

John 3:1-17
Trinity Sunday May 29-30, 2010
Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church Girard, IL

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There are two things that often make Lutherans feel uncomfortable in confessing the Athanasian Creed, as we just did. The first is the use of the term catholic. But that's easy enough properly to understand. Catholic with a small 'c' simply means "**universal.**" The catholic faith is the one true faith delivered by the apostles and prophets and recorded for us in the Scriptures, the one, universal faith which has been confessed by the true church in all places at all times, the faith which trusts in Jesus Christ alone as the Savior, which worships the Holy Trinity as the only true God.

But there is another part of the Athanasian Creed that, at first, seems to present a little more difficulty. The Creed says, "**They that have done good will go into life everlasting.**" Perhaps while you were saying those words, you were wondering to yourself, "**Hey, that doesn't sound quite right. We're saved by God's grace alone, not by our works! How could that statement be correct?**" Indeed we are saved by grace alone through faith in Christ. It is a pure gift of God, as Ephesians 2 clearly states. But what the Athanasian Creed states is not unscriptural. For in John 5:28-29, Jesus says this, "**The hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear the Son of Man's voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.**"

So how do we reconcile these things? How can both be true? The answer comes from Jesus' words in John 6:28-29. There the people ask Jesus, "**What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?**" And Jesus answered and said to them, "**This is the work of God that you believe in Him whom He sent.**" So to do good is to believe in Jesus, whom the Father sent to be our Savior. The "**good work**" which the Father seeks and which He

works in you by His Holy Spirit is to trust in Christ as the One who made full payment for your sins on the cross and who was raised again on the third day to give you life and resurrection.

To do good is to have faith in Jesus, for it is written in Hebrews 11:6, **“Without faith, it is impossible to please God.”** Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin, no matter how good and holy it appears to man. Only works which have been cleansed by the blood of Christ and which are worked by Him in us through faith are good and holy before the throne of God.

So it is that we rightly confess the truth of the Athanasian Creed, **“They that have done good will go into life everlasting; and they that have done evil, into everlasting fire. This is the catholic faith which, except a man believes faithfully and firmly, he cannot be saved.”** There is no salvation, no eternal life apart from faith in this 3-in-1 God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; this Jesus, the Son of God who became flesh to redeem us.

Now if that is true, if we believe that only through Christ is there life everlasting and without Him the rest are bound for hell, you would think that we'd be eager to speak about that out in the world to our family and friends and neighbors. For we have been shown the only truth that can save. Out of love for others, we should want to confess what we believe, so that they may be drawn into this same saving faith and worship and not be lost. *But the truth is, it's not easy for us to confess that faith out in the world is it?* It's easier just to keep quiet and avoid possible trouble. We don't want to be stereotyped; we don't want to be thought of as nut cases. And so we often keep what we believe secret, unless we're sure it's safe. We think and talk one way in here, and we think and talk another way out there.

That's what Nicodemus was doing in today's Gospel. He came to Jesus at night. It is written elsewhere in the Scriptures that Nicodemus was a follower of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews. You see, Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin. And that council saw Jesus as trouble, a rabble rouser and a blasphemer who needed to be silenced. So Nicodemus felt the pressure to

conform and maintain the status quo, even as we know all too well the pressure to conform to this world and follow its ways.

But Nicodemus was beginning to be drawn in by the words of Jesus. Those words of life were beginning to penetrate his heart. He was beginning to want something that he didn't have, just as every sinner, whether he admits it or not, knows that he's missing something without Christ. Our hearts are indeed restless until they rest in Him.

So Nicodemus comes with his restless heart to Jesus by night. And he says, **“Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.”** Nicodemus reasons that Jesus must be from God, because He's able to do these signs and miracles. And so Nicodemus figures that Jesus might be able to teach him something so that he can get his spiritual life together and make religion really work for him. But Jesus responds in a way that shows Nicodemus is missing the point entirely. The Christian faith is not about cleaning up your act; it's about stopping the act and getting a whole new life. It's not doing something to get yourself in touch with God and in harmony with His will, it's about being reborn in Christ. Jesus said, **“Most assuredly I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”**

To see the kingdom of God you must die to this life, to reason and experience, to logic and common sense, and to your own ideas of what God should be like. This life is marred and corrupted by the fall into sin, and so it must pass away. We must receive a new and holy life that is acceptable to stand in God's presence and to enter His kingdom. And that life is given to us by Christ. For He lived a sinless and holy life for us. He fulfilled the commandments entirely and completely kept the Law of love, even to the point of laying down His life. Now He is risen from the dead in the flesh to pour out His life by the Holy Spirit on all who believe. Jesus said, **“Most assuredly I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”**

When you come to the Light with penitent faith in Jesus, just as Nicodemus came through the darkness to Him who is the Light of the world, Christ will not rebuke and reject you. **“God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.”** What good news that is! Jesus did not come to damn you but to rescue you. He did not come to lay new rules and requirements on you, but to take your burdens and sins on Himself and put them to death in His body on the cross that you may have life and have it abundantly.

“God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.” There is no one to whom that verse does not apply. God so loved you that He gave His only begotten Son for you, that believing in Him you shall not perish but have everlasting life.

This is why we hold steadfastly to Scriptural confessions of faith like the Athanasian Creed and reject anything that is contrary to it. It’s not out of an arrogant **“We’re right, everyone else is wrong”** kind of attitude. Rather, we know that this is the only true God who is love; this Jesus is the only one who is the way, the truth, and the life. And no one comes to the Father except through Him. Here’s the only medicine that can heal you. All the others are just quacks. Ultimately it is out of love for our neighbor that we reject all false religion, so that they may know and believe the saving truth of the Holy Trinity—the Father who created us and who loves even us fallen creatures, the Son who demonstrates that love by taking on our flesh and redeeming us with His precious blood, and the Holy Spirit who pours out that love upon us by means of His words and sacraments. This is our God. This is our Lord. We are not ashamed to confess Him but are glad to say:

Blessed be the Holy Trinity and the Undivided Unity: let us give glory to Him because he has shown mercy to us! For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to Him be glory forever. Amen.