

Immanuel (Augsburg) Lutheran Church
Shobonier, Illinois
Holy Trinity B
May 30, 2021
John 3:1-17

The Catholic Faith

Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." (John 3:5-6 ESV)

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit,

Today is a special day as two of our younger members confess their faith, the faith into which they were baptized, and are confirmed. They have learned and know that being God's child is all about faith – specifically, faith in Christ and His atoning life, death, and resurrection for the forgiveness of their sins. And their faith, their believing, is God's gift to them, even as it is to each of us. Yet, there are two aspects to this faith. One is the faith that believes, faith as a verb, if you will. Then, there is the faith that is believed, that is, the object or content of the faith, the something or someone to believe in. Thus the Christian faith believes, and believes in, what God reveals to us in His Word, the Holy Scriptures.

Today is also special because it's a day of confessing that faith. A few moments ago we confessed in the Athanasian Creed that "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. . . . Therefore, whoever desires to be saved must think thus about the Trinity. But it is also necessary for everlasting salvation that one faithfully believe the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. . . . This is the catholic faith; whoever does not believe it faithfully and firmly cannot be saved." (Athanasian Creed). There is nothing on earth more important than this, for it has eternal consequences.

The true catholic faith is the universal faith, believed at all times and in all places. Thus it is not to be confused with the Roman Church or what it teaches. Instead, it's the faith, the believing and the content, that gives us life and leads to doxology, praise to the Triune God.

Now this faith is the only faith which saves from sin, death, and the devil. And it saves us for life - life with God now and eternal life in God's presence singing His praises. In today's first reading, when Isaiah was standing in the presence of God Himself, he was afraid for his life, "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). Yes, when confronted with the full holiness of God Himself, Isaiah realized the depth of his sin and the utter terror of standing before the true King and Lord of all. He knew that he and all Israel fully deserved nothing but God's wrath and punishment. But he didn't get it. Instead, he received

healing and forgiveness as an angel touched his mouth with a burning coal from the altar saying, "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for." (Isaiah 6:7). Now that burning coal on the lips doesn't sound very pleasant, and yet, it shows that the Triune God is a God of grace and mercy and love and forgiveness and life and that He desires to give that all to you. Indeed, the forgiveness of sins and the atonement for sin is all His doing.

So, how can we stand in God's presence without coming undone? How does God cleanse us of our sin? How does God touch our lips, take away our sin, and atone for our sins? That's what we learn from our Lord's encounter with Nicodemus (John 3:1-17).

When Nicodemus came to Jesus that night, he believed God had a place in heaven for him because he was an Israelite, one of God's chosen people. Besides, he was a Pharisee and a ruler of the people, and he lived an upright life. But He didn't know or believe that the One standing in front of him was the very Son of God, the second person of the Trinity in the flesh, come to save him from his sins. He didn't fall down before Jesus in fear for his life, or even to ask for mercy. He merely confesses that Jesus is "a teacher come from God," but nothing more.

So Jesus, full of compassion and love, gently leads Nicodemus to see his great need and his Savior. "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again (or from above) he cannot see the kingdom of God." Of course, Nicodemus doesn't understand Jesus. "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Of course not! The very thought is preposterous. But Jesus doesn't let up, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." But even this is beyond Nicodemus. After all, he can only deal with what he can see, for he is, by nature, earthly-minded, as we all are. And herein lies the problem. The catholic faith which saves is not something we can understand by reason alone. It's not merely a body of information for us to master. (Though understanding doctrine correctly is important.) Rather, it is given as a gift from God, through the working of the Holy Spirit, so that we believe in the Father and His only-begotten Son as He has revealed Himself to us.

Now, we certainly cannot understand the Trinity, and, of ourselves, we cannot believe in the Trinity. Being born of the flesh, we can only do what the flesh does - live a life of unbelief and sin. Like Isaiah, we too must confess: "Woe is me! For I am lost! For I am a man of unclean lips and I live in the midst of a people of unclean lips." Lips that have uttered falsehoods and slandered friends and neighbors. Lips that have kissed the idols of money, power, pride. Lips pursed in wrathful hate. With lips and hands and feet and soul and mind sin is embraced. All is unclean. There is no good in us at all. So if we are to believe and be saved, something has to happen from outside of us.

And that something has happened! The Father sent His only-begotten, uncreated Son to be the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world. Jesus, the One who has descended from heaven, has now ascended into heaven. The One born of Mary, born under the Law with its demands and

curses, submits to those curses and punishments to redeem us who are under the Law. Having taken into His own flesh the sin and guilt of all people, He died on the cross suffering damnation in their, in our, place. It is at the cross that we see most clearly that the one true God is a God who saves - and He does it by sacrificing His only Son.

So how does that forgiveness, that life, that comes from Jesus' death come to us? The Holy Spirit works through the Gospel to bring us to faith, and through Baptism to give us a new birth, a new life. When we were given that new birth of water and the Spirit, the Spirit seals us in the faith which believes in and trusts in Jesus' saving work for us. So we don't envision Jesus on the cross as merely a man gasping for each breath, crying out in pain, bleeding, dying, and finally dead. Rather, we come to see that holy death for what it is, the very Lamb of God, sent from the Father, bearing the sin of the whole world, so that all who believe in Him will not perish but have eternal life, the life of the kingdom. Yes, the Father sends His Son as a gift to the world and the Spirit reveals Him not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. Jesus' death on the cross is the sacrifice on the altar offered by the High Priest Himself. The blood is shed. Sins are forgiven. Life is given.

This is the new life, the life from above. It finds its source, even its very being, in the Holy Trinity. And though we so often fall into sin and unbelief, the Holy Spirit continues to call us to repentance, to look to Jesus, to believe in Him for forgiveness, life, and salvation. For even as the Israelites who gazed upon the bronze serpent on the pole were saved from the serpents' bites, so we who have been bitten by the ancient serpent, Satan himself, are saved when we look to Jesus who was lifted up for us. And keeping our eyes on Him, we shall be saved from the sin and death which plague us.

Yes, the catholic faith is this, that the one true God is the Holy Trinity, and the Son of God, Jesus Christ, is our only savior from sin and death. This God alone is the only source of our salvation for the Father sends the Son; the Son is lifted up for salvation, that all who look upon Him in faith may be saved; and the Holy Spirit pours out His grace into our hearts and minds, that being born anew, we may live in the new life Christ has won for us. By this faith, the children of flesh are made the Children of God, heirs of the kingdom of heaven and of eternal life. God grant you all so to believe and be saved now and forever. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Rev. Timothy J. Landskroener