

Seeking Glory

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Dear friends in Christ: Every year on October 31st, we Lutherans observe Reformation Day. And when we do, what we're celebrating are a series of historical events by which the Lord in his mercy restored to their place of prominence in the Church's teachings key saving truths that were sadly being obscured, neglected, or altogether denied; namely that we are saved from sin and its eternal consequences by God's grace alone through faith alone in what Jesus accomplished for us by his death for sin and his rising to life again. We celebrate and give thanks to God that these truths were recovered and that by his grace they are being preserved among us even today.

So it is also with Holy Trinity Sunday. Today we celebrate a much earlier Reformation that took place in the Church. This one happened more than a thousand years before the time of Luther. And contrary to what you might think, at issue then was not so much the nature of God and how he exists as one divine being in three distinct persons; but rather the real controversy was about Jesus. The questions were: Who is he? And what is he?

There were at the time a large number of very powerful and influential bishops, pastors, and church leaders who followed the teachings of a man name Arius, who was a bishop in Alexandria. He taught that Jesus was not true God – not in the same sense that God the Father is, anyway. Instead, Arius said, whatever might be called “divine” in Jesus was in fact a creation of the one true God, something like a super angelic spirit. It was this created super spirit that was later united with a human body born of the Virgin Mary. That's who Jesus is: not true man and true God, as Christians had long believed; but true man and something significantly less than God. This, Arius thought, made Christian theology a lot easier to understand; because, let's admit it: one God in three persons is a difficult concept to wrap your head around. Many people agreed. Arius's teachings gained a lot of popular support, and his followers intensely persecuted those who held to the traditional belief that Jesus is true man and true God in every sense of the word.

But those who held to the biblical truth about Jesus saw what was at stake. The doctrine of the Holy Trinity is not just a philosophical theory about the nature of God. The heart of the issue is the Gospel. If Jesus is not true God, if he is only a created being and not the eternal Son who is equal to the Father in majesty, power, and all the other divine attributes, then it was something less than God who died on the cross for your sins. And if that's true, then the atonement is not complete. You see, what makes the death of Jesus for sin able to pay the full redemption price for all the world's sin is the fact that he is God. If he's anything less, sin is not completely paid for. More than that, then the Father didn't give his only begotten Son in love for the life of the world; he gave something he made, a mere creature, something worth far less to him. By way of illustration, it's the difference between losing your child and merely a favorite portrait of your child. The sacrifice and therefore the love that God shows in giving it are much less. It cheapens the atonement. It cheapens God's love. Finally, to say that such a devalued sacrifice *could* pay the atonement price for the sin of the world, is to imply that our problem with sin is not that big a deal. It's “Sure, we mess up and make a mistake once in a while, but total corruption? One hundred percent depravity of the mind and will for which we deserve an eternity of suffering in hell? No. Don't be silly. We're really quite good most of the time. We're just a little bruised; not totally broken. Any ol' sacrifice will do to save us.”

The theologians who defended the Bible's true teachings about Jesus and the place of the Son in the Holy Trinity saw the danger in what Arius and his followers were saying. They saw that by lowering the divine nature in Jesus to anything less than the eternal Son who is coequal with and of the same substance as the Father was to destroy the Gospel. And that's why they vigorously stood up for the truth even in the face of great persecution. And that's why too that on this day that we celebrate their eventual victory over Arius and his heretical views, all of today's Scripture texts stress the full deity of Jesus. In the passage from Proverbs, the eternal Son is described as Divine Wisdom with whom and through whom God created the world. In the reading from Acts, St. Peter declares Jesus to be both Christ and Lord – and when he says Lord, he doesn't mean the boss; he means the Lord God who made heaven and earth. And in today's Gospel, it's Jesus himself who declares his true divinity over and against his opponents among the Jews who, like Arius, were trying to make him less than he really is.

Interestingly enough, in a way they were doing it for the same reason as Arius: they were seeking glory for themselves. Bringing Jesus down, making him something less than he is, is done to raise humans to a level higher than they are. With Arius, his teachings about Jesus implied that our problem with sin isn't that bad. His attempt to rob Jesus of his rightful place and glory effectively transferred some of that glory to mankind. And this is what the Jews are up to in their discourse with Jesus – but they aren't nearly as subtle about it.

Today's Gospel reading is the climax of a contentious discussion that took place between Jesus and his opponents at the Temple in Jerusalem. In the course of this exchange, Jesus has claimed to be the sole source of the Water of Life and he said that he is the Light of the World. He's been encouraging those who hear him to come to him, to trust in him, so that he can give them life eternal. But they're not having any of it. They don't need it. They don't need him. Why? Because they are children of Abraham, they say, and they believe that they are faithfully keeping the Law of God. "We're good. And God chose us and loves us because we're so good."

