

Holy Trinity
31 May 2026
Isaiah 6:1-7; Romans 11:33-36; John 3:1-17

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

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit—Amen

Today is Trinity Sunday, which means that it is one of the four or five times a year that we confess the Athanasian Creed out loud as a congregation. Since there are some things in this creed which may cause confusion, it seems it might be beneficial for us to examine some lines from the Athanasian Creed according to the Scriptures.

The Athanasian Creed begins, “Whoever desires to be saved must, above all, hold the catholic faith.” But wait, we’re Lutherans. What are we doing talking about the catholic faith? Not to worry. At the time when this creed was written the word “catholic” did not mean Roman Catholic. The word catholic comes from a Greek word καθολικός, which literally means “according to the whole” as in the sense of “general,” or “everywhere.” Indeed, the phrase καθ’ ὅλης comes up in Scripture, for example in Acts 9:31, “So the church—καθ’ ὅλης, translated as, ‘throughout all’—Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up.” It didn’t take long for the Church καθ’ ὅλης, the Church everywhere, to become a technical term: The Church καθολική, the Church Catholic. The “catholic faith,” then, means the unified confession of the one Church in all times and in all places. What that means for this creed is that this is what the Scriptures teach, so this is what we believe, teach, and confess.

Holding the catholic faith is very serious business. The second line of the Athanasian Creed says, “Whoever does not keep it whole and undefiled will without doubt perish eternally.” You believe in God as He has revealed Himself in the Scriptures? Salvation. You deny that God

is Triune, or you deny that Jesus came in the flesh? Condemnation, because our salvation depends on the Triune nature of God and the incarnation of the Son. Certainly, God remains Triune and Jesus remains in the flesh even if we deny it, but unless we believe it, we cannot be saved. So, Scripture says of Jesus in John 3:18, “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already.”

The creed continues: “And the catholic faith is this, that we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity neither confusing the persons nor dividing the substance.” The next twenty-one lines of the creed explain what this one line means, and it does so with the words: “Trinity,” and “persons,” and “substance.”

The word “Trinity” is a compound of “tri,” meaning “three,” and “unity,” meaning “one.” God is three-one. He is Triune. The “three” refers to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The “one” refers to the fact that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one God. Yet, they are not parts of God, like a pie divided into thirds that when put together make one God. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are each God. Yet we do not have three gods, but one God.

The Church took up the language of “persons” and “substance” to talk about this. The persons are three; the substance is one. We do not confuse the persons, saying that the Father is the Son or the Holy Spirit is the Father, nor do we say that sometimes God is the Father and sometimes the Son, as if one God simply put on different masks. We also do not divide the substance, meaning that we don’t turn one God into three gods, nor do we divide the essence of God into three persons of the Trinity the way that three children might split up a candy bar, or a waiter pours water from one pitcher into three glasses. So, we confess in the creed, “Just as we are compelled by the Christian truth to acknowledge each distinct person as God and Lord, so also we are prohibited by the catholic religion to say that there are three Gods or Lords.”

We see this clearly enough in the Scriptures. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, the Spirit hovered over the face of the deep, and God said, “Let there be light.” The Father spoke, the Spirit brooded, and the Son is the creative Word which was spoken, as John says in the first chapter of his gospel, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” At the baptism of Jesus, we also note the simultaneous presence of all three persons of the Trinity. But it says in Deuteronomy 6, “Hear, O Israel, the LORD is our God; the LORD is one,” and so we must keep in mind when we consider the creation or Jesus’ baptism that there are not three gods present, but one God.

The Trinity is one of the great mysteries of the Christian faith. When we’re confronted by one of God’s mysteries there’s a question we like to ask. Nicodemus asks the question in today’s Holy Gospel concerning the mystery of Holy Baptism. He asks, “How can these things be?” How? That’s the question we’re inclined to ask of the Holy Trinity, too. But when it comes to the mysteries of God, if we ask “how?” and then think we’ve figured out the answer, it is highly likely that all we’ve really figured out is heresy, and probably not a new heresy. Or to put it another way, when it comes to the mysteries of God, human reason only gets in the way and leads us astray.

