

THE OFFENSE OF THE TRINITY
Holy Trinity Sunday, June 7, 2009
John 3:16; Nicene Creed

Several years ago, I saw a car with an American flag in the window. That wasn't unusual in the aftermath of 9-11. Some words were written under the flag: "Jesus Bless America." That rocked me a bit. Wasn't "*God* Bless America" sufficient? Wasn't *that* a phrase any religious American could subscribe to? Was the person taking a swipe at patriotic Jews, Hindus, and, yes, even Muslims?

Then I started thinking about it. The word, "God," covers a multitude of identities. Anything from The Force of Star Wars, to AA's Higher Power, to a Master Architect of the Universe, to Allah, Brahman, Jehovah or Jesus, can be honored with the title of God. When we say or sing, "God Bless America," we think we're being generic enough that anyone of some faith and good will can participate. We figure, "God is greater and more wonderful than any of our names or ideas about him; so when we say, 'God,' we're simply talking about the One who stands behind all those names and ideas." There's just enough truth in that to make us sound tolerant, enlightened, and wise.

When we say, "*Jesus* (or Buddha, or Allah) bless America - and bless you," we become specific. We say, "The only One who properly fills the title, 'God,' is *this one*. Calling upon any other name is calling

upon the wind." And we sometimes wince, because we've seen how fanaticism and insistence upon the supremacy of one religion can draw down a whirlwind of hatred, prejudice, and violence. The tragedy of Islamicist fanaticism reminds us of that: They're the ones who support holy war to destroy any and all infidels who refuse to worship Allah or proclaim Mohammed as his prophet. Although many Muslims disavow this interpretation of their religion, it stings - and sticks. We don't want to be tarred with the same brush because of our beliefs! So we may wonder, "What's so bad about simply saying 'God' as we pray for America, for our soldiers overseas, for anyone? Why should we create greater polarization by specifying 'Jesus?' Shouldn't we be working for greater tolerance, cooperation and understanding between religions?"

The answer to the last question is, of course, yes. But does working for tolerance and cooperation mean appealing to a Least Common Denominator God? In the name of not giving offense to others, are we supposed to back off from specific claims Scripture and church tradition make about God? Are we truly called to speak only of a generic, "fill-in-the-blank-as-you-see-fit" Deity, because doing anything else is intolerant, exclusionary, and arrogant?

You've probably figured out that my answer to that is, No. When we baptize, confirm, welcome new members, when we gather each Sunday for worship, we recite one of the Ecumenical - that is, church-

wide - creeds. We don't say, "We believe in generic deity;" we specify *who* this God is. We name and describe this One who has the title of God, and we stand on the offensive claim that this One, and only this One, may bear that title. And this One whose title is God has the name, "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

In the Nicene Creed, which is the most widely used Creed in Christendom, we tell the story of who God is. Yes, we begin with the One who created the heavens and the earth, things visible and invisible. He called them good, and blessed them. Think how many people of various faiths speak of a Creator God! But *this* Lord, whose voice thunders over the waters; who strips forests bare; and who casts fire upon the mountains, is also named and worshipped as *Father Almighty*. This separates us from any who believe in an impersonal life-force deity - or one who is either good *or* almighty, but not both.

We tell more about this God. The Father's inmost heart and will is perfectly revealed in Jesus Christ, acclaimed true God and true man. He is "Eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things were made." Jesus is not just a great prophet or teacher like Moses, Buddha, or Mohammed. "I and the Father *are one*," Jesus tells his disciples. "If you have seen me, you *have seen* the Father." He is God, inseparable from yet distinguishable

from his eternal Father. Here we part with Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, and a host of others.

We then speak the astounding and offensive truth about Jesus: that in him, God became man, for the sake of mortal, sinful humanity. He died a brutal death for our sake. Here, alas, we part company with our elder brothers and sister, the Jews, because they acclaim God as the Transcendent One who cannot in *any* way be subject to death; and the perfect kingdom ushered in by the Messiah has not yet come.

We acclaim Jesus, true God and true man, as being raised by his Father from death, and ascended to his Father's right hand - the symbol of active power and authority to rule. We await his return as Judge and Lord of all. Here, tragically, we even part company with some Christians. There are those who gloss over the Resurrection as a grand myth to comfort believers, or who really don't believe that Jesus is *the* Way, *the* Truth, and *the* Life for all people. They're uncomfortable proclaiming that Jesus has Lordship over all people of every race, tribe, creed, and tongue. They're offended by his exclusive claims. They like the beginning of that beloved Bible verse, John 3:16 - "For God so loved the world." But they hesitate when it continues, "that he gave his *only-begotten Son; that whoever believes in him* shall not perish but have eternal life." How much does God *really* love the world if such restrictive strings are attached?!

And it gets more offensive even than that. Because next we confess, "We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father (the Western church adds, 'and the Son,' but that's not in the original); who, with the Father and Son is worshipped and glorified, and who has spoken through the prophets." And in the same breath we add: "We believe in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, we acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come."

Here's where we pretty much exclude ourselves! Remember from your Small Catechism what Martin Luther says about the work of the Holy Spirit? "I cannot, by my own reason or effort, come to believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord." Only this Spirit, given from the Father through his Son to us, can bring us to rightly believe, worship, and glorify God. *There is no other way.* Not our own efforts or ideas about God, not private visions or group gestalt, not the Koran or the sacred texts of Buddhism or Hinduism or the Book of Mormon, can rightly reveal the One who stands behind the title, "God." Only the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament; the life, death and resurrection of Jesus; the bestowal of the Holy Spirit; and the worship life of the community baptized in the Triune Name, gathered around the altar, brings us to true, saving, life-giving knowledge of God.

Yes, this *is* exclusive and probably offensive to many. Yes, some Christians *have* used this as a reason to persecute persons of other faiths, or none. But if speaking the truth in love is imperative, then we'd better be doing it. We'd better be confessing our faith *here*, every week, as practice for outside these doors. We'd better be ready, willing and able to say, "Yes, God bless America, and every nation and person; but this is no generic god upon whom we call. This is God the Father Almighty, who created us in love. This is God the Son, Jesus Christ, who in great love suffered, died and rose to save us from the powers of sin and death. This is God the Holy Spirit, given to us in love so that we may be united with him forever and may live lives that reflect the life of God himself. There is no other God from whom to ask blessing, forgiveness, guidance, comfort, or life."

Perhaps that car's message should have read: *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit* bless America. For to call upon another *is* to call upon the wind. May we believe, pray, proclaim, and live this truth, lovingly and faithfully, humbly and steadfastly, to his glory, so that many may turn to him, call upon his most holy Name, and be saved. Amen.