

The Holy Trinity: May 30, 2021

“Of Faith and Eternal Life”

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God, our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

This weekend in America we observe Memorial Day, it is a day in which we remember the men and women who died in military service. The day is set aside not just to remember, but to honor their sacrifice and reflect and enjoy the good gifts for which they gave their lives.

Today in the Church, we observe Trinity Sunday. It is a day in which we remember the Trinity in Unity and Unity in Trinity, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the substance. This day is not just a day set aside to remember God, but to honor Him, worship Him, fall on our knees and bow before the Name above all Names. It is a day in which we reflect upon the good gifts of creation, redemption and sanctification, which are all gifts of God Himself. It is a day we receive with thanksgiving God Himself through His own appointed means, gifts that are yours because Jesus, true God and true man, died so you may have them abundantly.

On this weekend of death and freedom, Jesus says, “*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*”¹ Aside from Psalm 23 and Philippians 4, this has got to be one of the most quoted verses by Christians. John 3:16 is plastered on billboards and written on signs found in parades, and protest marches, and in ball parks. The words aren’t quoted, just the location—John 3:16—is often launched as the Gospel to end all Gospels. Often, well-meaning Christians think that everyone who sees this reference either knows the words, or where to find them; and then, when someone reads it, they will be called, gathered, and enlightened by the Holy Spirit and that He would then sanctify and keep them in the true faith.

Now this verse is great. We know that there is an eternal life and that all believers will know God fully as He is and wants to be known. All believers will enjoy unspeakable bliss in soul and body. When Christians speak of the soul, you are not speaking the same language as many others around you. There is much debate on the soul, and many today, unknowingly, follow the teachings of Aristotle, Plato, and others, who argue for the immortality of the soul. The pagan teachings of the immortality of the soul are not to be mistaken for the Christian doctrine of eternal life.

¹ John 3:16

The soul doesn't exist in a "before-time." There is not a collective oneness of all human souls, of which a part is broken off and placed into a body, to then live, die and then be absorbed back into the collective. This may sound like some 80s sci-fi, but this is what passes for children's entertainment lately, and adults toy with false, wicked, pagan ideas of Karma, empty meditation to become one with the universe, past lives, and attributing souls to objects in creation to whom God has not given souls.

St. Paul declares that those who devote themselves to the belief of the immortality of the soul, those who place their hope in things apart from Christ, are "***separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.***"² The hope of eternal life springs from one place. It has only One Source—God loved the world with such a love that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish. The soul is not immortal; it too can die eternally. The only hope for eternal life for body and soul is in the saving death of Jesus Christ!

This hope is for all, but only those who believe in Christ in this life will enter eternal life. The love of God in Christ embraces the whole world, but added is the clause of purpose—whoever believes in Him will not perish. There is only one way of Salvation revealed in the Scriptures. It is not only dangerous to venture into thoughts of other methods of salvation, it is wicked. A man is not saved by their own works, or just because they are a really nice guy. Faith is necessary.

The necessity of faith in this life is the basis for the admonition addressed to all servants of the Word. They must diligently and faithfully fill the duties of their office, unless by laziness, idleness, or unfaithfulness, they contribute to the cause of eternal perishing of the souls committed to their care. The necessity of faith is the basis for the admonition to all Christians to pray for, instruct, admonish, reprove, and correct, an erring or sinning brother or sister, who is danger of clinging to their own works and ways. The necessity of faith is also addressed to all Christians to lead a blameless life, godly and dignified in every way before the world, for Jesus says, "***Woe to the world for offenses! For it is necessary that offenses come, but woe to the one by whom the offense comes!***"³

The doctrine of eternal life is a beautiful doctrine that must not be sullied by human wisdom, or soiled with our own perversion. It rests on Christ and Him alone so that faith is strengthened,

² Ephesians 2:12

³ Matthew 18:7

and Christians don't lose heart, "*Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.*"⁴ Faith in Jesus causes the Christian, even in turmoil, to, "*Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.*"⁵

With such great news, why are there so many misunderstandings? Who would want to wreck this beautiful gift? We know the short answer is sin, but just how far does this go? Have you ever stopped and pondered why we have Memorial Day? I in no way want to denigrate the sacrifice made by those who gave their lives, but isn't it odd that we need to have a day in which we are told to remember them? Shouldn't we be thankful every day for their sacrifice, and while veteran's will tell you, this day is not for them, it is for those who died; isn't it also strange that we have just one day a year that we are told to thank them for their service; which is something that we should be doing every day?

