

MY FATHER IS GREATER THAN YOUR FATHER

John 8:48-59

The Holy Trinity (Series C)

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Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The Gospel lesson for Trinity Sunday comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 8, verses 48 through 59. In this gospel lesson, Jesus reveals his true identity. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From John 8, beginning at verse 48, we read in Jesus' name.

⁴⁸ The Jews answered him, "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?" ⁴⁹ Jesus answered, "I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me. ⁵⁰ Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the judge. ⁵¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death." ⁵² The Jews said to him, "Now we know that you have a demon! Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, 'If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.'" ⁵³ Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?" ⁵⁴ Jesus answered, "If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, 'He is our God.'" ⁵⁵ But you have not known him. I know him. If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and I keep his word. ⁵⁶ Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad." ⁵⁷ So the Jews said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" ⁵⁸ Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." ⁵⁹ So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

There is one God. And there are three persons who are God. But they are not three gods. They are one God. They are equal in power, and glory, and majesty, and knowledge, and every other attribute of God.

This is the doctrine of the Trinity, and this is the first great mystery of the Christian faith. And by "mystery," I do not mean "secret." God has revealed this to us in the Holy Scriptures, so that we might confess it, believe it, and worship him. But it remains a mystery. We do not really understand it. We can know it, and we can confess it, even though we do not fully comprehend it. It remains mysterious.

Throughout Church history, when the doctrine of the Trinity has come under attack, it has most often been a denial that the Son is equal to the Father. For whatever reason, the heretics have kind of left the Holy Spirit out of the fight and focused their attention on bringing Jesus down a notch. And so the passages that orthodox Christians often use to defend the doctrine of the Trinity are those passages that prove the Son is equal to the Father. If we can prove from Scripture that Jesus is equal to the Father, then nobody really questions whether or not the Holy Spirit is also equal. Since Scripture speaks of all three of them as divine beings, then they are equal. There is a hierarchy within the Trinity. The Father sends the Son, and the Father and the

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Son together send the Holy Spirit. But they are all equal in power, and glory, and majesty, and knowledge, and every other attribute of God.

This is one of those passages that proves Jesus is equal with the Father. Jesus gets into a back-and-forth argument with some Jews about their fathers. Actually, most of chapter eight is an argument about this. They argue about who Jesus' Father is. They argue about who his opponents' father is. And they argue about which of their fathers is the greatest.

In a way, it kind of reminds me of the elementary school arguments boys have regarding whose dad is the greatest. I assume these arguments happen everywhere. You know, one boy says, "My dad can lift a hundred pounds." And another boy says, "My dad is stronger than your dad. He can lift a thousand pounds." And another boy says, "Oh yeah? Well, my dad can lift ten thousand pounds."

In my elementary school, we argued about whose dad had the best truck, because, in small town North Dakota, whoever has the best truck is ... the best. A lot of my friends' dads were farmers, so they had these big pickups, but I insisted that my dad's '87 S-10 Blazer was better than anybody's dad's Ford. My opponents took issue with me even calling it a "truck." After several years and much pleading, that vehicle finally became mine, and I learned that I was, in fact, wrong. When pulling a small trailer, that "truck" could do zero to sixty ... with a tail wind. My dad may have been better than their dads, but his truck was not.

But that's the kind of thing we argued about. Now Jesus is, of course, more mature than that, but his opponents don't seem to be.

Most of John 8 is an argument about fathers. Jesus speaks of his Father. And he speaks of his Father in exclusive terms. He does not share this Father with his opponents. So Jesus does not call him "Our Father." But, instead, he only calls him "My Father." Jesus is claiming that God is his Father, and that, therefore, he is the Son of God. And he means this in exclusive terms. It's different than when Jesus teaches his disciples to pray to "Our Father" or where the Bible calls Christians "children of God." Jesus is being exclusive here. He is the *only* Son of God. No one else is a child of God in the exact same way that Jesus is. Jesus is the only Son of God in the sense that he shares the same divine nature as God. That's the Father Jesus is talking about.

The Jews, on the other hand, and I don't mean all of the Jews, but only the ones who opposed Jesus, the Jews disputed Jesus' claims. That's what they mean when they call Jesus a Samaritan (8:48). The Samaritans were people of a mixed genealogy. They were, on one side, descended from Abraham, but, somewhere along the line, their ancestors intermarried with foreigners, so they were not full-blooded Israelites. Now, Jesus was not really a Samaritan, but these Jews try to insult Jesus by calling him a Samaritan. They notice that Jesus is claiming to have a different Father than they do, so they basically say, "Fine, your father is some random Assyrian peasant. If Jesus claims to have a different father, then he must not really be a Jew, or so they think.

