

## **“THE CHURCH OF THE TRINITY”**

Matthew 28:16-20

Trinity Sunday (Series A)

June 11, 2017

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for this Trinity Sunday comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 28, verses 16 through 20. It is on page 706 of the pew Bible. In this gospel lesson, Jesus does something to make sure you, and I, and whole bunch of other people receive salvation. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Matthew 28, we begin reading at verse 16.

<sup>16</sup> Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. <sup>17</sup> And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. <sup>18</sup> And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*  
You may be seated.

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Today is Trinity Sunday, and this is the Scripture passage that most clearly identifies God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There are a few other passages where all three of them are mentioned together, and many, many passages that identify each of the three members in divine terms.

So the Trinity is a thoroughly biblical doctrine, and this passage is one of the best places to start in teaching it. So as we seek to understand this text together, one of the things we will be looking at is the doctrine of the Trinity.

A friend asked me once if I understand the Trinity. I just laughed and said, “No one understands the Trinity.”

The doctrine of the Trinity is something we believe, teach, and confess, even if we don’t perfectly understand it. Scripture certainly reveals specific things about each person of the Trinity and how they relate to one another. So we know these things and confess them to be true. We know the “who” and the “what.” But the “how” and the “why” are a bit more mysterious.

So when we say that the Trinity is a mystery, we don’t mean to say that it is hidden from us. That would be a secret. The Trinity is a mystery, not a secret. The mystery of the Trinity has been revealed to us, but the understanding of it is far above human reason. Therefore, it remains mysterious, even though it has been made known. So we believe, teach, and confess the doctrine of the Trinity, even though we cannot claim to perfectly understand it.

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The doctrine of the Trinity is one of several glorious Gospel teachings in this passage. We often refer to this text as “The Great Commission.” And that title’s not wrong, but it might narrow our focus too much.

## “THE CHURCH OF THE TRINITY” (Matthew 28:16-20)

The word *commission* sounds a lot like the word *commandment*. And there certainly are commandments in this text. Technically there is just one commandment, but I won’t bore you with that explanation. For our purposes this morning, let’s say there are four commandments in The Great Commission. They are *Go, make disciples, baptize, and teach*. And we ought to obey all four of these. But we make a huge mistake if all we see is the commandments.

Now, there is a right way and a wrong way to read the Bible. And we want to read it the right way. The right way is to recognize both Law and Gospel and understand them in their proper relationship. “The Law is the divine Word which tells us what we must do” (*Explanation of Luther’s Small Catechism*, 11). And, “The Gospel is the good news of the grace of God in Jesus Christ our Savior” (*Explanation of Luther’s Small Catechism*, 12).

If we are prone to laziness, we might be tempted to ignore the Law. We give the Gospel its rightful primary place, and we enjoy this. It gets us off the hook. But then we make the error of dismissing the Law altogether. This is the wrong way to read the Bible.

On the other hand, for those of you who have a strong work ethic, your temptation might be to elevate the Law over the Gospel. That is, when you pick up your Bible, you ask, *What is God telling me to do?* And this sounds kind of good. We should all be in favor of a good, solid effort. But this mindset can actually prevent us from seeing the gracious gifts in Scripture, and it robs Christ of his glory as Savior.

So when we pick up the Scriptures, the primary thing we look for is what God has done. That’s the primary purpose of the Bible. It is the history of God redeeming sinful humanity through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. So that’s what we should expect to find in the Bible. And then, as we also come across God’s commandments, we should do everything we can to keep them, knowing that we already stand before God with Jesus’ perfect righteousness.

So it is right to hear the commandments of Jesus in The Great Commission. *Go, make disciples, baptize, and teach*. This is the mission of the Church.

It’s not the mission of each individual Christian. There are no “armies of one” here. The Church is one body, so we do not take this commission on by ourselves. We do it together.

One mistake it to try to do it alone. The other mistake is to delegate it to one or a few members of the congregation. Not everyone is called to the exact same function, but if you have no function in this work, something is wrong. So we should confess that as sin, receive forgiveness for it, and try to do better.

The Great Commission has commandments for us—not so much as individuals, but as a body. And we pray God will strengthen us in this work.

