

Trinity Sunday

June 12, 2022

"Whoever desires to be saved must think thus about the Trinity." This statement from the Athanasian Creed is ironic. Because our thinking is incapable of considering the true God. Our reason cannot comprehend God. He is a mystery, the greatest mystery, the source of all godly mysteries. His ways are not our ways. His thoughts are not our thoughts. As far as heaven is above the earth, so far are his ways and thoughts from our own. How deep are God's riches, wisdom and knowledge; how impossible it is to find out his decisions and trace his ways! And yet, God still desires us to think about him. He wants our minds to be conformed to him and to everything he is. Therefore God, in his infinite mercy, has revealed himself to us.

To think correctly about God is not our ability to figure God out. That's impossible. St. Paul says that the mind set on the flesh is hostile to God. Natural man cannot accept the things of the Spirit, because they are foolishness to him and only understood by the Spirit himself. Our thinking about God must come from God's Word. God's Word takes all our reason, all of our understanding, all of our intelligence, and it puts it in subjection to what he reveals about himself. He puts to death our own natural way of thinking. And in doing this, he causes us to be reborn so that we may see what he reveals. By putting to death our natural reason, he renews our minds so that we may discern his good, acceptable, and perfect will.

So what is this thinking about the Trinity? What is this knowledge of God? It isn't our own rational exercise. It isn't some intellectual gymnastics we perform as we slavishly agree to what doesn't make sense. No, it is God giving us new hearts and minds. In other words, it is worship.

Listen to what the Athanasian Creed says: "The catholic faith is this: that we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the substance." This is the true, whole, and universal faith. It is that we worship God. To worship God is to trust in God. It is to know him as he has revealed himself. It is to rely on everything he has done for you, to know his love, which surpasses all human ability to know anything at all.

Whoever would be saved must hold this catholic faith. You must hold to this true worship of God. Catholic simply means "according to the whole." It doesn't describe allegiance to a group, like a hierarchy based in Rome. No, it simply refers to everything God has given for Christians to believe and know. Our denomination isn't what determines our confession. It's the other way around. Being Lutheran doesn't describe our affiliation to this or that synod or outward organization. No, it simply refers to our confession drawn from Scripture. In the same way, being catholic doesn't describe a church government with grades of bishops and other clergy. It describes our confession of God's Word. It describes the teaching of Scripture given to the church throughout the generations. It is only from the Scriptures that true worship of God is known.

No one can see God. The only begotten Son who is himself God – he has made him known. He has made him known by making his love known. He has made his love known by loving us. This is the same love known by God from all eternity. And this is his love. It is that God has given his only begotten Son up into death for all sinners so that everyone who believes in him would not perish but have eternal life. What is this life? It is the life God has. It is the life the Father has always shared with the Son, the life proceeding from God by his Holy Spirit. It is to know the only true God through Jesus Christ our Lord. To know God is to have eternal life. This is what it means

to think about him. This is what it means to worship him. It is to rest in him, to belong to him, clinging to his Word, with the assurance that he knows us as his own.

As true God, Jesus knows everything. John records that Jesus didn't need to join with any man, because he knew man. He knew what was in man. He knew the sin of the human heart, the hostility of the human mind, the arrogance of human nature, which won't accept God. Our human nature can't know the unity of God. Instead, we strive for unity by finding others who already agree with us. If we can just put together the right team, the right party, the right club, then we can imagine that we have unity. John Lennon imagined a world where all people live as one. But he could only think about this unity by ignoring God, getting rid of religion, and wishing away heaven and hell. How he ends the song is telling. "You may say I'm a dreamer," he sings, "But I'm not the only one. Maybe someday you will join us, and the world will live as one." The only way Lennon could imagine unity was by inviting people to join his team. We can achieve unity if we can only organize our own echo chamber.

