

The Lord Our God Is One

Holy Trinity b
(Dt.6.4-9) Rm.8.14-17 Jn.3.1-17

The Rev. Thomas L. Weitzel
Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Spring Hill, FL
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I imagine most preachers are glad that Trinity Sunday only comes around once a year -- and for many of them, that may be once too often. It's not the most exciting topic on which to develop a sermon. The very nature of the concept of the Trinity sounds more like a theological abstract that has little to do with everyday realities like tending to your kids or grandkids, making it through the hassles of modern day living, or dealing lovingly with one's not-always-so-pleasant neighbor.

And yet it does. Actually the concept of the Trinity does have something to do with our lives as Christians. But before I tell you how, let me start at another point and lead into it.

I remember when I was just out of high school, I was quite interested in other churches and other religions. A childhood friend, who later became a Lutheran pastor as I did, used to go with me to visit services of all kinds and in all kinds of churches and settings when we were teenagers.

In particular, I remember several occasions when we went to a synagogue for Jewish services. It was very interesting. There was one particular thing that I noticed always occurred and always stood out above all the rest of the liturgy. It was called the Shema, and it's right out of Deuteronomy 6: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one" (v.4).

Every word was written in big capital letters and centered on the page of the Jewish prayer books. And every Jewish service had it: Shema Israel, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one. [And] you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Dt.6:4-5).

Even the speaking of these words by the congregation was with particular reverence and devotion. It obviously was a big deal -- something very important in the Jewish faith.

Later, when I was in seminary and had the opportunity to study Jewish liturgies, I found out that it not only was a big deal, but was probably THE big deal as far as Jewish affirmations of faith go, and HAD BEEN a big deal since the time of Moses.

During that seminary course, I had the opportunity to go to weekday morning prayers at a Chicago synagogue, and saw how the Shema and the following verses from Deuteronomy 6 had even been translated into particular acts of devotion.

Verses 6-9 read as follows: "Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a

sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”

Just so, I learned that the Shema is one of the first things taught to Jewish children. Just so, they are recited it with morning and evening prayers every day.

And just so, Jewish men wear phylacteries containing the words of the Shema in a little leather box tied to their foreheads in a literal interpretation these verses from Deuteronomy 6. And again in a literal way, the Shema is put into a small bronze scroll-like container called a mezuzah and nailed to the outside doorpost so that one may touch it affectionately upon entering or leaving the Jewish home.

What I'm talking about here is a Jewish statement of faith that is carried to the very height of devotion and meaning for their daily lives.

And yet, I would tell you on this day of the Holy Trinity that the idea contained in the Shema is also the most significant thing that we as Christians believe. And we took it straight over from our Jewish roots.

The Lord our God IS one Lord, and not three Lords. We worship ONE God, not three gods. The whole concept of the Trinity does nothing to change God's oneness. Our God -- the one God, the God of Abraham and Isaac, the God of the Jews, the God of Jesus the Christ -- is one and the same God.

Where the concept of the Trinity comes in is in the revelations of God's work in the world. Work as the Creator of all. Work as the loving redeemer of all. And work as the sanctifier or enabler of all. We have given God various titles for these areas in which we know him: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And yet we still talk of all this activity as being the activity of the same one God.

I suppose it might not be necessary to dwell too much on the idea of the oneness of God if it weren't for the fact that some Christians tend to emphasize one or another part of the Trinity too much. For example, some Christians get so heavy into Jesus-talk and Jesus-emphasis, you'd get the impression that the Father and Holy Spirit have little to do with us or the total being of God.

On the other hand, there are some Christians who get so heavy into Spirit talk and born-again talk and talk about gifts and speaking in tongues and all the rest that you'd think that the Creating and Redeeming work of God was insignificant.

The truth is, focusing too much on one or another part of the Trinity is limiting God in the full mystery of his being. And limiting God is never a good idea.

God is one God, Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier and so much more -- Father, caregiver, judge -- Son, lover, justice-seeker -- Wisdom, which is traditionally a female image and therefore Mother, equipper, guardian, and guide. All this is our God -- and more -- and yet one. One Lord. One God.

So what does this have to do with tending to your kids or grandkids, making it through the day's hassles, and dealing with one's not-always-so-pleasant neighbor? Well, it's interesting, because the whole idea of the Trinity is just as much a part of your life as a Christian as are the phylacteries and mezuzahs of the Jewish people.

It starts right at the very same point. "The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." Our own worship and Christian life-style is first and foremost an expression of God's oneness and our loving response to his first having loved us. We may not recite the Shema or have such literal devotional aids, but we do have our own unique ways

of worship: the liturgy, the church year, the cross, the water of baptism, the bread and wine of communion.

Second, our prayer lives express the many aspects of God, traditionally formed in the Trinity. We pray to "Our Father" for daily bread, for forgiveness, for the kingdom. We may even pray to the Father to send his Holy Spirit to guide us. And when we close our prayer, we close it in Jesus' name. Are we praying to three gods or in the name of three gods? No, we know that we pray to the one God.

Even the way in which we live our lives has an expression in the Trinity. We know that we are led by the Spirit of God, as the second lesson tells us. And that it is the Spirit that brings us to pray "Abba! Father!" and assures us of God's love.

This is where our daily lives come strongly into the picture. Because if we didn't know that we were loved by God, we might not have the strength to tend to the kids or stop their fighting or deal with unpleasant daily duties and neighbors. We know that if there is loving and giving to do, then Christ the Son is our example. We also know that if there is suffering to bear, then our suffering is linked with his suffering until we too are heirs to the kingdom as he was an heir to the kingdom.

So, you see, the idea of the Holy Trinity is not just some fancy theological doctrine that we hold. It is rather a truth about the one God we worship, and a truth about who we are in relation to him. God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit: Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier -- one God. And you and me: created, loved and redeemed, and made holy by him.

For all that, let us always say, "Thanks be to God!"