

Keeping Jesus' Word

“Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.” John 8:51

Dear friends gathered here and elsewhere, happy Holy Trinity weekend to you. As we come together to celebrate this great mystery of faith and foundational teaching of the Bible about God's identity, there is no doubt that our celebration is muted by challenges. God's triune nature, that He is one God and three distinct persons, is impossible for human logic to understand and certainly is a challenge to preach clearly. Adding to these challenges is the Church tradition of speaking this Athanasian Creed, which can be difficult to appreciate and endure due to its length and unfamiliar phrasing.

While admittedly this weekend has its challenges, these struggles don't need to cover up the celebratory fact that God has made Himself and His Work known to us through the Bible. To give us a lens to see through the challenging layers and focus on the core of our celebration, it is helpful for us to cling to a simple and profound promise that Jesus makes in our Gospel reading from John 8. In verse 51, Jesus says this, **“Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.”** These words from Jesus provide useful perspective for us on this Holy Trinity weekend.

Perhaps, as you heard these words read earlier in the service, they stood out to you. Frequently in the Gospels, Jesus begins important messages with this phrasing, “Truly, truly, I say to you ...” This introductory clause is like the flashing lights and signs we see along the road that make us aware something is coming that needs our attention. What follows these words in our reading this weekend, really is worth our attention.

When thinking about this first phrase, **“... if anyone keeps my word ...”**, it is very helpful to unpack the word ‘keep’. In the Greek, this word is *tereo*, and this word has several different English translations based on the surrounding context. *Tereo* can be rendered as keep – as in our text – or to share a few others, it can also mean to ‘guard’, ‘watch’ or ‘observe’. While this isn't the time and place to dig into the subtle differences between these English words, I do want you to notice one word that you didn't hear and that is the word ‘explain’. Jesus isn't calling for His followers to explain His Word, rather He is calling for His followers to *tereo* (keep, guard, watch, observe) His Word. We often use and are even more familiar with parallel language like believe, trust and confess God's Word.

This is a critical point of connection for us this Holy Trinity weekend. For as much as we might moan and groan at having to speak the lengthy Athanasian Creed once a year, this creed helps us keep Jesus' Word and avoid the traps of trying to explain things Jesus' Word doesn't explain. This creed guards us from errors that happened generations ago as well as protects us from errors in this present generation. It also allows us to

faithfully observe a summary of the very mystery of God's triune nature which is revealed throughout the entire Bible. This creed points us back to the Bible to be reminded, reoriented and even rebuked when our thinking strays from Jesus' Word. This gives us something to celebrate.

The truth is, we need this creed along with the Apostles' and Nicene creeds too, because no generation is willing to keep Jesus' Word. Rather the sinful inclination for each generation is to oppose Jesus' Word. The Pharisees from our Gospel reading are a great example. They heard Jesus' words and because they misunderstood Jesus' words through the prophets, they wanted to kill Jesus for claiming to be God! Likewise, our own misunderstandings lead us to want to destroy God too, maybe not with stones but with sinful, human ideas, feelings and substances, etc. that explain away and even remove God's presence from our lives! And when we choose the things that would explain away or remove God's presence from our lives, we aren't destroying God, we're destroying ourselves.

This sobering reality brings us to the second half of Jesus' statement, "... **he will never see death ...**." Death looms large and not death from boredom from a lengthy creed, sermon or service! The destructive choices we have made and make, replacing Jesus' Word with other things, are a death sentence. It goes back to Adam and Eve. They replaced God's Word with their own words and actions and brought upon themselves and all people to follow the judgment of death – not simply foreboding physical death but even more imposing spiritual death, separation from God for eternity. And sadly, we continue to daily affirm that this judgment is well earned and well deserved.

Here again, in the face of such weighty judgement, our creeds prove useful. While speaking them won't remove our death sentence and earn us salvation, they point us back to the One who has taken care of our death sentence and gained us salvation. From the Apostles' Creed, to the Nicene, to the Athanasian Creed, we are driven back to the Triune God and His work of creating, rescuing and restoring us. We are led to constantly confess that we are forgiven and saved from sin, death and the devil because Jesus lived, died and rose for us. Again, this is something worth celebrating! These ancient words, faithfully and accurately keep Jesus' forgiving and life-giving words and actions before our eyes and hearts reminding us of the Triune God's merciful purpose in our lives.

Dear friends in Christ, take our Lord's promise home with you this day "**Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.**" (*John 8:51*) This is a promise worth celebrating today, tomorrow and always! A promise affirmed and protected by our creeds, even the Athanasian Creed! And it is a promise guaranteed and delivered to you by our Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit – to Him alone, be all glory, might and honor! Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Dan