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So the commandments are right and good, and we will try, by God’s grace, to keep them. But if we stop there, we read the Bible wrongly. And we don’t want to do that.

Instead, we read the Bible for what it actually says. And when we do that, we find some marvelous good news in The Great Commission.

For starters, we recognize that the Great Commission has been obeyed, and the result is our faith. The Holy Spirit enabled those eleven disciples to do what Jesus commanded them to do. And it was not simply the eleven who carried out this commission, but the entire Church for almost two thousand years now. That is why you and I are Christians. That is why we have received forgiveness of our sins and eternal life. So the act of Jesus commissioning his Church to

do this work—that is good news to you and me and all who believe. This is how we have been brought into the Church, and this is just plain marvelous. We rejoice that we have been made Jesus' disciples through baptism and the teaching of the Christian faith.

And now the commission for us, is to go and do likewise.

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The primary commandment in The Great Commission is “make disciples” (28:19). But, fortunately, Jesus doesn’t leave us to our own imaginations to try to figure out how. He tells us exactly how to do it: baptizing and teaching. And it’s really that simple. We don’t need to invent our own evangelism plans.

Jesus gave us a simple, but labor-intensive, plan. And I think that’s why we’re tempted to dismiss it. The first part—baptizing—just seems too simple. It’s just water applied to a person in connection with the name of the Trinity—“**the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**” (28:19). And the whole thing almost seems too easy. We do a baptism and we kind of think, *That was it? That baby is a disciple of Jesus now?* We actually want there to be more to it—either some miraculous sign or more work on our part so we can feel like we actually accomplished something. It just seems too easy. But the reason it seems too easy is because God is the one doing all the work in baptism. Jesus is the one who died and rose again. And the Holy Spirit is the one who uses baptism to connect us to Jesus’ death and resurrection. The Holy Spirit is the one who creates new life in baptism. The reason baptism seems so easy is because God does all the work.

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But, while baptism seems too easy, the second part of Jesus’ disciple-making plan seems too hard: “**teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you**” (28:20). Now think about that for a minute. That’s not going to be easy. For one thing, if we are going to teach everything Jesus taught, that means we are going to have to learn it first, and that itself is enough of a challenge.

This isn’t just a matter of learning the two greatest commandments and a couple parables. It’s not even a matter of learning all the red letters in the four gospels. Jesus taught the entire Old Testament to his disciples (e.g., Luke 24:27, 45). And the New Testament basically consists of the teachings of Jesus that the Holy Spirit brought to the remembrance of the apostles (John 14:26). When Jesus commissions his Church to teach the nations everything he has commanded, that means all of the Scriptures. That is what we must teach. And in order to teach them, we need to learn them. And, I know, there’s a lot there. This involves a lifetime of learning.

Now, this is obviously Law. And it’s difficult Law, too. And sometimes with these difficult commandments, we kind of just throw up our hands and say, *Well, the Gospel forgives me, so ... you know.* And, yes, God forgives us for not learning his Word and not carrying out The Great Commission. If it’s a sin, God forgives it. You can be sure of that. But that doesn’t excuse us from doing what Jesus commanded us to do. The Gospel frees us to serve and obey without fearing God’s wrath or wondering if we are doing enough to make God happy with us. And that’s huge. We know where we stand with God. But it doesn’t change God’s will for our lives.

It’s like a parent who says to a child, “I love you.” And then, a little while later, the parent says, “Go clean your room.” So the kid says, “But I thought you said you loved me.” And the

parent says, "I do, and that's never going to change. Now go clean your room." So God says, *Yes, I forgive you and I love you. Now learn my Word, and teach it to all the nations.*

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Now, all of Christian doctrine—this teaching that Jesus has commanded us to teach—it can all be summarized in the doctrine of the Trinity.

The Church Fathers recognized this when they organized the Apostles' and Nicene creeds around this doctrine. This doctrine of the Trinity teaches us who God is. He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—three persons in one Godhead. And it also teaches us what God does for us. We can speak of the three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—in terms of their primary activities—Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier.