These Jews, on the other hand, spoke of their father collectively. They speak of *their* father. In one place they assert that God is their father (8:41), though they certainly don't mean the same thing Jesus means. And in other places they claim that Abraham is their father. They mean by this that they are physical descendants of Abraham. So they claim to be children of God in a spiritual sense, because they are, in a physical sense, children of Abraham. And Jesus admits, of course, that, physically, they are descendants of Abraham. That's true. But that does not make them children of God. Since they do not believe Jesus, Jesus says that they are actually children of the devil. This is a harsh burn. This is back in verse 44, just a few verses before our reading

for today. **“You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand the truth, because there is no truth in him.”**

So that’s the argument that is building in John 8. In our text for today, at the end of the chapter, this “My dad is better than your dad” argument comes to a head. The Jews say to Jesus, “Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?” (8:48). The way Jesus answers this is kind of interesting. He says, **“I do not have a demon”** (8:49), but he doesn’t dispute the Samaritan thing. Now, Jesus is not a Samaritan, but he didn’t bother to dispute the accusation. And by ignoring that insult, he shows his acceptance of Samaritans. The Jews despised Samaritans because of their mixed heritage. But Jesus accepted them. He’s not bothered about being called a Samaritan, because there’s nothing wrong with being a Samaritan. It shouldn’t be an insult, so Jesus ignores it.

Instead, Jesus goes on, **“I honor my Father, and you dishonor me. Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the judge”** (8:49-50). By this, Jesus means that the One who seeks the glory of Jesus is his Father. Jesus doesn’t have to worry about glorifying himself. He doesn’t need to boast in order to pad his own ego. When Jesus does boast, or when he seems to boast about himself, he does it because people need to know this stuff in order to be saved. He insists that he is the Son of God, because that knowledge is necessary for salvation. People need to know it. He boasts for the sake of others, not for his own sake. And he leaves his glory in his Father’s hands. At the appropriate time, the Father will glorify the Son.

But Jesus makes this promise: **“Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death”** (8:51). To those Jews who hated Jesus, this seemed like an arrogant boast, because they did not believe his words. But to those who believe and treasure Jesus’ words, this is a marvelous promise. You will never see death.

Those Jews who hated Jesus took this as verification that Jesus had a demon. They thought this was absolutely crazy. Even Abraham, their father and the recipient of God’s promises, died. The prophets died too. If Jesus claims to have power over death, then he must be greater than Abraham and all the prophets. This is kind of crazy. This is like a fourth grade boy saying, “Oh yeah? Well my truck is better than your dad’s truck.” *You’re in fourth grade. How do you have a truck?*

The Jews are starting to understand what Jesus is really claiming. If he claims to have power over death, that must mean he’s claiming to be ... you know ... that Guy, the one who is greater than Abraham and greater than the prophets. They’re beginning to understand that Jesus is claiming to be God. So they say, “Who do you make yourself out to be?” (8:53).

There’s also an interesting dynamic going on here that drives these Jews to eventually murder Jesus. Jesus is, in kind of a subtle way, inviting them to kill him. This promise, **“If anyone keeps my word, he will never see death,”** plants the seed of an idea. And the idea goes like this: *How can we prove that Jesus is just plain crazy, or that he has a demon? Well, he claims to have power over death, so if we kill him, it will prove that he’s lying. Then everyone will see that he was possessed by a demon, and that we were right to kill him. Everyone will see that we were right, and they were wrong to ever follow Jesus.* So the logic goes like this: if they succeed in killing Jesus, then they were right to kill him. And there’s kind of a built-in failsafe too, because, if Jesus really is who he says he is, then they shouldn’t be able to kill him anyway, or so they think.

But we actually find Jesus’ response to that line of thinking in the next thing he says, though I don’t think the Jews understood it. Jesus says, **“If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me”** (8:54). So think about this: how does the Father glorify Jesus? What

does the Father actually do to glorify Jesus? He raises him from the dead. If these Jews follow the course of action that Jesus is leading them to, then the Father will raise him from the dead. Jesus is leading them on to do something that will backfire on them. They think that killing Jesus will discredit him, but it really glorifies him, because the Father raises him from the dead. They play right into Jesus' hand.

