

Last Sunday was a special day in the church year: Trinity Sunday. A day that we confess the doctrine of the Triune God in all its purity, even though we don't understand how God can be triune. Even though the very idea that God can be one and three is a paradox that our human minds cannot grasp.

And, in order to confess this doctrine of the faith, we used the Athanasian Creed. Which spells out the doctrine of the Trinity in detail throughout the entire first half of the creed. It is a good and true confession of our faith in this matter. And yet, while we were focused on the doctrine of the Trinity in the first half, there was a line in the second half that might have sounded odd to you.

It's at the very end, where it says, "Those who have done good will enter into eternal life, and those who have done evil into eternal fire." Now, there are a lot of Christians who would take this statement for granted. In fact, there are a lot of non-Christians who know nothing about the Athanasian Creed, but assume that this is just what Christians believe.

But, as Lutherans, a statement like that should set off some alarms. Make our spidey-senses tingle. Because it sounds an awful lot like we're saying that salvation is by works. That if we do enough good works, God will reward us with eternal life. That if we do too many evil things, God will punish us with eternal fire. And so our salvation is entirely based on the works we do.

And that can't possibly be right. According to St Paul, salvation is by grace through faith and this is not of our own works. This is gift of God, lest any man should boast. And as Lutherans, we proclaim with Luther himself that this doctrine of justification is the doctrine by which the church stands or falls. It is the doctrine by which we are saved or condemned. It cannot be altered, compromised, or diminished.

So does that mean the Athanasian Creed is wrong? Well, no. Because the Athanasian Creed is citing scripture too. In John 5, Jesus says, "*An hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear [my] voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.*"

So now, we're not just pitting Lutheran doctrine against the Athanasian Creed. We're pitting Jesus against Paul. And that's never a good place to be. A good rule of thumb to follow: When scripture seems to contradict scripture, it usually means you've missed something important. And that's exactly what happening here. Thankfully our Epistle Lesson for today helps clear up what we've missed.

This Epistle is also from St Paul. But the Biblical account that it tells is one from far earlier in Scripture. Way back in Genesis 12.

God comes to Abram while he's still living in the land of Haran and he tells him to go to the land of Canaan, some 500 miles away. And that when he gets to Canaan, God will bless him and make him a great nation. He will give him a son. And from that son, all the nations on the earth will be blessed.

Now, Abram at this point is already 75 years old. His wife Sarai is 65 years old and has been unable to conceive a child for her entire life thus far. They are not thinking about having a family at this point in their lives.

And yet, Abram believes God's promise. He believes and he immediately packs up all his belongings and goes where God tells him to go. And when he gets there, God makes the promise again. Your offspring will be as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the sea shore. And he gives him the new name, Abraham, which means "the father of many."

And still, Abraham believes. And still... nothing happens. And another 14 years go by. And God makes the promise again. And still Abraham believes and still nothing happens.

Until finally, God shows up, visibly, looking like a human being with two angels beside him, and tells Abraham, "Alright, now it's actually going to happen. Sarah will conceive a child and give birth to a son." And Sarah laughs at the very idea.

Because Abraham is now 100 years old. According to St Paul, he's as good as dead. And Sarah is 90 years old. She is as barren as a woman can be. But still, Abraham believes. Paul says that all those years of waiting just made Abraham stronger in his faith as he gave glory to God, and that he was full convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.

And God was able. God kept his promise. He gave Abraham and Sarah the son he had always promised to them. And he did indeed make Abraham the father of many.

But then Paul points something out. In Genesis 15:6, after one of the times that God yet again confirms his promise to Abraham, the Bible says, "*And [Abraham] believed the Lord, and [God] counted it to him as righteousness.*" And Paul says that's really important. Not just to Abraham, but to us.

God counts faith as righteousness. He did it with Abraham, the very patriarch of his people. And he's done it with generation after generation of Israelites and Christians. For thousands of years, God has been crediting faith as righteousness.

Which is not something we should take for granted. Because think about what that means. If you were at a job and your boss said, "Go clean up the warehouse." What would you think he meant? Probably that you should go clean the warehouse. And if you didn't clean the warehouse, you would be fired, or at least reprimanded for failing to do your job.

Counting faith as righteousness is kinda like you you got to the end of the day and you didn't clean the warehouse and your boss came to you and asked, "Why didn't you clean the warehouse?" And you responded, "Because I believed that you would clean the warehouse for me and promote me for the good job you did in cleaning." That's crazy! That's absurd! And yet, that's exactly what God invites us to do.

He comes to us and says, "You failed. You sinned. You broke my Law. You deserve to be punished with everlasting fire." And we say, "But I believe that your son washed away my sin and fulfilled all righteousness and kept your Law perfectly. And I believe that because he was righteous, I will be given eternal life, because you count faith as righteousness." And God says, "Yep. You're right. I do."

Paul puts it this way: "*[Righteousness] will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.*" God counts our faith in Jesus as righteousness. He counts our faith in Jesus' death and resurrection as a good work that saves us. It isn't a good work. It is distinctly a lack of good works. But it is regarded by our Lord as a good work nonetheless.

And Jesus himself gives us this same promise. You remember that passage from John 5? Where Jesus says that those who have done good will receive the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil will receive the resurrection of judgment? Well, in the very next chapter, the subject of good works comes up again. And his followers ask Jesus a really good question. They ask him, "*What must we do, to be doing the works of God?*" What are these good works that you're talking about?

And do you know what Jesus says, "*This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.*" Faith. That's the good work that Jesus was talking about. Which isn't a good work at all. It's only a good in God's eyes. It's only a good work because God, in his mercy and grace, has chosen to count it as a good work.

"Those who have done good will enter into eternal life, and those who have done evil into eternal fire." The Athanasian Creed isn't making a statement about earning salvation through our good works. It's making a statement about being given salvation as a gift through faith in Jesus Christ. Faith that is counted as a good work. Faith that is essential for salvation.

For this is the catholic faith; whoever does not believe it faithfully and firmly cannot be saved. Amen.