My point is that even with something as important and seemingly straight forward as Memorial Day, how many only see it as a day off from work and to finally fire up the grill to eat and party until you need Pepto Bismal? If it is easy to twist earthly gifts about me, than how much easier is it for the sinful nature to twist the gifts of God. Our confessions rightly state, "*Enthusiasm...is the origin, power, life, and strength of all heresy.*"⁶ To be excited about something is great, but that feeling can easily become a god which you serve and are willing to sacrifice everything to reach that same level of excitement.

Christians should be excited about John 3:16; however, one must be careful to not make it your own work. The object of saving faith is not that you have faith; faith's object is Christ's death in your place. Sinners don't like to hear that someone had to die for me; they would rather live in blissful ignorance. This is not only why many churches stand more and more empty, it is also why less and less people attend memorial services this weekend. The world tries to hide death away by treating it like Voldemort, or Beetlejuice, names that shall not be named.

⁴ 2 Corinthians 4:16–18

⁵ Matthew 5:12

⁶ Smalcald Articles, Pt. III, Art. VIII, 8

We are told not to say death or funeral, because it might make someone sad; it makes loss real. I say, “Good. Death is real and we must be comfortable saying death, dead, and funeral. If we talk about death, we can then say that Christ has defeated death. Death is real, and so is the resurrection of the what? Not the resurrection of the forms that housed the immortal soul; THE RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD!”

This is the sinner’s problem. It doesn’t like to hear of grace or mercy, it likes retribution, and vengeance. If God loves the world by sacrifice, then I can’t take revenge upon my brother. If God forgives me freely for the sake of Christ, I must forgive my brother whose debts to me are way less than mine to God. Because the sinful nature wants and knows revenge by experience, because it understands an eye for eye, it seeks to twist even God’s free-gift of grace into an earned payment. We don’t feel so good about hearing the innocent Son of God who died in my place; so, to placate my experience, mankind tries to falsely teach in several ways.

One way is to speak of Jesus’ death on the cross in our place, which is called the vicarious atonement, a theory. By attaching the term theory, casts a shadow of doubt, and hints that “maybe this isn’t true, but one way to understand God’s Work.”

Another false teaching states that there is no wrath in God on account of sin, but that God declares His love for man through Christ. Teachers here postulate the idea that God is not angry over sin. What really matters is God sees the potential in mankind. So instead of sin needing to be paid for, He declares that He loves you. As a show of just how much He loves you, Jesus died. This movement of God’s love is then supposed to motivate you to love Him back. Brothers and sisters in Christ, this makes God a psychological charlatan; nothing but a shyster, who requires your work to be equal to God’s.

Another false teaching drives the idea that Christ saves by being the Head of a new, sanctified humanity. Instead of being justified, saved by Christ, and then sanctified, that is made holy; here sanctification comes first. This teaching asserts that you must first be holy, a righteous and good person, only then will Christ be your Head. “Faith does not save you; faith does not obtain forgiveness of sins,” they say. In this teaching faith grafts you into the new, perfect, body of Christ.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this false teaching is clearly rebutted in Romans, “*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the*

redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.⁷

John 3:16 is great Gospel, if understood rightly. As great as John 3:16 is, even better is the next verse, ***“God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”***⁸ This is the heart of the Gospel. This is the very Work of God. This is the proclamation of the death of Christ. Verse 16 talks about the fruit, and what you get out of it; which is why so many cling to this verse—it’s about me, it is my hope; it makes it personal. Verse 17 drives home the reality that Jesus death is not a psychological exercise or emotional stratagem. It not a theory with which to ponder and twist until it breaks. Theories cannot bring peace to the conscience, since they lead the conscience to rely not solely on Christ’s work, but on man’s effort, or man’s character, or something within myself as the deciding factor in salvation.

Only faith in the vicarious satisfaction can remove our guilt. When confronted with the holy words of God, ***“You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy,”***⁹ there is no amount of human cunning that can silence the condemnation of my commonness. Man knows on his own he cannot be holy, so he tries to make the holy common and the common holy. But the voice of accusation continues, and the guilt can only be removed by Jesus who was nailed with our own handwriting on the cross. It was for my sins He died. I deserved to hang upon the cross in shame, but He did it for me. He became common to make me holy.