It's interesting to see, in many passages, how Jesus baits the rulers of the Jews into killing him. It's been said before that the best way to get someone to do something is to make them think it was their own idea. And that's exactly what Jesus does to the leaders of the Jews. It was Jesus' will for them to crucify him, and he got them to do it by making them think it was their idea. But it's not like Jesus caused them to sin, and he didn't cause them to fall into unbelief. There were other members of the council, like Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, who believed Jesus, so they did not consent to the plan to kill him. But there were enough members of the council who were simply unbelievers. They didn't even know it, but they hated God. That's why they rejected Jesus. And Jesus used their hardness of heart to accomplish the greatest good. He enticed them to demand his death. Pilate, the Roman governor, reluctantly agreed. And that's how Jesus was crucified for the sin of the world.

And this crucifixion, then, led to his resurrection from the dead, which vindicates all of Jesus' claims about himself, and it opens eternal life to all who trust in him.

The part of this passage that really scandalizes Jesus' opponents and drives their murderous rage, is the part at the end about being older than Abraham. Jesus says, "**Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad**" (8:56). The Jews deduced from this that if Abraham has seen Jesus, then Jesus has also seen Abraham. And this, they think, is just crazy. Abraham had been dead for almost two thousand years at this point. And these Jews look at Jesus and think, *He can't possibly be more than fifty years old*. Actually, he was closer to thirty, but that's not really important. So they ask how this is possible. And Jesus says the most scandalous thing possible. "**Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am**" (8:58).

I'll explain why that's so scandalous. It's a reference to the Old Testament name "Yahweh." Yahweh is the personal name for God in the Old Testament. It's used over 6,700 times in the Old Testament. It's usually translated as "LORD," but it literally means "I am." It emphasizes that this is the God who is. This is the God who actually exists. And one of the little nuances of it is that he exists at all times at once. He is not bound by time like we are. He is actually outside of time. So he sees all things and interacts with all things all at once. It's kind of like how we might look at a timeline in a history book. We can see the entire scope of it at once. Except God actually sees the history taking place, and he interacts in it. He is present with us now, and he is present with Abraham almost four thousand years ago, and he is present at creation, and he is present at the end of the world, all at once. He sees all time and interacts with all time at the same time. So when Jesus says, "**Before Abraham was, I am,**" he meant that from his perspective he was present with Abraham in the same moment he was arguing with these Jews. He did not say, "I existed before Abraham," though that is also true. But he goes beyond that to say, "**Before Abraham was, I am.**" In this way, Jesus makes his claim explicitly and scandalously clear. He is God. He is the God who created the world. He is the God who appeared to Abraham and Moses. He is the God who led the Israelites through the Red Sea. He is God, He is the LORD. He is the great I am. He is Yahweh. He is the God these unbelieving Jews pretended to worship. Jesus does not merely claim to be the Son of God. He claims to be God. And, really, if you are the Son of God, then you are also God, because a son is always the same type of being as his father. The

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son of a human is always a human. The son of a squirrel is always a squirrel. And the Son of God is God. It just so happens to be that the Son of God is also a man, because he decided in love to come down among us.

This claim of Jesus scandalized his Jewish opponents to the extent that they tried to kill him right then and there. They picked up stones to throw at him, in the temple no less. But the failsafe worked that time, as it did on few other occasions when people tried to kill Jesus. Since Jesus is God, they could not kill him, not until he disabled the failsafe. And Jesus would. At the proper time, he laid down his life by his own accord. That's what all of this is driving toward. The Son of God, who is true God, laid down his life for you.

And this is the great point of the doctrine of the Trinity. It's not some trivial knowledge. But it is the great mystery of God, which he has revealed to us. The Father is God. The Son is God. And the Holy Spirit is God. And together, as one God, they work together to accomplish our salvation. The Father sends his Son. And, his wrath over sin, he pours out that wrath on his Son. And the Son of God came in human flesh to bear that wrath for our sake. In this way, God suffers the wrath of God for us. The Father and the Holy Spirit raise Jesus from the dead, and he lives and reigns forever more. And the Holy Spirit is sent by the Father and the Son to teach this to our minds and our hearts, so that we might know it, trust it, and be saved.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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