

Epworth Chapel on the Green
May 22, 2016
Trinity Sunday
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 6:1-8
Psalm 29
Revelation 4:1-11
John 6:5-15

Today is the one day of the year where our liturgical focus is not on the *actions* of God in history to save us, but rather on the *being and nature* of the God who comes to save us.

It is also the one day of the year where instead of reciting the Nicene Creed, we recite the *Athanasian Creed* instead. The Athanasian Creed may seem a bit obtuse and even impenetrable to us, but both the creed and the bishop who wrote it are extremely important for Christian faith, practice, and history.

From the time the church was born at Pentecost through the first few centuries of its growth, the church often faced the challenge that came when people would introduce teachings or doctrines that did not come from Christ or from the apostles on whom Christ bestowed his authority.

As early as the end of the first century, the apostles began to appoint bishops to oversee local congregations, and they were tasked with safeguarding the deposit of faith that had come from Christ to the apostles, and preserving unity in doctrine and worship in their churches.

Early in the fourth century, a presbyter from Libya by the name of Arius began teaching that if Jesus was God's *begotten* Son, then that meant that there was a time when Jesus did not exist. Jesus was *created*, and therefore was not the pre-existent Son of God and was not of the same substance as God.

Soon Arius' teaching was spreading like wildfire. A catchy tune was even written and began to "go viral." People far and wide were singing, "There was a time when the Son was not."

In A.D. 325 the Emperor Constantine, newly converted to Christianity, saw what was happening and took action. He called for a council of bishops to gather at Nicea so that the issue could be settled.

A little over 300 bishops gathered at Nicea to deal with Arius' teaching. The council of bishops declared Arius a heretic and condemned his teaching. And the principal bishop who championed the teaching that Christ was of the same substance as God and that God was *one* God revealed in *three* persons, was Athanasius.

Athanasius is counted as one of the four great "Doctors" of the Church in the Roman Catholic tradition. In Eastern Orthodoxy, he is labeled the "Father of Orthodoxy." In some Protestant traditions, he is called the "Father of the Canon," because he was one of the first persons to list the 27 books that became our New

Testament, and to argue that these writings (not others) were divinely inspired and authoritative for the church.

So even though the Athanasian Creed which we will recite can be a bit cumbersome, the truths it reflects are profoundly important and relevant for us today.

A very specific example of this is found in the current debate and dialog between many as to whether Christians and Muslims worship the same God. This debate took off in the wake of the Wheaton College Professor who was terminated a few months ago for making this claim.

The controversy continues to generate confusion, and one reason for this is that putting the issue in terms of whether Christians and Muslims worship the same God is not as helpful as putting the issue in terms of what *each believes about God*.

While Christians and Muslims share some beliefs about God, such as the belief that God created the world and revealed himself to Abraham, they also have several beliefs that are simply irreconcilable with each other. Consider, for example, these statements:

Either Jesus died on the Cross to save us from our sins, or He did not.

Either Jesus was raised bodily from the dead, or He was not.

Either Jesus is the Son of God, or He is not.

Either Jesus is God's final definitive revelation, or He is not.

Either God exists eternally in Three Persons, or He does not.

Christians affirm the first of these logically incompatible claims, and Muslims affirm the second. These claims are absolutely essential to Christian belief and theology. It is disrespectful both to Christians and Muslims to downplay these differences.

Christian faith is *Trinitarian*, and it is the Trinitarian nature of our faith as expressed by Athanasius in his creed that continues to be important these many centuries later. And it is why the liturgy of the church is permeated with Trinitarian formulas and references. The church from its inception has believed this to be a *revealed* truth that ultimately transcends reason alone, and as such must be apprehended by faith.

John Wesley's counsel to his early Methodists is still valid for us today. Wesley said, when speaking of the Trinity, that we should not make the mistake of doubting the *fact that God has revealed something* simply because we *do not understand the manner in which God has revealed it*.

Christians worship *one* God in *three* Persons, neither confounding the persons, nor dividing the substance. Wesley was right. We may not fully comprehend *how* God comes to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But the testimony of both the Church and Holy Scripture reveal that He does so. Anything less than this Trinitarian faith is not fully Christian.

As we come to the Table this morning, let us come with faith. But let us also come with humility and reverence. Let us bow our hearts and lives at the foot of this great mystery, and receive with joy the grace He offers us in these tangible gifts of bread and wine.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.