

June 19, 2011

[Trinity A: Immanuel Presbyterian Church, Los Angeles, California]

Genesis 18.1-8

“A Trinity of Love”

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Matthew 10.40-42

Visitors to the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow frequently see people standing, wrapped in prayer, before Andrej Rublev’s famous icon, “The Hospitality of Abraham.” It’s one of the most famous icons in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. When Rublev painted this icon depicting the story of Abraham and Sarah’s being visited by three strangers in the desert, he had no idea the influence his work would have on so many subsequent generations. Today reproductions of Rublev’s icon can be seen all over the world. Indeed, that’s what greets visitors to my home. None of these, however, capture the sense of mystery we experience when standing before his original work. Those who’ve seen it tell how we are immediately drawn into the scene. We get a real sense that we are the object of contemplation, rather than the other way around. This, we are told, was Rublev’s intent. He uses the story in Genesis to portray the mysterious presence of the Triune God in our lives—Parent, Child, and Holy Spirit—and to communicate his belief that we humans are God’s work of art, and as such, are worthy of God’s love.

Now what do the opening words of our lesson in Genesis, on which the icon is based, suggest to us? “*Yahweh* / the LORD appeared to Abraham by the Oak of Mamre . . . He looked up and saw three people standing near him.” With the immediate naming of *Yahweh*, God’s name in the Hebrew text, and LORD in capital letters in the English translation, we have an obvious reference to God. Because God is perceived as three persons here, we have an allusion to the Trinity! who Abraham even addresses in the singular, in verse 3, as “My lord,” as well as later in the chapter. Others would say no, the three visitors are just angels. Yet this story has been used by the church both in the East, especially, and the West from the 5th century onward to depict the essence of the Trinity prior to the coming of Christ. In the Orthodox tradition, this passage and its representation in icons por-

trays the Trinity in human form. Today, Trinity Sunday, I'm going with that tradition.

Rublev isn't the first icon painter to use the story of Abraham's mysterious desert encounter to express our belief in "God in three persons, blessed Trinity," and God as a presence in our daily lives. If we look in the art section of any large bookstore, or online, the chances are we'll find several different icons illustrating this same story. The older pre-Rublev icons include Abraham, Sarah, and a servant entertaining their visitors with food and drink. Their presence reminds us that our relationships with God must be large enough to embrace others, which is why this icon is called "The Hospitality of Abraham." The icon conveys to the on-looker the simple message that if we want to develop a deeper relationship with God and discover the shalom this brings to our lives, we must be ready to put ourselves at the service of others. God enters into our lives through the unexpected encounters we have with people. The willingness displayed by Abraham and Sarah to set aside their own personal agendas and attend to the needs of strangers is what is required of us. What clearly happens in this passage, regardless of theological interpretation, indicates the presence of God in that place, a divine visit to Abraham and Sarah by the God of love—a God who is welcome, who shares our life, and who promises new life in a visitation to announce the birth of a child—a Trinity of Love. The hospitality then extended is commended by Jesus in our gospel lesson.

The Trinity is depicted as three angels sitting around a table. The second person, seated in the center and representing Christ, beckons us to come in. Something very powerful is happening here. We should remember that with our baptism we enter the very life of the Trinity. We realize that this deepest of all mysteries, the source of ultimate reality—God—is best understood as love. St. Augustine

uses an analogy of love to describe the nature of the Trinity. He says that the Triune God consists of a triad of love: “the Lover, God the Parent; the Beloved, God the Child; and Love Exchanged between them, the Holy Spirit. Lover, Beloved, and Love Exchanged—Parent, Child, and Spirit—a Trinity of Love. All this is to say that God loves us, and we are called to love God, one another, and our neighbor as ourselves—our trinity *to* love—God, each other, and neighbor. Few things are more basic than this—love as a medium of exchange!

When Robert Indiana created his famous LOVE sculpture, we may legitimately wonder whether he considered it a representation of God. The love of friends, partners, spouses, love between parents and children, love extended to strangers and the unwelcome—all this is part of it. All this is suggested in the profound story of Abraham and Sarah’s hospitality, and Rublev’s icon.

Imagine, at the beginning of the story, Abraham is sitting in the shade of the oaks at Mamre, trying to stay cool. He doesn’t recognize the three strangers who have come up to his tent as *Yahweh*/God, though he does later in the chapter, yet he and Sarah don’t hesitate to offer hospitality to them—comfort from the heat the day, rest from the weariness of their travels, as well as food and drink. Note that Abraham initiates the generosity. The three passersby don’t come knocking on his door asking for food or to stay the night. Rather they stand apart so he runs out to greet them, bows to the ground, begs them not to pass, but to become his guests, so dusty feet may be bathed, and they may rest and eat. In ancient times travel was difficult and dangerous. Thus hospitality was an essential dimension of human relations, and in the desert a matter of survival. This explains Abraham’s open-hearted welcome of the three strangers who come his way. Welcoming the visitors translates into accepting them as extended family.

