



Trinity Sunday

Pastor John Klawiter

John 16:12-15

June 12, 2022

Grace and peace to you my siblings in faith,

When you hear the name of **Constantine** (picture of Constantine), if you have a casual familiarity with church history, this emperor's name might ring a bell.

He's often believed to be the big difference maker in making Christianity the dominant religion. That's sort of true.

Constantine wasn't exactly a devout Christian. Yet, when he was converted, suddenly the empire took notice when theological arguments went unresolved.

Constantine presided over the council of Nicaea, but he wasn't even baptized.

In fact, what if I told you that at the council of Nicaea, those who lost that theological debate were the ones who quickly regained the power shortly after. The Arians.

Indeed, when Constantine was on his deathbed, he was finally baptized... by an Arian.

If you thought the reformation stories of Luther were exciting and involved lots of speaking out against corruption, the earliest

ecumenical council makes the reformation look tame.

Trinity Sunday is one of the few occasions where the doctrine of the church takes more of the spotlight than the teachings of Jesus, but those who followed Jesus had a lot at stake... including a long period where many in the church were Arian, and didn't even know it!

What started as a small squabble between a bishop and a priest in Alexandria, Egypt escalated into the first ecumenical council of all the Christian leaders in the world. **Arius, a popular presbyter within the city, insisted that Jesus was created by God.**

This went counter to the prevailing stance by the bishop of Alexandria, Alexander, that Christ WAS God. The disagreement threatened to divide the entire Eastern church, so Constantine intervened.

Constantine decided to call the first council in the year 325 in Nicaea. Before Constantine had come into power, being a Christian was not safe, so many gathered only knew each other by reputation.

Over 300 bishops were summoned to Nicea, a city close to Constantinople. As the famous theologian Justo Gonzalez writes about this time, he says “Many of these bishops had been imprisoned, tortured, or exiled and some bore on their bodies the physical marks of their faithfulness. Now, a few years after such trials, they’re invited to gather AND the emperor covered their expenses.”

Most of the bishops gathered didn’t belong to the Arius OR Alexander camps and the controversy threatening the church right AFTER persecution had ended was incentive to find compromise.

One of the bishops from the Arian camp thought a simple statement would do the trick and declared that Jesus was no more than a creature, no matter how mighty he was. This caused an uproar.

Suddenly, the council was determined to reject Arianism. Using scripture to defend it, like the passage from Proverbs today, wasn’t gonna get it done.

The bishops needed a creed.

Constantine suggested the word “homousios” or SUBSTANCE, be used. Essentially, Jesus and God in heaven are of the same substance.

A young deacon named **Athanasius (IMAGE)**, the assistant to Alexander of Alexandria, was a key figure in constructing this.

The question is focused on “is Jesus created... or is Jesus eternal?” In John’s gospel, he says that In the Beginning was the Word—the LOGOS—and the word was with God, and the word WAS God. A clear argument that Jesus wasn’t created by God, but Jesus IS God.

Thus, in the Nicene Creed, which we’ll state as a congregation in a few minutes, has phrases like “begotten, not made.” The

majority of bishops agreed and those dissenters were exiled by Constantine.

You’d think that this would solve everything, but remember, Constantine wasn’t a fully practicing Christian—he was more interested in keeping the peace.

After the council, one of the bishops closest to Constantine, Eusebius of Nicomedia, started to present his case to the emperor for the Arian belief. He also convinced Constantine to allow Arius to return.

Then, Constantine’s kids took over after his death and the one who would ultimately gain the most power as sole emperor, Constantius, just so happened to be Arian.

If you think about it, of course many of these Roman emperors would prefer an Arian understanding of God. Jesus isn’t GOD, he’s just a guy. Helps the ego of an emperor who thinks that HE is God, right?

It was then that “the entire world woke from a deep slumber and discovered that it had become Arian.”

This new emperor forced bishops to sign Arian confessions of faith... and they did.

Who took the reigns to make sure that the Arian position isn’t what we are today? Athanasius—the young deacon grew up to become bishop and defender of the belief that Jesus Christ is God—not just a good guy, not just a man created by God—truly that God in heaven, Jesus Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit were all three of the same substance, but remained one God.

Why does all this matter to us today?

Athanasius continued to defend the position that Jesus is God, no matter how much pushback, no matter how easy it would have been to give in. He died before this happened, but if not for his perseverance, we wouldn’t have a Trinity.

Luther probably said it best when he declared “to deny the Trinity is to risk our salvation; to try and explain the Trinity is to risk our sanity.”

I experience the Trinity in so many ways. I see God at work in creation—that this beautiful earth is made by a loving God and I’m asked to participate in this creation. Watching my children grow up is witnessing the God of creation at work.

I see God at work in the Holy Spirit—the presence I feel when I pray. The calm in my heart when a big decision is made or when I need guidance. I am never alone, even in my own thoughts. God is ALWAYS there.

And finally, I see God at work in the flesh—Jesus Christ in the hands and feet of my neighbors. I see it in you, Faith Lutheran, and I see it in our ministry partners.

During the announcements, I shared a video about the most effective advocate—how inspiring it is for children to advocate for what’s right.

But there’s another friend of ours, Todd, who embodies the incarnational God. Here he is, telling his story and making the case for why we respond to our neighbors experiencing homelessness.

Todd video

The war in Ukraine is causing global inflation. Gas is expensive. Food is expensive. Things are tough. It’s tempting to hoard for ourselves in stressful times like this.

This isn’t gonna let up anytime soon. One of my most respected peers in the community social work network, Mary Sue Hansen, reached out to me and asked if we could help adopt a family in Forest Lake as a church.

It’s a single mom with a lot of kids. They need help. They’re about to get evicted.

And all the affordable housing options out there are gobbled up quickly and the landlords are picky, because they can be.

Mary Sue said there is about to be a tsunami of homelessness. Not just chronic homelessness, but even lower middle class families. Families that have never needed shelters.

The wave is coming.

I don’t know how we’ll respond when the wave hits us, but I do hope that the work we’ve done with Settled and Walking with a Purpose opens our minds to unique possibilities.

Athanasius of Alexandria devoted his life to remind Christians that Jesus isn’t just a great guy. Jesus is God—of the same substance as our God in heaven—Jesus is eternal.

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is creating, walking with, and encouraging our next steps. Where will those steps take us? By faith, I believe it’s towards the right thing to do. Amen.

We share the words of the Nicene Creed

**We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.**

**We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, light from light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,**

**of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and
the Virgin Mary
and became truly human.
For our sake he was crucified under
Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of
the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge
the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.**

**We believe in the Holy Spirit, the
Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father [and
the Son],
who with the Father and the Son is
worshiped and glorified,**

**who has spoken through the
prophets.**

**We believe in 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.
Amen.**