Now, as Christians, we don’t reject the right use of reason. We simply acknowledge that some things make perfect sense to God and yet are beyond us. Our problem is that we presume that we’re the most reasonable beings in existence, and therefore if something doesn’t make sense to us then it doesn’t make sense at all.

But could it be that the uncreated, eternal, infinite God understands His own nature better than we do? Today’s Epistle is meant to remind us of our humble place in the world: “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments and

how inscrutable his ways! ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?’ ‘Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?’” And so, the Athanasian Creed doesn’t bother with explaining how. It simply confesses what is: “So the Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God; and yet there are not three Gods, but one God.”

Fortunately, understanding with the mind is not a requirement for salvation. Rather, it is believing with the heart. Therefore, the creed does not say, “the Trinity in Unity and Unity in Trinity is to be understood,” but, “the Trinity in Unity and Unity in Trinity is to be worshiped.” When we meditate on the mysteries of God the result is not a satisfied reason but a heartfelt doxology: “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen.”

The Athanasian Creed confesses the mystery of the Trinity, but it doesn’t stop there: “But it is also necessary for everlasting salvation that one faithfully believe the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Now if you’ve already gotten this far and believe that three persons are one God, then it’s really not a stretch to believe that the second person of the Trinity can be fully God and fully man, just as it’s not a stretch at this point to say that bread and wine can be Jesus’ body and blood.

Jesus “is God, begotten from the substance of the Father before all ages; and He is man, born from the substance of his mother in this age.” This is also clear enough from Scripture. For example, Romans chapter one says that Jesus “was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead.” Or more briefly, Colossians 2:9 says, “in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.” Jesus is fully God and fully man, and yet, as the creed says, “He is not two, but one Christ.”

And the creed clarifies: “one, however, not by the conversion of the divinity into flesh, but by the assumption of the humanity into God,” meaning that the divine nature did not lose anything by becoming enfleshed; rather, by its union with the divine nature, the flesh of Jesus can do things that human flesh cannot do of itself. For instance, it says in 1 John 1:9, “the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.” Can human blood cleanse from sin? My human blood can’t. Your human blood can’t. But Jesus’ human blood can cleanse from sin, because His humanity has been assumed into God; His human blood can be called God’s blood.

And this is what the Athanasian Creed has been building up to: “God and man is one Christ, who suffered for our salvation.” So, you see, the Trinity is not some dry point of doctrine. If the Father is God, but the Son is not, then a mere human being died on the cross, and that wouldn’t have given you eternal life any more than my death could give you eternal life. Nor is the incarnation some boring old dogma. If Jesus were not man, He could not act in our stead, nor could He do something like die for us.

No, the Trinity and the incarnation should not make us think of dusty books and theological treatises. The doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation should make us think of the crucifixion of Jesus. There hangs God, giving His life for you. That flesh is God’s flesh, and that blood is God’s blood, and that suffering is God’s suffering, and that death is God’s death. Therefore, your salvation is secure, because it rests with God—God made flesh. No one else could have done it except the God-man Jesus Christ. And He has done it. He has taken on your flesh. He has taken away your sin. He has laid down His life for you, and He has taken up His life again.

Jesus’ atoning sacrifice makes sense of two lines at the end of the creed: “At His coming all people will rise again with their bodies and give an account concerning their own deeds. And

those who have done good will enter into eternal life, and those who have done evil into eternal fire.” Does that scare you? It should, if you think about it apart from Christ. So don’t think about it apart from Christ. Hebrews 4:13 does say, “no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”

But what do we have to fear? Yes, we have done evil, and certainly we deserve the eternal fire, but Jesus has crucified our evil in His flesh, has made us good trees by faith in Him, has given us His Holy Spirit who brings forth good fruit from us. On the Day of Judgment, you will stand free from your evil deeds for Christ’s sake, and you will stand clothed in all righteousness for Christ’s sake. And this is by faith, not by works. Therefore, the creed concludes, “This is the catholic faith; whoever does not believe it faithfully and firmly cannot be saved.” So may the Lord bring forth good fruit from you, but even more so, may the Lord keep you steadfast in this catholic faith unto life everlasting, believing always that because God loved the world by sending His Son into your flesh, you are forgiven for all your sins.

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit—Amen

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus—
Amen

Sermon based on one by the Rev. Andy Richard