

June 16, 2019 – Holy Trinity Sunday
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
John 16:12-15

We Believe in One God

I'm beginning this sermon with a story that might embarrass my children, or maybe me. This happened some time ago, back when I was a student in seminary. I don't think my kids were in school yet, or just barely, maybe they were four and six, so maybe I should cut them some slack. We were eating lunch together and we were talking about God. That makes it sound like we regularly have conversations about God, over lunch, which we don't, though we could, should. On that day we were. I must have said something about God and Jesus because my sweet little children said, innocently, but with conviction, "Jesus isn't God." "Yes he is!" I sputtered, aghast, "Jesus is God!" I was studying to be a pastor, I was deep into systematic theology, I'd been sending them to Sunday School, and somehow I still had two little heretics in my home, piping up with one of the oldest anti-Trinitarian heresies: Jesus isn't God. My children gave me permission to tell that story, but Ruth said that I should also note, in defense of their comment, "It's confusing."

It is confusing, and not just for four-year-olds. The divinity of Jesus, Jesus' unity with God, not to mention the Holy Spirit, who also is God—the whole concept of the Holy Trinity is confusing. It's probably the most confusing thing about Christian faith. Christians believe that there is a God. That's why we are here, we believe there is a God...and that Jesus is God...and that the Spirit is God—and it's not three gods. We believe in one God, one Triune God.

The early church had a lot of conversations about this. I'm sure some of these conversations were over lunch, because it was everywhere, it was the talk of the town the first centuries of Christianity, how to understand God and Jesus. Among the various camps there was: adoptionism, docetism, arianism, nestorianism, monophysitism, and more, all of them deemed not it, not right, because none of them rang true to what had happened, what became known after Easter, and after, what was happening in people, in the early church, people couldn't stop talking about. They had lots of conversations about it, meetings, Councils, held on various continents, over centuries, and came up with creeds, statements to help summarize the Trinitarian nature of God.

We often say one of these creeds in worship, usually the Apostles' Creed, but sometimes the Nicene Creed. Both of those Trinitarian creeds are organized into three sections: a part about God the Father, a part about God the Son, a part about God the Holy Spirit. Each of these parts—or in church terminology, "articles"—describe characteristics and activities of each part—or in church terminology, "person"—of the Trinity: the Father who creates, the Son who saves, the Spirit who empowers. The Nicene Creed, which is a little longer than the Apostles' creed, also includes descriptions of the relationship between the three persons of the Trinity—who, of course, are not really three persons—not in the way we usually we think of three persons. As the Nicene creed begins, "We believe in one God." The Nicene creed also more explicitly addresses the question of the divinity of Jesus. Though Jesus is known as the second person of the Trinity, Jesus is not secondary to the Father, Jesus was not created by the Father, Jesus is of one being with the Father. The second person of the Trinity was there when the world was created, the second person of the Trinity is there where and whenever the first person of the Trinity is. The Holy Spirit is also there. Though listed last and perhaps described the least, the

third person of the Trinity is not an afterthought, it's the activator. The Holy Spirit is the giver of life. The Holy Spirit is there, with the Father and the Son, and is also proceeding, being sent, enlivening the world, enlivening believers, enlivening faith. The Holy Spirit is the way that God is made known, the way that God's presence continues to be with us, around us, among us, in us. The Holy Spirit is the way that God speaks through the centuries, through prophets, through apostles, through the church, through us.

There's yet another creed, the Athanasian Creed, which is longer than both the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed combined, and which is organized in yet another way. The Athanasian creed with a strong caution against confusing the Trinity—even though it is confusing—and continues, not with a part for each part, but with affirmation of qualities each has, and shares, how they are distinct, and one. We tried to convey that in the way we recited that creed—parts of that creed, it's a very long creed—at the beginning of worship today. The Athanasian Creed emphasizes how each part of the Trinity is its own person, but also one; God is Triune.

Jesus talks about this in the gospel reading today. Jesus doesn't use the word Trinity—the word "Trinity" never appears in the Bible; neither does the word Bible—but what Jesus is speaking about is thoroughly Trinitarian. The gospel passage for today comes from a long speech Jesus gives at the Last Supper, a section of John's gospel known as "The Farewell Discourse." After years spent with his disciples, teaching them, guiding them, leading them, Jesus' time with his students is coming to an end. He looks at what's ahead and gives parting words. In a sense it's like the disciples are graduates, and Jesus is giving them a commencement address, the most important one they will ever hear. Jesus tells them that in this next phase in their lives, after he goes away, which itself is confusing to them, but after that happens, the Holy Spirit will come, and will guide them into truth. Jesus says that the Spirit will not speak on its own, but will glorify Jesus, because the Spirit will take what Jesus says and say it to them, and this will be from the Father, because the Father and Jesus have the same things, all one has the other has.

It's confusing. I think Jesus knows this, because of the way this gospel reading begins. Jesus says to his disciples, on the night he is betrayed, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them right now." Or, in other words, "You're not going to be able to take all of this in right now." Or, "You're graduating, but you're not done learning." There is still Good Friday, and Easter, and Ascension, and Pentecost, and the life of the church, and the life to come. We're not done learning, how could we be? We believe in one God, whose being is before time, and in time, and beyond time.