

May 27, 2018
Holy Trinity Sunday

“Seeing God Beyond Us”

John 3:1-17

While I’d guess that the vast majority of Lutheran Christians accept the doctrine of the Holy Trinity as truth, I’d say they don’t think about it all that much. Thinking about the Holy Trinity is kind of like looking at an optical illusion that doesn’t make sense. There is this picture of what seems to be different stairways all connected with people walking on them, but the up and down up the stairs is all messed up. Your brain tries to make sense of it but it can’t and eventually you just have to turn away and shake your head. It’s mind blowing.

The Holy Trinity is like that, it’s a truth of God that is beyond the comprehension of us, God’s creation. Unfortunately, with God people often do the same thing—turn away, shake their head, clear it of how awesomely above us God is, and move on. But because as Christians we don’t want to turn away from God, because we know that our salvation is in God’s Son. But we are tempted to reshape Him into something or someone we can handle.

Every time I preach on John 3 I try to clarify that oh so popular verse that is the Gospel in a nutshell. *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”* While it most certainly is true that it was from God’s unfathomable love for His created people that He sent His Son, the Christ, to redeem us by the cross, Jesus is here describing the manner in which that redemption will take place. *“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved [meaning ‘in this manner loved’] the world, that he gave his only Son...”*

Jesus is recalling a time God’s righteous wrath had come upon Israel’s unfaithfulness in the form of venomous snakes. After their repentance, at God’s direction Moses formed a bronze serpent, raised it up on a pole, and anyone dying by a snake bite could look to the snake and not die.

But what ultimately became of that symbol of God’s mercy? It became an idol! Generations later when King Hezekiah attempted to bring Judah back to right worship of God it is written that *“he broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it.”* What God gave in mercy, they turned against Him. They stood it up as something of the world called a god, but a god they could manage with offerings and sacrifices—made it a god they could understand.

Do we do the same thing with Jesus?

I mean look around your culture. Ask your neighbors what they think about Jesus and what practical impact He has on their lives. I can respect atheists and skeptics, at least they come out and say “I don’t believe” or “I’m not sure I’m buying this Jesus thing.” They’re wrong, but I can respect their honesty.

But “Christians” will claim Jesus as Lord and Savior and turn around and say things that totally deny His authority as God. Of course, this shows up in the realm of sin. Folks do little thefts against employers or maybe on their taxes and they just expect Jesus won’t mind because life is tough and he’ll understand. He’s righteous God! He’s holy. Sin is not okay with Him. It is an abomination to His perfect being.

We have inclinations toward sexual immorality and pornography, substance addictions, other behaviors that take God’s good blessings to sinful places. The excuse? “Well, God made

me this way.” In other words it’s His fault so He’ll just have to deal with it. That’s not regarding God as God, that’s making Him something you can manage.

But it’s not just sin. It’s how we think about God, about Jesus. Remember “Jesus is my copilot,” or “Jesus is my homey.” I’m glad those sayings have passed, but the thinking that Christ is just some good buddy hanging out in your life for the ride is still around. Another oldie but goodie, “What would Jesus do?” As if I’m just like him and have the same ability to make righteous decision in life just like He did. What would Jesus do? He’d be God above and beyond your comprehension, dying for you and redeeming you from sin, death and Satan! That’s what Jesus would do!

At funerals I hear folks say, “Now she’s be watching over you and caring for you from heaven.” That’s Jesus’ job, not dear, human grand mama! Some churches say you “make a decision for Christ” as if He is something you’re even capable of grabbing on to. In so many ways we try to make Christ less than He is, a being we can understand and manage.

If we don’t rail against this temptation and repent of this practice, we may find ourselves being Nicodemus. Christ the Lord Jesus, Son of God, standing smack dab in the middle of our life and our response is to admire Him as a great teacher, a worker of wonders, and exemplary person, yet something less than the true Son of the Father reigning at the right hand—of the one divine substance of God.

I think we all need to spend more prayerful, devotional, contemplative time dwelling on our Savior Jesus Christ in union with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, all-powerful, all-knowing, ever-present, deigning out of love to grant us pardon and forgiveness through the bloody suffering and death of the cross. We need to let that boggle our mind, fill us with awe, maybe even cry out like Isaiah, “Woe is me!” at the glory of God. This is the God who declares by that cross, “Behold, your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for,” and we can trust it’s true.

If we take the merciful love of God in Christ and turn it into an idol, the little, manageable “Jesus the forgiveness guy” totem hanging out in the corner of our life somewhere, is He our Lord and master, or are we His? Where is faith aimed in such a scenario? And is that saving faith? Certain hope? Trust in the God of power beyond our reckoning? Or is it just us doing our life as Lord, and keeping a pet god on a leash?

That’s kind of harsh, I admit. But you’re hear for the forgiveness of sins delivered in Word and Sacrament. The God that is faithful to His promise of the forgiveness, life and salvation found in these things cannot be understood or managed—does not make any human sense at all in doing what He did to provide these gifts. Receiving the gifts, do you dare make Him any less than He truly is? Of course not.

So think about this often. God is God above, beyond and incomprehensible. God is Father, Son, Holy Ghost in glory and power. You’re nothing compared to Him, yet He of Himself values and loves you so much He died to redeem you from death and draw you close to Himself. He’s not your idol. He is God. He is Lord. He is Jesus for you.

Amen.