It is here where the troubled conscience finds rest and true peace, ***“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”***¹⁰ Nicodemus came at night, fearful of what the world and his friends might think of him, and he came looking for answers, for peace. He was heavy laden with guilt and labored with understanding. Theories of the immortal soul were being debated in the marketplace thanks to the Greek influence of Aristotle and Plato and the openness and plurality of gods thanks to Rome. The debate of the afterlife and souls and the invisible world even butted-heads between the two schools of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

⁷ Romans 3:23–25

⁸ John 3:17

⁹ Leviticus 19:2

¹⁰ Matthew 11:28

With all of the competing ideas, Jesus points Nicodemus to the true rest, “Nicodemus. I am the true rest. You must be born from above. You use the term divine realm, but have no understanding what it truly means. You must be born of the water and the Spirit. These are not to separate acts, they are one. You do not know where the Spirit goes, but I do; and I’m telling you where to find Him. I have come to save the world, and by faith, you can be part of this. This faith is given to you as you are born anew through Word and Sacrament.”

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this is our God—Three persons, one divine essence. We worship the Trinity in Unity and Unity in Trinity, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the substance. All Three Persons are present and involved in baptism. The payment for sin is made, and there new birth is given. You bear witness to the baptized that they have received God and all His gifts of creation, redemption, and sanctification. As members of the body of Christ, you teach the baptized the gift of eternal life that is theirs, that rest here awaits for their heavy burdens. God has sent His Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but to save it.

Look around, that is why were are here. We walk by the font; we hear the words of God; we eat the fruit of the tree of the cross in the body and blood of our crucified Lord. These are not our works. These are not psychological tricks or emotional facades, these are the very means by which God declares and dispenses His forgiveness, life, and salvation.

As we remember the soldiers who gave their lives for our American freedoms, may we also remember the saints who have given their lives for our Christian freedom, and most importantly, Jesus, who gave His life for our eternal freedom. Let us pray,

“Would to God that I might even
 As the martyred saints of old,
 With the helping hand of Heaven,
 Steadfast in the battle bold!
 O my God, I pray Thee,
 In the combat stay me.
 Grant that I may ever be
 Loyal, staunch, and true to Thee.”¹¹ Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

¹¹ Rise Again, Ye Loin-Hearted TLH 470:4

Prayer of the Church
The Holy Trinity
30 May 2021

Let us pray for the whole Church of God in Christ Jesus and for all people according to their needs.

Lord of hosts, Your ways are inscrutable and Your judgments unsearchable. Through Your Word, give us an ever-growing understanding of the depths of Your riches, wisdom and knowledge, that we may glorify You forever. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Lord of hosts, You gave Your only Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. Bless the work of missionaries as they carry this Gospel to the ends of the earth, that many may hear of Your love in Your Son and be saved through Him. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Lord of hosts, have mercy on those who would deny the new birth of water and the Spirit to infants and children. Open their eyes and hearts to the fullness of Your grace, that they would no longer hinder these little ones from being born again and seeing Your kingdom. Loving Father, we give thanks that in Holy Baptism we receive forgiveness of sins, deliverance from death and the devil, and eternal salvation, bless those who celebrate baptismal anniversaries this week, especially, *Elizabeth, and Isabelle*, grant that by Your Word and Spirit they may faithfully keep the covenant into which they have been called, boldly confess their Savior, and finally share with all Your saints the joys of eternal life; Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Heavenly Father, You have promised to send Your holy angels to guard and keep Your children. We thank and praise You for the gift of life and for the protection and care you have provided as *Stephanie, William, and Barb* celebrate their birthdays. Grant that they may grow in grace, continue to know Your loving-kindness, abide in the confession of Your care and protection, serve You faithfully all the days of their life and finally come to the fullness of Your joys in heaven; Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Lord God, Heavenly Father, we give thanks for the joy and blessings that You have granted *Eric & Amber, and Steve & Pam* during the years of their marriage. Assist them always by Your grace that with true fidelity and steadfast love they may ever honor and keep their marriage vows, grow in love towards You and for each other, and come at last to the eternal joys that You have promised; Lord in Your mercy; **hear our prayer.**

Lord of hosts, uphold the shut-in, the sick, the lonely, the oppressed in body or mind, and all who have requested our prayers, [*especially Carmen, Susan, Zoey, Vernon, Karen, Floyd Doughty and those we name in our hearts.*] strengthen their faith so they cannot be shaken. Gladden their hearts, cause their tongues to rejoice and make their flesh dwell in hope. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Lord of hosts, we give thanks for those who have served our nation through military service, and we remember with gratitude those who gave their lives for us and for the cause of freedom. Help us to honor their sacrifice by using our liberty responsibly. Keep safe all who travel, bless our nation, and help us to protect and increase the privileges we have for those who follow us, looking always to You, from whom these privileges come. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Lord of hosts, take away our guilt and atone for our sin by touching our unclean lips with Christ's cleansing body and blood, that we may not be lost but abide in Your holy presence forever. Lord in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

All these things and whatever else You know that we need, grant us, Father, for the sake of Him who died and rose again and now lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God forever. **Amen.**