was a powerhouse of proclamation on behalf of the godhood of Jesus. While he wasn't able to speak at the Council of Nicaea, his bishop, Alexander, spoke on his behalf. And, with his help, the biblical view of the Trinity was codified as the official teaching of Christendom. This brought unity and uniformity to the teaching of Christianity. It reassured the people of God as to what was the correct teaching of Scripture and what was outside of that teaching.

These men knew the Scriptures, knew the beliefs handed down to them, and were great scholars. They were great teachers, preachers, and writers. Some of them we still celebrate today, like St. Alexander of Alexandria, his deacon, Athanasius, Emperor Constantine, and even, yes, St. Nicholas.

The Athanasian Creed did not come out of the Council of Nicaea. Neither did the creed that bears the city's name, the Nicene Creed. Both creeds were completed a few years later. But, the Athanasian Creed bears the name of the 'black dwarf', that determined deacon and courageous Coptic; Athanasius.

The same Holy Spirit that sent out the disciples, inaugurating them as Apostles was present at the Council of Nicaea, just as he was at the Diet of Worms, just as He was at your baptism and just as He is today.

The Trinity is not an easy doctrine to grasp. In fact, if you say you have it fully understood, you are either lying, naïve, or have risen to a higher plain of theological thinking and understanding than anyone else in the history of Christianity.

Notice how the Athanasian Creed, itself, struggles to make sense of a doctrine that... well, doesn't make sense. It is repetitively redundant, and tries to define the undefinable.

But, isn't that exactly what God is? Undefinable?

Try to understand the fullness of His glory. Not even Isaiah could do that as he stood in the presence of God in our Old Testament reading this morning. He was in awe, and he was humbled. *"Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"* (Isaiah 6:5).

Oh, how I love that statement. That should be our posture, our thoughts, our humble position as we enter into God's presence, especially, as we approach His presence in the Lord's Supper, where we place Him on our lips, just as the coal of the altar was placed on Isaiah's lips, cleansing him of that uncleanness that he had decried.

The same happens to us. Why? I don't understand it. I don't understand the love of my God. I don't know why He would spare me after I have sinned against Him so often, so harshly, and so defiantly.

Yet, here I come to the altar, the pastor places a part of the sacrifice, a part of that "Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" in my hand, or on my lips. And, he, like the seraphim proclaims, *"Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for"* (Isaiah 6:7b).

I do not understand it, but boy do I rejoice in it. I accept it, not because I understand it, but because it is what God has declared. I accept it by faith. Faith given to me by my God, through the work of His Holy Spirit, and because of the work of Jesus the Christ. All of it to reconcile me to God the Father. All three members of that Trinity at work on my behalf; to forgive me, reconcile me, free me, and to love me.

My friends, come to the altar today. The Triune God, who we know, not by understanding, but by faith. He is the One declared to us in the Scriptures, defended by the Church Fathers,

worshiped by Christians throughout the world. He is the One calling people to Himself to be born again, *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him"* (John 3:16–17).

Now may the peace that passes all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.