

“My Treasured Possession”

In the name of him who in love died for the ungodly, dear friends in Christ: In accordance with a long held tradition in the Christian Church, last week when we met for worship, the first Sunday after Pentecost, we celebrated the Festival of the Holy Trinity. At the time I noted that it's an unusual Festival of the Church. Almost all of our high holy days commemorate some important event in the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus. Holy Trinity stands apart because it celebrates the triumph of the true biblical teaching about God over and against a number of heresies that threatened to rob the Church of the saving Gospel in the third and fourth centuries. If our understanding of God is wrong, the Gospel itself is lost. And so, taking some extra effort to get it right, as part of our celebration we confessed together the Athanasian Creed, which, as you know, expresses the correct understanding in almost painful detail how our one God exists in three distinct persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who are coequal, coeternal, infinite, and almighty. And we concluded that portion of the Creed with this statement: “Therefore, whoever desires to be saved must think thus about the Trinity.”

Correctly confessing the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is critical to our faith. It's necessary to understand God as he truly is. But let's face it: it comes across as a bit cold, clinical, and impersonal. It describes *what* God is; but it doesn't say much about *who* he is especially in terms of his character and motivation. To really know and trust the Lord we need a more complete picture. And it just happens that all three of today's Scripture readings help us to fill in the gaps. I'd like to focus mostly on two of them.

In the reading from St. Matthew's Gospel we've got Jesus in the Galilean phase of his ministry. He's traveling all throughout the region visiting the cities and villages. He's teaching in the synagogues and healing people of all of their afflictions. It's especially the latter, his ability to perform miraculous cures of every kind, that draws huge crowds to him wherever he goes. Looking at these crowds, we are told, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

Here at last we have a description of the Lord's feelings and attitude toward people. He has *compassion*, a word that literally means “to suffer with”. The pains, hardships, and troubles of life, seeing them in others he shares them. He feels them himself. Their burdens become his own. Actually the Greek word Matthew wrote that's translated compassion is much stronger. It says Jesus was “splagmatized”. It means to be moved in the guts. It's what happens when you see something truly tragic and you feel it down deep in the pit of your stomach.

That's the feeling that overcomes Jesus when he sees human suffering. And he would have seen a lot of it. Modern medicine has come a long way to alleviate a good deal of it in our day, but that wasn't the case back then. Think about it: no antibiotics, no anesthetics, no really effective antiseptics, not even an aspirin. How often have you relied on such things? And in what condition would you be without them? Back then something that's treated routinely today like appendicitis would have been a death sentence – a horrible, painful death at that. Truth be told, even with modern medicine, we can't solve every problem – the current pandemic being a good reminder of that – and there's still a lot of suffering that goes on; but it's nothing like it was then.

But Jesus sees a lot more than physical suffering in these crowds. He knows that the wounds that hurt the most are often carried in the human heart, in the mind, and in the soul. There's guilt and shame and sorrow and regret and that feeling you get when you've been betrayed (that probably has a name but I couldn't think of it). There's the ongoing struggle with sin with lust with envy with rage. And sadly the spiritual physicians who were supposed to help heal these problems, by which I mean the religious leaders, were incompetent. Instead of lifting burdens with God's grace, mercy, and forgiveness, they heap on more law. They make the problems worse. The heart of Jesus is set on rescuing people from all of their afflictions.

This is the same thing we see in the Exodus. When the Lord calls Moses from the burning bush, he says to him, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and I have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to rescue them."

And so he did with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. He delivered his people from their oppression and bondage. And having brought them out, he tells them why. It wasn't just to end their suffering, it was more than that. It was to gather them to himself and to make them his own treasured possession. The Lord describes himself as a Father who delights in his children. He gives them his Word so that they can walk in his ways and grow up to be like him. He means to restore the perfect relationship that was lost when mankind fell into sin – both collectively and individually, and to keep that relationship going so that he can delight in his people and they so can delight in him and look to him to provide all good things.

We see this collective and individual relationship in the Gospel. Jesus calls the twelve disciples, the group, but then we get each of their names. They're individuals whom Jesus knows personally. And what a diverse group they are. Four, we know, are fishermen; two sets of brothers: Andrew and Peter, and James and John. One of them is named Philipp, which is a Greek name. It tells us that he was a Hellenized Jew, one of the progressives who would not normally have associated with the rest of the group who were traditionalists for the most part. And on the extremes we've got Matthew the tax collector, a guy who worked for the hated Roman occupation, and Simon the Cananean, which means he was one of the freedom fighters or terrorists (depending on your point of view) who violently resisted the Roman occupation. All are brought together into one fellowship in Christ.

Lastly Judas Iscariot is listed, which tells us something else: not all who are called, who are rescued, who have their relationship with the Lord restored, not all of them stay that way. They can walk away from it like Judas did. And how that must grieve the heart of God who wants all people to be saved, who wants all people to be his treasured possession in whom he delights.

Jesus describes the gathering of people to himself as a harvest. And until I lived here in Iowa for some time, I didn't fully appreciate the metaphor. It makes more sense now because I've seen it. Come harvest time there's this almost maniacal urgency that overcomes some of you. Got to get it in. Not a moment is to be wasted. And oh the frustration when the weather won't allow or if a piece of equipment goes down. Then you're fit to be tied. And sure, I understand, it's your livelihood. Dollars are at stake. But it's more than that. There's a passion there. There are easier ways to make a living than farming. Why, you could become a pastor and only work one hour a week. I'm joking, of course. The fact is there are easier ways to make a living than being a pastor. I happen to love the work like you love yours. But when the harvest is ready, you're compelled to bring it in. As long as it's in the field, it's vulnerable. You want it where it's gathered up safe and sound. And you're not at peace until it is.

And that's what Jesus sees when he looks out at the crowds of humanity even today: fields ripe and ready that urgently need harvesting, each and every grain precious in his sight. He wants none of us lost; each of our names written permanently in his blood in the Lamb's Book of Life, each of our names engraved on the palms of his hands – the scarred hands that held his outstretched arms that he used to rescue us from sin and death.

May he give us the grace to see in every person what he sees: an individual that he very much wants to be a part of his very own treasured possession. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!