

## **Good Things Come in Threes**

Thanksgiving Eve  
Ecumenical Service  
November 24, 2010

There is a saying: “All good things come in threes.” It’s true. Three times’ a charm. There are three outs in baseball, three wheels to a tricycle, and the three-egg omelette.

Speechwriters and movie writers know about threes. There’s “Planes, Trains, and Automobiles.” There’s “You, Me, and Dupree.” And, my favorite, “The Three Amigos.” Good movies, like all good stories, have a beginning, middle, and an end. Great rhetoric is also made of up of threes: “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Ancient cultures seemed to know that three is a good number in the human mind. They would count, “one, two, three—many.” After three it just becomes—a lot.

So it is appropriate as we gather to give thanks to the Lord for his blessings that we acknowledge our three-ness. We are three churches. Three communities of believers situated within walking distance of each other in Morris Plains, New Jersey. Three faith traditions—Lutheran, Episcopal, Presbyterian—three distinct identities, three unique congregations.

Good things come in threes, and it is good to see it tonight.

To borrow from the 20th-century Lutheran theologian Herman Sasse: “The church is not confined to one address. One congregation does not a whole church make.” Are we three, or are we one? What makes us a whole church?

Here we are doing ministry, in Morris Plains, week to week, experiencing our separate struggles. On the other hand, here we are tonight, to give thanks jointly, for the many blessings of God. I wonder—is God trying to tell us something? Is he trying to show us the basis of our unity?

Let me put it a different way. What is it that might penetrate our comfortable weekly schedules and move us to find common purpose? What is it that would help us to lead a mighty cause together as three unified churches?

Here we come back to the number three. Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The question is not *what* will unify us, but rather *who* will unify us? Father, Son, Holy Spirit. The Triune God, that’s who. Father, Son, Holy Spirit, One God.

Lutheran, Episcopal, Presbyterian, One Church. Diversity and Unity. Variety and Oneness. It's all there, wrapped up in the faith we just confessed together in the Apostle's Creed.

I really like Thanksgiving. It isn't quite so commercialized as Christmas (as long as you resist the urge to get up at 3:00 a.m. on Black Friday), and it comes at a time of year when you really need some time off. There isn't as much racing around to wrap presents and so forth. It is just time to be together.

What do you look forward to about Thanksgiving? What food do you eat? My kids love the sweet potatoes with marshmallows on top. Got to have the marshmallows. I love the mash potatoes and gravy. Got to have the gravy. And don't forget the pumpkin pie. If you're lucky you have many other dishes to savor as well.

But it isn't really about the *what*, is it? It's about the *who*. The food isn't much if there is no one to serve it, and no one to eat it. Who is the *who* at your house this Thanksgiving?

Thanksgiving is a communal holiday. It reminds us that we come from a communal God, who said, "Let us make humanity in *our* image." We have God's plural nature—His threeness—imprinted on our souls. It's in our very being, it's why we desire not to be alone. We come *from* community in order to be *in* community.

So Jesus wants us to pay attention to the *who*. He says, I am the bread of life. If the *who* at the table is Jesus, he will feed us the bread from heaven. He shows us the Father. He sends the Spirit.

This Thanksgiving, can three extra guests come to your house? As they did for Abraham at the Oaks of Mamre, three people, asking for some refreshment? When Father, Son, and Holy Spirit gather us around the table, we have unity. One God, One Family, One Church.

Remember Jesus' prayer in the garden, before his death? He prayed that we might be one, even as he is one with the Father. Good things come in threes, and the Trinity is no exception. In fact, it is The Good Thing that Comes in a Three. *Par excellence*. Why? Because it is a Father-Son loving bond. That love and that bond is so strong, so powerful, that it is a third person, the Spirit.

That love can change the world! Do you believe that? In that Spirit, at Pentecost, people from all over the known world were brought together, and

they finally understood each other! The prophecy from Joel was fulfilled in Peter's preaching that day: "My Spirit will be poured out on all peoples, your old men will see visions, and your young men will dream dreams, and your sons and your daughters shall prophecy."

Wow! What a vision of the church! No boundaries between young and old, Jew or Greek, slave or free, men or women, or between Lutherans and Lutheran-wanna-bes. (I know you're all jealous that we can imbibe Lutheran beverages at the Oktoberfest, please come next year if don't know what I am talking about.)

*Who's who* of your table this Thanksgiving? Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, One God. *Who's who* in our three churches? Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, One God. Who brings diversity breaks down the boundaries between nations, races, and yes, even churches? Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

My dear friends in Christ, I now come to the most important point of this message. I pray you will have ears to hear it. We tell our kids, "turn on your brain." Now is the time to turn on your brain. Hear this, and remember it.

*It is not our ministry, it is God's.* It is not our ministry! It is the three in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We need to get out of the way, so that God's ministry can thrive.

I am reading a book called *The Crucifixion of Ministry* (by Andrew Purves, a theologian of calvinist persuasion, who teaches at Pittsburg Theological Seminary.) An odd title. We think of Jesus being crucified, taking our sin to the cross, and this is surely what he did. But ministry? Does our ministry itself need to die? In other words, does our sense of who we are as a congregation, our very way of life, need to be put to death, so that Jesus can come in and really begin doing His work? *It is not our ministry, it is God's.*

*Who* is the *who* of our ministry? Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We cannot save Morris Plains. Only God can do that, as Jesus works his work of forgiveness and life through his one holy Christian Church.

Are you getting it? If it is up to us, we will not have effective ministries. If it is up to us, we will not work together. But if Jesus is the minister in the sanctuary, if he is the high priest, if Christ serves us the Father in worship and in service, all things are possible!

Think on it. What kind of power is the Triune God capable of? Nothing less than the redemption of the whole world. Nothing less than a new heaven and

new earth. Nothing less than the total unity of the people of God, as they look to their Lord Jesus, who shows us that forgiven, we are Three in One, the image of God, as he gives that to us.

Dear friends, good things do indeed come in threes. Father, Son, Holy Spirit, One God. Lutheran, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, One Church. Whether gathered around a table, or an altar, whether giving together, or serving together, or praying together, we are the body of Christ.

We are thankful, that because the bread of life has come to feed us; we are one in Him. And we look forward to more good things to come, from the Good Three Churches, and the Good Three-In-One God.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.