God the Father is the Creator. Now, that doesn't mean the Son and the Holy Spirit were not involved in creation. All things were created through the Son (Col. 1:16), and we just read about "the Spirit of God ... hovering over the face of the waters" (Gen. 1:2). They were there when God the Father said, "Let us make man in our image" (Gen. 1:26). The doctrine of the Trinity teaches us that God the Father is the Creator and Preserver of all creation, and that he does this as an act of love for us.

Then we speak of God the Son, Jesus Christ, as the Redeemer. Now, that doesn't mean the Father and the Holy Spirit were not involved in our redemption. They did their part, but they did not bear our sins. They did not take on human flesh in order to die. And they did not rise again from the dead. The Son of God did. So the doctrine of the Trinity teaches us that Jesus is our redeemer, who suffered, died, and rose again as an act of love for us.

And then we speak of the Holy Spirit as the Sanctifier. Now, the word *sanctify* is just a fancy theological word that means "to make holy." So the Holy Spirit is called "holy" for two reasons. One, because he himself is holy. And, two, because his work is to make us holy. His work is to conform us to the image of God. This typically begins in baptism, continues through the teaching of God's Word and the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, and will finally be completed on the Last Day when he raises us from the dead, and transforms our bodies and souls back into the perfect image of God. The doctrine of the Trinity teaches us that the Holy Spirit is our sanctifier, who does all this as an act of love for us.

So we see that the doctrine of the Trinity really covers everything in Christian doctrine. It teaches us who God is and what he has done, is doing, and will do for us. As we learn the Word of God together, the doctrine of the Trinity is a great place to start.

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So, baptizing and teaching. Simple, but labor-intensive. And for this reason, we are tempted to reject it. We want to do something heroic. We just don't want it to be difficult. We want it to be like video games where we can set the difficulty level to "very easy." Five minutes in you think you're the best racecar driver ever, but you don't even know what button the brake is.

We human beings are living contradictions. We want to accomplish great things, but we just don't want it to be too difficult.

So we get these evangelism programs that are supposed to make sharing the Gospel really easy. You read a few Bible verses and ask a few leading questions. Then after about five verses and questions, you expect them to just say, *Look! A drinking fountain. What prevents me from being baptized?* But it usually doesn't go like that.

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We want to fulfill The Great Commission and tell people about Jesus, but what if they have questions, and I don’t know the answer? What if they have cancer, and they’re mad at God? What do I say to that? What if they were abused as a child? The problem with the simple evangelism programs is that people are real people. They have real questions and real tragedies. Now, the good news is, the Scriptures have real answers. But if we are going to give those real answers, we have to learn them first.

I’m not saying we have to learn everything before we even try to speak about Jesus to another person. And you don’t have to go to seminary in order to be a Christian construction worker. The point I’m trying to make is simply that we are all students. And the more we learn God’s Word, the more comfort and instruction we will have in our own lives, and the more comfort and instruction we will be able to share with others. It’s as simple as that. If we don’t know God’s Word, how will we ever be able to teach it?

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So teaching God’s Word is going to take some work. But, lest we think everything depends on us, Jesus makes a few promises. First he says, “**All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me**” (28:18). This is our first assurance that the “Jesus Disciple-Making Program” is going to work. If Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth, then we have assurance that these two activities—baptizing and teaching—will, in fact, create disciples.

However simple these means might seem, they are prescribed by the ruler of heaven and earth. This is how you and I have become disciples, and it is how others will become disciples too. We have assurance of this because Jesus has all authority.

That’s how Jesus begins The Great Commission. And then he ends it with another comforting promise. “**And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age**” (28:20).

It must not have been very long after this that these same disciples stared into the sky as Jesus vanished from their sight. They no longer saw him in visible form, but that does not mean he was not with them. He certainly was, just as he is with us now. He is still present, exercising his authority over all things.

And so we have confidence in these two disciple-making activities, because the one who has all authority in heaven and on earth has commanded us to do them and has promised to be with us.

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God the Father—the creator of heaven and earth—has given his Son to die for us. Jesus has redeemed us from every iniquity by his death and resurrection. And the Father and the Son have given us the Holy Spirit, who creates and sustains faith in our hearts. Praise be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.