

A Heads Up for Trinity Sunday

Colleagues,

Just as I was about to post something else for this week's ThTh offering, Jerry Burce, pastor at Messiah Lutheran Church, Fairview Heights, Ohio, sends me this item of Trinitarian theology. Even though Trinity Sunday is ten days away, this seemed too good to postpone past Pentecost. So here you have it.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Ed,

ThTheol 574 was last year's June 11 posting of Luther snippets on the Trini ty. It either inspired or dovetailed with the Trinity Sunday preaching I did last year, and the week after I started an email to you about that, but didn't quite finish it. Ran across it this morning, and it occurred me to finish it up now and send it along. Could be that you're casting around right now for Trinity-related material-it's that time again (so soon, so soon). If so, and if this helps the cause, feel free to use it.

Jerry

From Thursday Theology 574, June 11, 2009-

And then finally this one from Luther's Large Catechism, which gave me my first clue that the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is a proposal for "how to talk about God and have it come out sheer Gospel."

Book of Concord (Tappert edition p.419:63-65)

“In these three articles God himself has revealed and opened to us the most profound depths of his fatherly heart, his sheer, unutterable love. He created us for this very purpose, to redeem and sanctify us. Moreover, having bestowed upon us everything in heaven and on earth, he has given us his Son and his Holy Spirit, through whom he brings us to himself. As we explained before, we could never come to recognize the Father’s favor and grace were it not for the Lord Christ, who is a mirror of the Father’s heart. Apart from him we see nothing but an angry and terrible Judge. But neither could we know anything of Christ, had it not been revealed by the Holy Spirit.” [Note the sequence reversal. The confession goes “Father, Son and Holy Spirit,” but in our life with God the order is reversed: Holy Spirit brings us to Christ and Christ brings us back to God as Abba-father, no longer terrible Judge.]

Some prose I worked on when I read this last year, arising from the preaching I did the week I read it. I almost sent it off, but got sidetracked. Here’s how I put Luther’s key point into nickel words that seemed to work in Fairview Park this past Trinity Sunday.

What we think about and celebrate today isn’t so much WHO God is but rather HOW God is. Sure, the WHO and the HOW are related, but when all is said and done what really matters to you and me and every other sinner is the HOW.

Consider:

A hand is a hand is a hand. But if I hold out my hand with fingers closed, like this, you feel quite different than if I hold it out with fingers open, like this. In fact if I hold it like this [closed fingers] you don’t even call it a hand. You

call it a fist. Or if I hold it like this [index finger extended] all you see is a finger, and whether pointed or wagging you do not like it, not one little bit.

When your neighbors hear “God” they see a fist. Or else they see a finger. Jesus anticipated that. That’s why, after telling us in today’s Gospel reading that “God so loved the world...” (Jn. 3:16), he quickly adds, “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but” – surprise! – “that the world might be saved through him” (3:17).

Some saving started to happen on Easter Sunday night, remember? “Peace be with you,” Jesus said to those locked-in disciples, cowering for fear of all the fists out there. Then he showed them HIS hands. Fingers open, obviously. And in the middle? Those gaping holes.

A week later it falls to Thomas – yes, that Thomas, Mr. Doubt himself – to put two and two together. “My Lord and my God,” he gasps. You could call this the Trinitarian Aha, if not the first ever then the first one we know about.

How had Jesus put it? “If you’ve seen me, you’ve seen the Father.” That’s what Thomas suddenly gets. The open, embracing hands of Jesus are the open hands of the One Who Sent Him. The Fist is a Fist no more because of the spike that forced it open and and the enduring wound that keeps it that way.

In tumbling to this, Thomas is saved–saved, that is, from expecting nothing from God but the fist and the pointing finger. Expectation, remember, is everything. If God the Fist is the God I expect (a.k.a. believe in) then that’s the God I’ll spend my life reacting to – and, because of that, the God I’ll be stuck with when all is said and done. Remember Adam after he’d chomped on the fruit? How the only God he could imagine at that point was the Fist and/or Finger he’d have to dodge or deflect if he

hoped somehow to keep living? So the God he got was exactly that: God the Finger drilling straight through his whining accusations ("the woman YOU gave me..."), God the Fist in the small of the back pushing him out of Eden.

Thomas by contrast got God the Open Hand. In Jesus, through Jesus, on account of Jesus – that's how he got him. He learned that second Easter Sunday night to head into a world filled with fists and pointing fingers without being afraid of them any longer. He knew that the one and only hand that matters in the end, God's hand, was in exactly the position that all of us have always ached to find it in. Wide open. The Father waiting to welcome us for Jesus' sake when the Holy Spirit brings us home.

That's tremendously good news, the best ever. And that's what today's celebration is finally about.

It occurs to me that to keep the party going you and I might try this week to surprise some folks by waving at them—you know, the open hand thing, unexpected, out of the blue. Could be they'll wonder why we're doing that. If by chance they ask let's tell them about our God. Their God too, for that matter.