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The Holy Trinity (Series C)

May 22, 2016

Text: John 8:48–59

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

One of the frustrations that a lot of people have with politics is the mudslinging, name-calling, and sheer meanness that takes place. It's quite disappointing to witness men who are supposed to be leaders succumb to childish, playground antics. That's kind of what we hear and in today's gospel reading from John 8. The Pharisees can't seem to beat Jesus in open, forthright debate. So they call Him names instead. It has been noted, in both ancient and modern times, that people begin using personal attacks when their ideas and actions have been shown to be lacking or simply wrong. When you can't beat them fair and square, you try to destroy their character.

Look at vs. 48, “Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?” For 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews, these were about the lowest, worst form of racial and theological slurs one could utter. Samaritans were impure half-breeds, who compromised with pagan unbelievers and worship God in a concocted, man-made way. The Jews despised Samaritans. And to call someone a devil, and truly mean it, is, well, to cross the point of no return. In John's gospel, Jesus and the Pharisees will be in open hostility from this point forward. Reconciliation is no longer an option.

There's something we must always keep in mind about Jesus. By what He says and does, our Lord creates strong reactions, both positively and negatively, from those who hear and see Him. There can be no neutrality with the Jesus of Holy Scripture. One hears His extraordinary claims and believes them, rejoices in them, and lives in them, or one categorically rejects them as a demonic lie or pitiful insanity. What I've just described is C.S. Lewis' famous trilemma argument. Lewis asserts that when reading about the Jesus of Holy Scripture one must decide if Jesus is a liar, a lunatic, or the Lord. All three options pose difficulties. But in the end, there can be no neutrality about Jesus.

Keep Lewis' trilemma in mind – liar, lunatic, or Lord – when considering what Jesus claims in today's reading from John 8:48–59. Jesus says that God the Father seeks to glorify and honor Jesus (vs. 50, 54); He declares that everyone who believes in Him

will never taste death (vs. 51); Jesus states (vs. 55) that He knows God (the Pharisees don't); our Lord claims that Abraham rejoiced to see the coming of Jesus (vs. 56), and finally, Jesus claims to be the divine, self-existent "I am" seen by Moses in the burning bush of Exodus 3 (vs. 58). Powerful claims! Liar, lunatic, or Lord?

I fear that we Missouri Synod Lutherans are so used to hearing Jesus make these remarkable claims that they have lost some of their shocking power. In these 12 verses, Jesus says He is honored and gloried by the Father, has special, intimate knowledge of God, is greater than Abraham, one of the greatest men of faith in all of the Old Testament, and just in case we've missed the point, He's eternal God in the flesh! And He hasn't mentioned His resurrection from the grave, yet! If we could somehow step outside ourselves and hear these extraordinary claims for the first time, we might be able to be shocked by them! Or transfixed by them!

You see everything changes with the coming of Jesus. How we understand God, how we relate to Him, how we trust Him, it all changes with Jesus. That's what today, the Sunday of the Holy Trinity, is all about. Jesus reveals God to us for we believe that Jesus is the Lord, the Lord of glory. He reveals to us that we worship one God in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Today reminds us that the God of the Bible, the God revealed in Jesus is not something made up by human imagination.

History teaches that when men think about God, they tend to go in two different directions. The most common conception of God was polytheism, many gods like the Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, and many other cultures. The other way that men have conceived of God was monotheism, like the Jews and Muslims. Both teach a strict divine unity. One god, nice and simple. You've heard me say this before but it needs to be said again just because of the times in which we live. You hear it said in various media outlets that Muslims, Jews, and Christians, the three great monotheistic religions of the world, worship the same god. Don't believe it for a moment. Jews, unless they are Christian, reject both the divinity of Jesus and the Trinity. The Koran, which is the holy book for Muslims, expressly and categorically rejects the Virgin Birth, the divinity of Jesus, and the Trinity. Faith in Jesus as the divine Son of God separates us Christians from every other religion of the world.

Our biblical faith, as it's summarized in the Athanasian Creed, says that the catholic, or universal faith is this, "that we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the substance."

In John 8:48–59, Jesus claims to be God come in the flesh. He's one with God the Father but also distinct from the Father. Such an audacious, bold claim is why the Jews pick up stones to stone Jesus (vs. 59). Standing right before their eyes is a man. He was born in Bethlehem but raised in the mundane town of Nazareth. He claims to be honored and gloried by God the Father. He's not yet 50 years old (vs. 57) but He says He's greater than Abraham, the father of all God's faithful. He says that whoever believes in Him will never see death. Who can overcome death but God? The Pharisees rightly understand what Jesus is saying. He is God in the fullest sense and also completely man. There are only two legitimate responses: faith or unbelief. Faith says Jesus is who He says He is, God's divine Son in human flesh and blood, and rejoices with exceeding great joy. Unbelief says Jesus is a blaspheming liar who deserves to be stoned or a lunatic needing to be pitied. The Pharisees in John 8 chose the second option and want to pick up stones to stone Jesus.

Why should we believe that Jesus is God, the second person of the Holy Trinity?  
Answer: The resurrection and ascension of our Lord. That's what the apostle Peter preaches in his Pentecost sermon recorded in Acts 2 (today's epistle reading). Quoting Psalm 16, Peter declares that God the Father would not abandon Christ to the grave. He raised His Son, Jesus from the dead. And then, quoting Psalm 110, Peter says that Jesus was exalted to the Father's right hand and so fills heaven and earth with God's glory and power. From the Father's right hand, the exalted Lord Jesus now sends the promised Holy Spirit upon the Church. Every believer has fellowship with God the Father through faith in God the Son in the power of God the Holy Spirit.

But there is a danger that we Trinitarian Christians must also avoid, the danger of turning the teaching of the Holy Trinity, one God in three persons, into an abstract idea. God the Trinity is as concrete and real as the baptismal waters that were splashed upon you in His Trinitarian name. The promise of forgiveness of sins, rescue from death and the devil, and eternal salvation to all believers is a Trinitarian promise from beginning to end. Every prayer you speak is a Trinitarian confession of faith. For you pray to your heavenly Father in Jesus' name through the Holy Spirit's power. The Lord's Prayer is prayed to the Father, as instructed by His Son, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. The holy food of the Lord's Supper which you eat this day is the very body and blood of the Father's Son given and received by the power of the Holy Spirit. Sitting at the right hand of the Father, Jesus fills heaven and earth as the divine Son of God and Son of Mary. In the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus gives Himself so that we can have forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation.

Faith in God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is life, now and forevermore. The hope and joy that we confess as Christians is a Trinitarian hope, a triune joy that transcends all human understanding or expectation, a rock-solid faith that overcomes all trials and temptations. We boldly and joyfully confess that Jesus is Lord in the power of the Holy Spirit to the glory of God the Father.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.