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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
Holy Trinity Sunday, B, May 26, 2024  
John 3:1-17  
The Trinity and Christian Stewardship

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This is Holy Trinity Sunday. In this sermon, I mean to try my hand at *applying* a theological principle that I have lifted up before. I mean to apply, in some concrete fashion, a principle about our Triune God. It goes this way: The works of God *ad extra* are the joint work of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity. Let me repeat that:

The works of God *ad extra* are the joint work of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

“Ad extra” means the work of our God outside Himself. That is, when the three Persons of the Holy Trinity turn from their own fellowship to a world they have created outside themselves, their work with that world involves all three of them. Their work is different, but coordinated and motivated by love.

There is quite a lot to think about here. When I speak of the world “outside” of our God, I mean the whole universe! I mean us! I mean the forests and the meadows and the mountains and the streams and the oceans and all the creatures therein... the lions and tigers and the bears, the trout and the mighty whales. I mean the sun and the moon and the stars. I mean the galaxies way off yonder. All of these things are “ad extra.” All of them are *outside* God. Indeed, none of them would exist except for the definite decision of God that they should exist. And so, the Bible begins where it must begin:

<sup>1</sup>In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...<sup>3</sup>And God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. (Genesis 1:1,3, RSV)

This is the beginning of our story. If Father, Son, and Holy Spirit had not decided to create light, sun, moon, stars, lions and bears, and us, then none of these things would exist. We are all “creatures.”

And the fact that our Triune God did say, “Let there be.... everything” is a divine act of good will toward our world. Our universe came into existence because it pleased God that it should be. I fear that too often we human part of God’s creation have disappointed our Maker in grievous ways over the centuries, and yet God has not withdrawn our existence. He is moved by love. What he says about Israel through the prophet Hosea is also what he says about this whole universe:

<sup>8</sup>How can I give you up, O E’phraim!  
How can I hand you over, O Israel!  
How can I make you like Admah!  
How can I treat you like Zeboi’im!  
My heart recoils within me,  
my compassion grows warm and tender.  
<sup>9</sup>I will not execute my fierce anger,  
I will not again destroy E’phraim;  
for I am God and not man,  
the Holy One in your midst,  
and I will not come to destroy. (Hosea 11:8-9, RSV)

So God created a world outside Himself. He did so with hope and good will toward what he has made, and his love continues to this very moment.

So, these have been a few words about the works of God “ad extra.” We are talking about our whole world, our whole universe, and us ourselves.

The other part of the ancient principle concerns the “joint work” of the three divine Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The universe and its fate are not the private hobby of just one of the three Persons — say, God the Father. No, all three of the divine Persons are at work in our world. Their work varies, because they are individual Persons, but their work is “joint.” It is harmonious and it reflects the love that each of the Persons has for our world.

For us humans, the big works of God *ad extra* are these three: creation, salvation, and sanctification. All three of the divine Persons work at our

existence, our salvation, and our sanctification. For example, we are mindful of Jesus, of course, for our salvation. And yet Jesus himself says that his work reflects the will of God the Father. And so we read in John 4:

<sup>34</sup>Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work. (John 4:34, RSV)

This speaks of the unity of will between the First Person of the Holy Trinity, God the Father, and the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, Jesus Christ.

And then in John 16, we read of the coherence between Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Jesus comforts his disciples, saying:

<sup>12</sup>I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. <sup>13</sup>When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. (John 16:12-13, RSV)

There is much more to say about the Holy Spirit than this. Indeed, in a way the Holy Spirit is the leading Person of the Holy Trinity — at least when it comes to the flow of reality.

And then there is the Second Person of the Holy Trinity — Jesus, the Son of God. Jesus is the middle link. He is the Savior. He is the One who keeps the Father’s hope when he made everything and the Spirit’s crafting of us for heaven... Jesus is the One who keeps everything from falling apart. And so it is that Jesus is not only the Savior of us, but in some sense, also the Savior of God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. He keeps their work from falling apart. But oh! What a price he had to pay. He had to suffer a cost because the hopes and dreams and work of our Triune God face opposition. They are fought against by Satan and by our own cooperation with Satan. I mean, our sin. Sin and Satan threatened to wreck everything. But Jesus overcame Satan. Satan is on his way out. And you and I are free to give our complete loyalty to a much better Master. I mean, we are free to serve our Triune God.

Anyway, these have been a few words about the ancient principle of theology:

The works of God *ad extra* are the joint work of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Now, let's try to apply this principle to a concrete case. I believe that the three Persons of the Holy Trinity are concerned about *everything* in this buzzing, blooming world. None of it is unimportant to them or overlooked. So, let's consider one case. Let's speak of Christian stewardship. Let's speak of our tithes and offerings to the church. This, then, can be an early stewardship sermon — a setting of the stage for our annual fall stewardship campaign.

You and I have some money. There is a tradition of piety going back to the Bible of giving a tenth — a "tithe" — of our income to the church, to keep the church afloat. There have been faithful Christians through the ages who have given their tithes and offerings to the church. There have been wealthy Christians who have given a tithe or more. There have been poor people living in smoky trailers who have given tithes and offerings to the church. Carol and I have tried to live by that practice throughout our marriage, even when we had little money and wondered how in the world we were going to be able to send our boys to college. But God has provided.

