

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
July 1-2, 2 017
Matthew 10:34-42

“Reformation 500 – The Augsburg Confession: God: One Essence, Three Persons”

The Fourth of July is upon us. The annual celebration of our nation’s founding and Independence Day on July 4, 1776, is already happening in many places over this weekend. There will be parades and fireworks, picnics and barbeques, speeches and concerts, and all sorts of things to celebrate the day. You may be joining 500,000 of your closest friends on the National Mall for the big celebration in Washington, D.C. that will culminate in one of the largest fireworks displays in the country. Whatever you do, please be safe, be courteous, and keep your eyes open for joining Jesus on his mission opportunities wherever you may be. If you go downtown, you will be very near to the National Archives where the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights – founding documents of our nation – are all carefully stored and on display. The Fourth of July is a time for all of us to reflect on these principles that have guided our nation for nearly 250 years. Our celebration takes us back to our beginning as a nation. Right now, I’m reading a book entitled, *James & Dolley Madison: America’s First Power Couple*, by Bruce Chadwick (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2014), a fascinating look at the fourth President of our country and his charming wife who used her social skills to work the political system. James Madison (1751-1836) is called the “father of the Constitution” and the “author of the Bill of Rights,” and rightly so; the man was a genius. One of the little-known facts about him is that Madison credited Martin Luther and his doctrine of the two kingdoms (the spiritual kingdom of the right and the civil kingdom of the left) for the American handling of church and state. Madison indicated this in a letter to a Rev. Schaeffer in 1821 (see <https://www.lhm.org/men/studydetail.asp?id=15579>). The complexities of separation of church and state are still being worked out in our nation, as witnessed by the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision this past week in *Trinity Lutheran Church of Columbia, Inc. vs. Comer*, which precludes states from discriminating against churches in at least some state financing programs (https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/16pdf/15-577_khlp.pdf). What the long-term implications of this decision may be, only time will make clear.

Over the summer, we’ll also go back to our beginning as Lutheran Christians. The Augsburg Confession is the earliest confession of what Lutheran Christianity believes and teaches, as we observed in worship last weekend with the Presentation of the Augsburg Confession on June 25, 1530. In this Reformation 500 anniversary year, over the summer we will examine articles from the Augsburg Confession: God, sin and free will, Jesus Christ, righteousness before God, and others. These articles are as relevant for believers today as when they were first written nearly 500 years ago. Begin at the beginning; that’s usually a good place to start. The Augsburg Confession does this very thing with Article I, which speaks of God: One Essence, Three Persons: “Our Churches, with common consent, do teach that the decree of the Council of Nicaea concerning the Unity of the Divine Essence and concerning the Three Persons, is true and to be believed without any doubting; 2] that is to say, there is one Divine Essence which is called and which is God: eternal, without body, without parts, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness, the Maker and Preserver of all things, visible and invisible; and 3] yet there are three Persons, of the same essence and power, who also are coeternal, the Father the Son, and the Holy Ghost. And the term "person" 4] they use as the Fathers have used it, to signify, not a part or quality in another, but that which subsists of itself. 5] They condemn all heresies which have sprung up against this article, as the Manichaeans, who assumed two principles, one Good and the other Evil: also the Valentinians, Arians, Eunomians, Mohammedans, and all such. 6] They condemn also the Samosatenes, old and new, who, contending that there is but one Person, sophistically and impiously argue that the Word and the Holy Ghost are not distinct Persons, but that “Word” signifies a spoken word, and “Spirit” signifies motion created in things.” As we focus on God: One Essence, Three Persons, may the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

Today's Scripture lessons (Jeremiah 28:5-9; Psalm 119:153-160; Romans 7:1-13), and especially the Gospel lesson (Matthew 10:34-42), point out the truth that we should not be surprised if we suffer for the sake of our faith. Jesus clearly tells us that the message of the Gospel will pit people against one another, though that is not the Lord's desire. God desires that all people be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4), but people can and do turn away from that gift of salvation, and turn against those who do embrace it. Religious intolerance and persecution, and even religious wars, are not just a relic of the past, but are very much alive and well in the world today. In the midst of this, we may be tempted to back down or compromise our own beliefs. Jesus calls us to take up our cross and follow him (Matthew 10:38), trusting that in doing so we will actually gain life, rather than lose it. So, what does this mean?

Confessing the truth of God as One Essence in Three Persons, that is, the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, may not align with the idea of God in contemporary culture today. In our nation's founding documents, although God is referenced, who and what God is remains vague and undefined. In the pluralistic landscape around us, there are many beliefs about who God is, some based on sacred writings, but others based on individual and personal belief that may or may not have any basis in outward revelation. In fact, the fastest growing religion in America is no religion at all, as evidenced by polls which indicate that nearly one-fourth of people in our nation identify themselves as "nones;" that is, no religious affiliation at all (<https://www.amazon.com/Rise-Nones-Understanding-Religiously-Unaffiliated/dp/0801016231>). How do we confess the truth of God Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in this diverse and at times turbulent age in which we live? This is very much about joining Jesus on his mission. Of those five mission practices, I think mission practices #2 and #3 are particularly relevant: hearing from Jesus in his Word (#2) and talking to, as well as listening to, people (#3). In order for us to confess who the God Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are, we have to be familiar with how God has revealed himself, and that comes through God's Word. This isn't just about what I may think; it's about what God has said who He is. As Jesus tells us, if we want to know the Father, we need to know the Son (John 14:7). As important as this is, equally as important is how we are talking to and listening to others as we join Jesus on his mission. My go-to verse from Scripture is this: **"But in your hearts, set apart Christ as Lord, always being ready to make a defense to anyone who asks you about the hope that is within you, but doing this with gentleness and respect"** (1 Peter 3:15). Nobody is ever shouted down, coerced, or shamed into the kingdom of heaven. It is about gentleness and respect toward others. So, what kind of opportunities for joining Jesus on his mission will the Holy Spirit open up for each one of us over this Fourth of July holiday?

May the truth and blessing of God: One Essence, Three Persons, revealed in the Augsburg Confession, be graciously revealed to those around us, not only with our lips, but also with our lives, as we join Jesus on his mission. God help us to do this for Jesus' sake. Amen.