

## **Our Triune God**

### **In the Name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, and our Helper, the Holy Spirit. Today's sermon is titled "Our Triune God."

Today we celebrate and bring to mind one of our faith's most profound mysteries, our triune God, the Trinity. This core doctrine permeates the whole Christian religion. In fact, if you deny the Trinity, you're excluded from the purview of Christianity itself. It is one of the few doctrines that has no, none, not an inch of wiggle room. Eschatological belief has a lot of wiggle room. There's a dozen positions you could take without leaving orthodoxy. Baptism has a handful of acceptable positions. Whether you're for infant baptism or for believer baptism only, you're still safely inside Christianity. However, if you were to say that Jesus Christ is not God, you instantly leave the realm of acceptable Christian doctrine and dive headfirst into damnable heresy. Unfortunately, there are those who claim to be a branch of Christianity, yet they deny, in some aspect, the Trinity. We will examine some of those groups, but we have to first explore and understand the doctrine of the Trinity.

And before that, I want to quickly say two things. One, the doctrine of the Trinity is really one of the hardest to understand. As I have stated many times, our God is a God who is, in a technical level, incomprehensible. He is infinite while we are anything but. Like a 3D object being represented in 2D, some things are simply lost in translation. And those are the mysteries of God which He keeps to Himself. So, if you come into this sermon not understanding the Trinity and you leave still not understanding, it's okay. It's not required that you understand it in the same way you may understand how electricity works. But even if you are entirely ignorant of electromagnetism, you can still use an electrical outlet or switch on the lights. And so, even if you're still confused about the Trinity, but you entrust it to God, saying, "Lord, I don't get it, but if you say it is the case, then I believe you." Then your relationship and trust in God is well off. And

secondly, I won't be quoting Scripture much as the proof texts are scattered wide and far throughout the books of the Bible and quoting them and expounding on them with context would take several sermons or even a book. If you are curious what Scriptural support there is for the Trinity, and there is plenty, I would recommend checking out a systematic theology like the one by Wayne Grudem. The whole point of systematic theology as a practice is to ask the question, "What does the whole Bible say about X?" And so, its scope by nature is larger than that of a 20-minute sermon. And when it comes to such a complex doctrine as this, that extra scope goes a long way.

Last week I mentioned the Athanasian Creed. It is one of the three Ecumenical creeds found in our very own Lutheran Book of Concord, that is to say, our confessional document. The word "ecumenical" comes to us from the Greek, roughly, for "worldwide." We are much more familiar with the other two creeds professed in the Book of Concord. The Apostle's Creed, we say at our weekly service immediately following the sermon. We profess the Nicene Creed a couple times a year on special occasions. But I cannot recall a time when we corporately confessed the Athanasian Creed. Both the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds affirm the Trinity, but the Athanasian Creed devotes half of its great length to not just affirming but defining the Trinity. Since we as Lutherans profess it as truth, let's take a look at that ancient creed.

It begins, "Whoever desires to be saved must, above all, hold the catholic faith. Whoever does not keep it whole and undefiled will without doubt perish eternally. And the catholic faith is this." This opening statement is a bold declaration that error doctrine can be damnable, especially in those doctrines on which the entire faith resides. The term 'catholic' doesn't mean the faith that is specific to the Roman Catholics but retains its definition from a Greek word meaning "universal." That is to say it's a "small c" catholic.

"that we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in unity, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the substance." This a dense summary of the entire theology of the Trinity. There is one God. That God is three persons. Each person is distinct, yet each is fully God. They are not each 33.33% of God, they are each 100% God.

“For the Father is one person, the Son is another, and the Holy Spirit is another.” As we all were already aware, we have here the enumeration of the three persons of the Trinity. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, or Holy Ghost if you’re a King James fan.

“But the Godhead of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit is one: the glory equal, the majesty coeternal.” The word “Godhead” is alien to most of us, I would wager. It’s just not a word that we use every day. Etymologically, it comes to us from Middle English’s “godhede” with “hede” being cognate to “hood.” So, we can think of it as “Godhood” or “divinity” or even “divine nature.” It is the essence of God. The three persons of the Trinity share one divine nature, glory, and majesty.

“Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Spirit:” Stressing that since each person is fully God, each has the same qualities. Then the creed runs through many of those qualities.

“the Father uncreated, the Son uncreated, the Holy Spirit uncreated; the Father infinite, the Son infinite, the Holy Spirit infinite; the Father eternal, the Son eternal, the Holy Spirit eternal.” Each of these intrinsic attributes of God apply fully and equally to each person of the Trinity. A good sermon could be written discussing what each of these qualities mean, but that will be a sermon for another day.

“And yet there are not three Eternals, but one Eternal, just as there are not three Uncreated or three Infinities, but one Uncreated and one Infinite. In the same way, the Father is almighty, the Son almighty, the Holy Spirit almighty; and yet there are not three Almightyies but one Almighty. So the Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God; and yet there are not three Gods, but one God. So the Father is Lord, the Son is Lord, the Holy Spirit is Lord; and yet there are not three Lords, but one Lord. Just as we are compelled by the Christian truth to acknowledge each distinct person as God and Lord, so also are we prohibited by the catholic religion to say that there are three Gods or Lords.” Line after line of stressing that despite there being three distinct persons, each is fully God. If all you take home from this sermon is that there are three persons and each one is fully God, you’d do well. The creed then continues to describe the relationship

between the three members of the Trinity.

“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.” In these sentences, the creed explains what is known as the “economy” of the Trinity. The Father is at the relational head of the Trinity, hence why He isn’t begotten nor proceeding from anyone. The Son is relationally subordinate to the Father and therefore we see Him being “begotten, not made,” of the Father. And then the Holy Spirit is sent by both the Father and the Son, and so He proceeds from them both. As an aside, this “proceeding from them both” is known as “double procession of the Spirit” and actually caused quite a stir back in the day. It was one of the wedges that divided Western and Eastern Christianity. To make a very long story short, a single Latin word was added to the Nicene Creed without calling another ecumenical council to discuss it—Filioque, “and the Son.” The Eastern churches disagreed theologically and legally, and it gave them one more reason to break with Rome for good.

“Thus, there is one Father, not three Fathers; one Son, not three Sons; one Holy Spirit, not three Holy Spirits.” The three persons are, again, distinct from each other. I have mentioned before that each person plays a unique role in our salvation. God the Father sent His Son to die for us. God the Son took on the human frame and died for our sins. And God the Holy Spirit comes to us, make His temple inside of us, and sanctifies us. Though I will say that that isn’t an exhaustive list of what each person of the Trinity does, and I will add that there is overlap in actions as well.

“And in this Trinity none is before or after another; none is greater or less than another; but the whole three persons are coeternal with each other and coequal so that in all things, as has been stated above, the Trinity in Unity and Unity in Trinity is to be worshiped. Therefore, whoever desires to be saved must think thus about the Trinity.” The creed makes it a point to note that despite there being a difference in relationship, it does not equate to a difference in essence. The Father isn’t “more God” because He begets the Son and the Holy Spirit proceeds from Him, and the Holy Spirit isn’t “less God” because He proceeds from both the Father and the Son. Each one is, as stated before, fully God.

These statements make up a very exact and cohesive description of the Trinity. It may seem long winged or verbose, and it may very well be, but that's by design. This creed was designed to be a bulwark against heresies that the church was facing or would face in the future. In fact, my copy of the Book of Concord has, underneath the title, "written against the Arians."

So, what are these heresies, and who were the Arians? Arianism, spelled Arian, not Aryan, was a heresy taught by a theologian named Arius. He taught that the Son was not coequal and coeternal with the Father, but rather the Son was created by the Father. If you are created, you are by that very fact not eternal. They claimed that the Son was the greatest of all created things, but the difference between created and uncreated is still an infinite divide. This was not and is not, unfortunately, the only heresy. There's the heresy of Tritheism. Tritheism is the idea that each person in the Trinity is actually a separate god. This denies the unity that exists within the Trinity. Another heresy is Partialism. This is the belief I alluded to earlier that each person is actually a part of God, be it an equal 33.33% or otherwise. This denies the idea that each person is fully God. And then there's Modalism which claims each person is actually a persona of sorts of God, or a different hat that God swaps out as needed. This denies the distinctiveness of each person.