Jesus tells them otherwise. He tells them that they are slaves to sin. And for this they want to kill him. In fact, he tells them that their murderous intent – that they are actively plotting to do things that they know to be illegal and immoral to get rid of him – is proof that they are sinners. Jesus tells them that if they were children of Abraham, they would do what Abraham did – namely, believe and trust in him. As it is, he says, your intent to murder me shows that your true father is the devil, for he was a murderer from the beginning. It's not a coincidence, by the way, that Satan's goal in enticing our first parents to sin and come under the curse of death was to elevate and glorify himself. This has been Satan's goal all along: to glorify himself at God's and man's expense. And those who do the same – who seek glory for themselves – prove themselves to be his children.

Anyway, all this sets up the heated debate we heard in today's reading. The Jews are furious with Jesus. They can't handle the truth about their sinful condition. They refuse to admit it – even though deep down, I suspect they know he's right – which only makes them madder. They fire back with insults: "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and you have a demon?" It's two of the worst things they can think of to say to him. To the Jews the Samaritans were lower than pond scum. Ah, but to be a demon possessed Samaritan, that would be lower still. And just as an aside that proves the point, the reason the Jews looked down on Samaritans was to raise themselves. It's another form of seeking glory. It's more proof that they are children of their father the devil, the original self-seeker of glory.

And this is why Jesus' reply to them is so telling. First he denies having a demon, but he refuses to play along in their degrading of Samaritans. Instead, he says he honors his Father and they dishonor him by hurling insults. And then he says this: "I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the Judge."

It's vital that we understand this: glory, true glory, comes from God and from him only. It comes from his judgment and just evaluation. It cannot from your efforts to glorify yourself. As Jesus says even of himself, "If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is the Father who glorifies me." To be sure, attempts to achieve glory for oneself are the problem. It's what Satan wanted to do when he rebelled and tried to exalt himself above God. It's what our first parents tried to do when they thought they could become like God by eating the forbidden fruit. It's what the people who were building the tower of Babel wanted to do: to make a name for themselves, to reach for the sky, to achieve lasting glory. It's what the Jews who were arguing with Jesus wanted to do by raising themselves and lowering Jesus and Samaritans. And it's what we do any and every time we seek by our own efforts and accomplishments to attain favor in the sight of God or glory in the eyes of the world. "Look at me! Look at what I've done! Am I not special? Am I not good? Am I not better than others?"

This is nothing more than sinful pride. This is seeking to exalt the self at the expense of others. It's exactly opposite of what godly glory is all about. What's that? It's the glory of the Father that he gives himself sacrificially to beget the Son. It's to his glory that he seeks the Son's glory, not by bringing him into this world as a prince among men and showering him with riches, honor, and power; but rather in sending him as a humble servant to give his life upon the cross – to sacrifice himself – to save sinners. It's to the Son's glory that he submits to the will of his Father and offers himself in love to serve and to save fallen man.

The Jews thought they were glorifying God with their supposedly holy and obedient lives. In truth, they were only seeking to glorify themselves. And that glory is nothing. What Jesus tells them is to trust in him: that's what brings glory to God: that sinners look to the Savior God sent, trust in him, and receive eternal life. And then, having been made alive in Christ, by his love they are transformed to glorify God with their lives not in seeking to reach upward and climb higher; but in descending, reaching downward, and humbling themselves in the service of others. This is glory in the eyes of the Lord: to be like Jesus; not to be served, but to serve. Not to not to say look at me: ain't I great? But to ask "How can I help you? What can I do to raise you up? How can I give myself in love for you?"

But the opponents of Jesus do not understand this. They can't see that kind of glory because they are children of their father the devil. But rather than point accusing fingers at them, we need to recognize that they speak for the sin nature in all of us, the sin nature in us that like Satan seeks after worldly glory, that wants to be recognized and praised, that imagines that God is pleased with me just the way I am – and so ultimately doesn't need a Savior as great as the One God sent. That's what must be destroyed in us. That's what must be put to death through repentance – because to the extent that it lives in us we too will reject Jesus and attempt to bring him down, to make him less of a Savior than we truly need.

That's what the Jews did. When Jesus truthfully claimed to be the great I Am whom their earthly ancestor Abraham rejoiced to see, they took up stones to kill him. As we heard, Jesus hid himself and left them. The time for his sacrifice had not yet come. Eventually though, the Jews would have their way with him. They would falsely accuse him, unjustly condemn him, and get him crucified – all to bring him down and thereby raise themselves. The irony is that in so doing, in attempting to humiliate and destroy him, they brought him the greatest glory of all:

the giving of himself on the cross to save sinners. What they intended for evil, God meant for good. Yes, even for their good, as Peter explains in today's reading from Acts. It's to the very people who condemned and rejected Jesus that Peter preaches repentance and life through faith in the Savior. It's to sinners like you and me. And this is why we can be assured that the promises of the Gospel apply to all – all who will by the power of the Spirit recognize their sins, repent of them, and humble themselves to receive by faith the life and salvation Jesus gives through the glory of his cross.

Therefore let us every day repent of seeking glory for ourselves, and instead hold out our hands as beggars to receive the glory that God seeks to give us through faith in Jesus, the faith that enables us to confess the truth and say, "Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen."

Soli Deo Gloria!