Today most of us live in a climate of fear and suspicion of the stranger.

Horror stories in the media have taught us to be wary and not take chances. We understandably warn our children not to talk with strangers. In such a culture of caution, it's extremely difficult for us to be as magnanimous in our response as Abraham and Sarah are to the unexpected arrival of three unknown people. Yet we should not allow our immediate social circumstances or current social attitudes to excuse us from our obligations to others, nor to exclude the stranger from our midst. An openness and willingness to receive and embrace others, and to share our good fortune with them, remain essential to the development of a deeper relationship with God.

Now look at what goes into all the hard work and effort of hospitality here! Abraham tells Sarah to make cakes—perhaps he's proud of her baking—while he and the servant prepare a hearty, extravagant, festive meal. The story shows how hospitality was shown then, and still is in many cultures today. You eat and drink, or at least break bread, as a sign of welcome and hospitality. Rabbi Daniel S. Wolk once described how he met a contemporary Abraham, or Ibrahim, a Bedouin. He asked whether he might take a picture of him, his camel, and his open tent. The man agreed on the condition that Wolk first pay him the honor of being his guest. “We'll eat dates and drink water,” he said, “Yes, and perhaps I will even kill a sheep.” Soon others came from their tents to join the party, blessing the stranger with words of welcome, “*Allah* give you life.”

The “little bread” Abraham talks about turns into a banquet, but how quickly one prepares “a choice tender calf” is left to the imagination. Think of butchering, quartering, and serving up a side of veal! But remember, this is a culture with a completely different attitude toward time. We shouldn't worry too much about the details, but reflect on what God is telling us here. Here is a divine presence. Here is an occasion where God rewards Abraham's generous heart. Here is the

promise of new life in the coming birth of Isaac. Here is a holy mystery about hospitality and sharing. Whenever goodness, gladness, and the simple pleasures of life are enjoyed in community, God is present.

An American pastor was asked by a 1.5 generation immigrant member of his congregation to call upon her old mother who was of the first generation. She said, “Mom doesn’t understand much English, but I’ll tell her you’ll be coming by. When she sees who you are, she’ll say two things, ‘You come? You eat!’ That’s really all the English she knows.” Perhaps that’s really all the English she needs to know to show her hospitality, that is, her love.

Christianity is fundamentally a faith we share and live with others. Our relationship to God is intrinsically linked to our relationships with other people. The obligation to be hospitable, to reach out in love, doesn’t just rest with the individual. It’s a duty we share with others. The pressures we live under today—our age and health, our family and home circumstances, our work responsibilities as well as the culture of fear—don’t always make it possible for us to respond to the needs of others as individuals in the way we should. To love others, we need other people, to help us love and share love. Sharing hospitality and love as a community strengthens our individual efforts and feelings about our own obligation to love others.

If we’re speaking of *agape*, or Christian love, we mean a love that’s self-giving. The very first thing God the Parent gives us in love is the creation—the universe, but especially life and the life-giving earth. The next gift is God the Spirit—the Word, or the revelation and continuing presence of God’s love. Then God gives the Word made flesh in Jesus, the incarnate gift of God the Child, who gives his life for us. A Trinity of Love. We know how much Jesus extends love to others—to all others—women and outcasts, sinners and strangers, enemies and

pagans. He also gives us a comprehensive commandment to love others as he loves us. Then he adds, “Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me . . . and welcomes the one who sent me” (Matthew 10.40). Even more, he stresses both compassion and service as the hallmarks of discipleship. All this is the very life to which we are called in our trinity of love.

Relationships, community, the body of Christ. People who know us and love us, who care for us. Hospitality and reaching out to the stranger. “All the lonely people, where do they all come from . . . ?” The Beatles sang that nearly fifty years ago. “All the lonely people” are everywhere, especially in cities like Los Angeles—in institutions, nursing homes, on the streets, alone in apartments, undocumented . . . If the Trinity of Love motivates us to realize our true selves and the way we should relate to one another in self-giving love, *we* will become icons or representations of that love, reaching out, bidding them come in, and welcoming others into the community of love and faith, as do Abraham and Sarah in our Genesis lesson.

There’s a delightful old Irish verse that goes like this: “I saw a stranger last eve / and I put food in the eating place, / drink in the drinking place, music in the listening place, / and I heard the lark sing her song, / ‘Often, often, often, goes the Christ in the stranger’s guise.’” Food in the eating place, drink in the drinking place, music in the listening place. And all are welcome here. For God is a Trinity of Love, and we are icons of that love for others—reaching out, bidding them come in, and welcoming them.

AMEN!