Again, you and I have some money. Let's do a Trinitarian analysis of this fact. My theme is that all three Persons of the Holy Trinity are concerned with our money, but their concerns vary. Their concerns are in harmony and they are all carried by love for us, but they vary. Let's begin with God the Father.

Martin Luther is wonderful in discussing the concerns of God the Father when it comes to the blessings we enjoy. Luther uses two tenses when talking about our creation. He uses both the past tense and the present tense. He says both that God *created* everything — past tense — and that he still *preserves* — present tense — his creation. And so we read Luther's famous explanation of the First Article of the Creed. As I read Luther's words, let us reflect how many of these things apply to you and me personally:

I believe that God *has created* me together with all that exists. God has given me and *still preserves* my body and soul: eyes, ears, and all limbs and senses; reason and all mental faculties. In addition, God daily and abundantly provides shoes and clothing, food and drink, house and farm, spouse and children, fields, livestock, and all property — along with all the necessities and nourishment for this body and life. God protects me against all danger and shields and preserves me from all evil. And all this is done out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all! For all of this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true. (Luther's *Small Catechism*, Kolb-Wengert edition)

Now, to my mind, there is much truth in the idea that what we have, we have earned fair and square by the sweat of our brows. And yet it is also true that what we have comes from the loving hands of God the Father. We did not create ourselves. God the Father created you and me and keeps us alive moment to moment. And he created the conditions which give us a chance to flourish. He created us in this good land, in this century, with whatever talents and gifts we have. He gives us government to protect us. He gives us farm and field to feed us. He gives us the economy into which we fit, that we might have necessary things and even surplus sometimes. As Luther says, we owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true.

Next, let's speak of the Holy Spirit and his concern for our possessions. The thing about the Holy Spirit is his enthusiasm to take what the Father calls into existence and to do something with it — to do something good and holy. The Holy Spirit is not content to let the Father's creation simply wander along and totter and go nowhere in particular. No! Every speck of what the God the Father creates is of interest to the Spirit. The Spirit — the Third Person of the Holy Trinity — works with great intensity that creation should end up, where? Answer: Should end up in the Kingdom of God. Creation began in the Garden of Eden. The Holy Spirit is working

day and night that creation should end up in heaven. And by “heaven” I do not mean up in the clouds, but the Kingdom of God on earth. Jesus is “Christ the King” of that good Kingdom. And St. Paul teaches us that the whole creation “groans” and longs for that good Kingdom on earth.

And so the Holy Spirit looks at our money and thinks to himself, “I need some of that money! I need it for my own holy purposes.” The Holy Spirit, you see, fights the good fight of faith with, as it were, one hand tied behind his back. That is, he does not simply insert holiness into us. Rather, he uses what we call “the means of grace” to make us holy. He uses the proclamation of the Gospel. He uses the holy sacraments. He uses the encouragement we can give to one another. In general, he uses the Church to fit us for heaven. The Church is very important to the Holy Spirit. The Church is the Spirit’s main weapon for creating faith on earth and orienting reality toward heaven. So, the Holy Spirit is interested in our money. The Spirit wants us to support the Church. There is important work that needs to be done and in the normal course of things, it takes some money to do it.

Finally, let us speak of Jesus and our money. Jesus preached a lot about money. That seems inevitable to me because money is one of God’s greatest competitors on earth. Jesus himself was a poor man with nowhere to lay his head. When Satan tempted Jesus with all the kingdoms of earth and the glory thereof, Jesus turned Satan down. In this way, Jesus gave us a model for victory over that great idol, money.

But Jesus did more than give us a model and a teaching about money. He did much more! The way St. Paul puts it is that Jesus became poor for our sakes:

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. (2 Corinthians 8:9, RSV)

How poor? How poor did Jesus make himself that we might become rich? Answer: poor all the way to death, all the way to his final breath. And so what Luther said about God the Father we can also say about God the Son:

For all of this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true.

We should not trade our gratitude and obedience to Jesus for all the money in the world. This means something for the tithes and offerings we give to the Church.

In closing let me mention that one of the Bible commentators I read on today's Gospel Lesson said that most Trinity Sunday sermons are failures. He put it this way:

Often Trinity Sunday is referred to as an "idea feast" in recognition of the fact that instead of a concrete event in the life of Christ (e.g., Good Friday), this particular day has its roots in a complex set of doctrinal formulations. Often sermons on this day fail because they set as their admirable, but unreachable, goal the exposition of the "idea" of the Trinity in twenty minutes.<sup>1</sup>

But my theory is that you and I are born theologians. We all have *some* notion about the Holy Trinity. What I have dared to share with you is my notion of the Holy Trinity after a career of thought, and to apply that notion to an everyday subject: money. I do this because I am excited about the Holy Trinity. I think that reality is much more complex and interesting and hopeful than we often imagine. It is complex and interesting and hopeful because of our Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to whom belongs the glory now and through all the ages. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Black Johnston in *The Lectionary Commentary* on John 3:1-17.