With that being said, there's two groups I would like to discuss briefly as they're major groups that masquerade as Christians despite lacking in the proper faith once delivered for all to the saints. The first of these are the Jehovah's Witnesses. While there are many doctrinal issues to go over, this being Trinity Sunday, I will only note their errors in the nature of our Triune God. The Jehovah's Witnesses do not believe that Jesus Christ is fully God, coequal and coeternal. Much like the Arians before them, they contend that Jesus is a created being. Their belief goes further than that, though. According to them, Jesus is actually the Archangel Michael and that his human body is gone forever, never to be seen again. How they came to that conclusion, I could not tell you, but they hold fast to this belief. The other large group which denies the Trinity is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, or Mormonism. The Mormon's beliefs are even further out there than the Jehovah's Witnesses. They claim that God the Father is actually a created being. I want to stress this; I am not making this up. Their belief is that God the Father was a particularly pious individual on

a planet that wasn't Earth. He was so pious that he was exalted into Godhood. He took this Godhood, created Jesus with the help of his wife, the "Heavenly Mother." Then Jesus created Earth and us. And now, according to the Mormons, you too can ascend into Godhood if you're pious enough. That's their doctrine of "Exaltation." I don't think I have to say it, but I'll say it anyways. This is also not Christianity. Nowhere in that belief is the notion of the Trinity preserved.

I do not mention these heresies and doctrinal errors to scare or frighten anyone into thinking that they'll get this or that wrong and go to hell. I mention these errors because they are out there, and we will encounter them in our walk with Christ. It is important to know what they are and what you believe (or at least profess to believe by being here in a Lutheran church). The old saying is true: forewarned is forearmed. Or another way to look at it is that old quote from Sun Tzu. "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles." It is our jobs as faithful and devout Christians to not only know and understand our faith, but to, as we are commended to do so in [Jude 1:3](#), contend for the faith. And if we are to contend effectively and hold our ground so as the very gates of Hell may not prevail, we must take our spiritual education seriously. While this is worthy of a sermon in of itself, I just want to ask everyone this. Could you speak the words of Luther's Small Catechism? If not, or even if so, when was the last time you went over its contents? By yourself? With your family? With friends?

But, with that being said, I want to reassure everyone that God doesn't expect us to get every single thing right or have it memorized like an automaton. There are doctrinal errors that are minor enough that the grace of God will more than make up for it. For example, being on the wrong side of the Eschatological debate. And there are errors of confusion or innocent ignorance which again will be covered by God's mercy. An example of this would be being confused about the Trinity. I am sure you can find readily enough a God-fearing, Bible believing, church attending Christian who would, out of a genuinely innocent error, state one of the previously mentioned heresies. And I even have proof of that claim. According to the State of Theology, in its latest polling 67% of Evangelicals who attended church at least once a week strongly agreed that "Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God." This is, as we discussed, a severe and damnable heresy. God the Son is fully God, He is coeternal, and He is begotten not made.

And yet, I cannot fathom that this 70% are card carrying Arians. Especially when that same demographic had 97% strongly agree that “There is one true God in three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.” These errors are best correct on this side of Heaven, though. So, I encourage everyone to be diligent in the study of God’s word, of the creeds, and our other confessional documents. If there is any subject you find yourself lacking in, do not hesitate to reach out to me, another church goer, or our interim Pastor Steve once he’s here. And if you think you have a good grasp on a subject, don’t hesitate to share with those who need it. Remember, we are one body in Christ, made of many members. It is our job to help, support, and complement our brothers and sisters in Christ, and that includes in their knowledge and understanding of Scripture.

Let us pray to our Triune God and ask Him for understanding and wisdom in our walk with the Lord.

Amen and amen.