But the unity of God is not like the unity of this world. Jesus already had the only true unity with the Father and the Holy Spirit. He didn't need to join a club, a party, or any kind of team. Because he knew what was in man. After John records this, he talks about a man from a team. This man was Nicodemus. The team was the Pharisees. They were separated from the other earthly teams. They prided themselves by their devotion to the Scriptures and their correct thinking about God's law. They figured that if only people would join them, then they could accomplish the unity they needed. But again, Jesus was not interested in joining any human group. He wouldn't join himself to any hierarchy or pecking order, no matter how pious it seemed to be.

So when Nicodemus assures Jesus that he and his fellow Pharisees know that he's a big deal, that he comes from God, and that God is with him, Jesus doesn't bight. He's not interested in what the Pharisees or any other group think they know about him. He is straightforward and to the point with Nicodemus. He speaks the truth. "If anyone isn't born from above," he says, "he can't see God's kingdom." You can't even begin to see God unless you are altogether born anew. Joining the right organization of likeminded individuals won't do anything for you. When Nicodemus shows his inability or unwillingness to grasp these words, Jesus responds: "Unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, he can't enter the kingdom of God."

Jesus is referring to baptism. We are baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. By bringing us into God, whose ways and thoughts are high above our own, this baptism puts to death our natural way of thinking. It gives us faith by the Spirit of the living God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, but that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Natural man can only see the various denominations, the various groups, the various teams and factions, and he judges based on what he thinks he knows. But through baptism, the Spirit of God puts to death all of these divisions. By bearing witness to what he has always known, he puts to death all human thinking. And he causes us to worship him, to know him, to think of him, and to confess him as the one and only God.

How does baptism do this? St. Paul says that we are baptized into the death of Christ. It is there, in the death of God's Son, where all human thinking is put to shame. The Word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. It is despised by those who boast in their own intelligence. But it is there, in the crucified body of Christ, in the Son of Man lifted up on the cross, where true knowledge of God is found. Because it is there where the love of God is carried out in its fullness.

It is there where God turns his anger away from poor sinners, where the whole world is reconciled and restored to God.

Folks imagine that they can bring about a better world by their own reason and strength. They think they can bring about unity. They dream of global peace and harmony, which can only be accomplished by the control of a few factions of powers. There's nothing new under the sun. The builders of the tower of Babel thought the same thing. Yet such thoughts and imaginations of man's heart are only evil continually. They rely on selfish notions as each tries to control or manipulate his neighbor, trying to achieve whatever version of heaven they can imagine.

But no one has ascended to heaven except for the Son of Man who came down from heaven. God doesn't have us know his glory in heaven by discovering the potential within ourselves. Instead, he humbles us, leading us to see the unspeakable corruption of our own hearts, so that we would know him only through his Son.

Consider the example of Isaiah. Isaiah was in the temple when God revealed himself with his glory filling the entire place. The angels cried out, "Holy, Holy, Holy is the LORD of hosts! The whole earth is full of his glory!" Isaiah was terrified. Facing God, the Three in One and One in Three, the Thrice-Holy LORD, he could not boast in himself. He could not boast about what team or group of people he belonged to. Instead, he said, "I am a man of unclean lips dwelling in the midst of a people with unclean lips." Isaiah was beholding the LORD who is the King over all the earth. No strength of man, no party, no team, no hierarchy, no prince or human institution could save him. But one of the angels, using a tong, grabbed a burning coal from the altar. He touched Isaiah's lips with it and declared, "Your guilt is taken away and your sins are atoned for."

This is how God made himself known to Isaiah. And this is how God makes himself known to us. He doesn't let us rely on any of our own thinking. Instead, he himself provides the atonement for our sins, which his Son rendered for all sinners on the altar of the cross. This is his love. It's a great mystery, which no human reason can even imagine. And by this same mystery, our Lord gathers us as his holy people, joining himself to us through the washing of water with his Word. By this same mystery, our Lord Jesus places his own body and blood to our lips and says, "Given and shed for you for the remission of sins." By faith, we rely on this great mystery.

And this is what it means to think of God. It is to worship him. It is to receive from him what our human reason can only scoff at. It is to adore the mystery in the confession of the only true God, three in one. God has given it all to us in his Word. This is the catholic faith. Blessed are those who believe it faithfully and firmly! Amen.