

The Holy Trinity/First Sunday after Pentecost (C-RCL) – June 16, 2019

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; Psalm 8; Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15
University Lutheran Church, Cambridge MA; Imogene A. Stulken
Ecumenical Prayer Cycle: Malawi, Zambia

After the attacks of 9/11, people gathered at First Church in Cambridge for an interfaith service. At this event, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim women said to each other, “We need to keep meeting, to learn more about each other’s faith, and to get to know each other.” Out of that conversation emerged the Daughters of Abraham book group. There are currently 18 chapters in Massachusetts and 24 chapters in 13 other states and the District of Columbia. One of the original founders is now part of the chapter to which I belong. Our book for this month has been *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*. With Jewish author Douglas Abrams as narrator, the book chronicles the week-long dialogues that took place in April of 2015 in Dharamsala, India, between Nobel Peace Laureates His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu, Archbishop Emeritus of Southern Africa. (Near the end of the book, there’s a great photo of the three of them – an interfaith trinity, as it were – a Buddhist, a Christian, and a Jew.) Since the Tibetan uprising in 1959, when the Dalai Lama fled Tibet, he has lived and worked in exile in India. For decades, Desmond Tutu lived and worked under the harshly repressive and oppressive institutionalized system of apartheid in South Africa.

Our greatest joy, the Archbishop says, “is when we seek to do good for others. . . . We are wired to be caring for the other and generous to one another. We shrivel when we are not able to interact. I mean that is part of the reason why solitary confinement is such a horrendous punishment. We depend on the other in order for us to be fully who we are. I didn’t know [he continues] that I was going to come so soon to the concept that we have at home, the concept of Ubuntu. [Ubuntu] says: A person is a person through other persons.” [Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu, Douglas Abrams, New York, NY: Avery/ Penguin Random House LLC; © 2016 by The Dalai Lama Trust, Desmond Tutu, and Douglas Abrams, pp. 59-60] Or, put another way: “I am because we are.”

When asked if he spent a lot of time in prayer and meditation on his own, Archbishop Tutu replied, "Certainly in our sort of prayer . . . it is never the alone speaking to the alone. Our concept of God is of a God who is one, but who is a fellowship, a community, the Trinity. And we are made in the image of this God. . . . So even when you go into retreat, you are not alone.'" [p. 132]

I invite you now to look at the icon provided.



This icon is titled “Holy Trinity.” The icon was written by the famous Russian iconographer Andrei Rublev in 1425 in memory of the Venerable Sergius of Radonezh. Sergius is one of the most highly venerated saints of the Russian Orthodox church and was born in the 14th century. During the time of Rublev and Sergius, Russia was under the rule of the Mongol invaders, the Golden Horde, who ruled over Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and the Caucasus for over 250 years.

[<https://www.thoughtco.com/what-was-the-golden-horde-195330>, accessed 6.5.2019] In the mid-1300s, new deadly invaders arrived – fleas carrying the Black Death.

Sergius dedicated his life to the Holy Trinity. He and his older brother Stephan built a small cell and a church dedicated in honor of the Trinity. Sergius sought to bring all of Russia together around the Name of God. He hoped to reproduce a unity in the image of the Trinity so that the people would conquer “the devouring hatred of the world by the contemplation of the Holy Trinity.” Rublev, too, in writing the icon, wanted “to offer to his fellow monks a way to keep their hearts centered in God while living in the midst of political unrest.” [Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Behold the Beauty of the Lord: Praying with Icons*, Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, © 1987, p. 20]

Rublev based this icon on an earlier icon known as the “Hospitality of Abraham”. In Genesis 18, “The LORD” appears to Abraham “by the oaks of Mamre” in the form of three men (or three angels). Abraham and Sarah extend hospitality to these three mysterious visitors who speak as one. This is the story depicted in the banner above the back altar. (I note here that the entire story of Abraham and Sarah’s hospitality is in the First Reading appointed for July 21st – so I invite you to come back then and hear the rest of the story!)

Like Sergius and Rublev, the artist for this “Abraham and Three Angels” banner also lived in the midst of political unrest – but in the 20th century. The artist is the Chinese-American He Qi, whom I was privileged to hear some years ago at a Global Mission Event. He Qi told us that when he was in high school, the Cultural Revolution erupted in China. The university where his father worked was closed down. He Qi was sent to the fields to do hard physical labor – which he disliked intensely and

which he didn't feel strong enough to do. He says, "In those days every little town with a wall needed a painting to venerate. I thought maybe if I could paint Chairman Mao's portrait, I would be lucky!" [*Look toward the Heavens: The Art of He Qi*, New Haven, CT: OMSC Publications, © 2006, p. 10] He won a painting competition and was thus relieved from fieldwork. He found a copy of Raphael's *Madonna and Child* in a magazine. By day he painted Chairman Mao, by night Raphael's *Madonna*. He says, "It was a time of great struggle. Everywhere you turned people were rioting in the streets, condemning everyone else. I looked into the peaceful eyes of Raphael's *Madonna*, and it touched my heart." Thus began his journey not only toward a career in art but also toward the Christian faith. [*Look toward the Heavens: The Art of He Qi*, New Haven, CT: OMSC Publications, © 2006, p. 11]

In Rublev's icon, with the figures of Abraham and Sarah removed and through a subtle change in symbolism, the icon is now a contemplation of the Mystery of the Trinity. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrei_Rublev, accessed 6.5.2019] The tent of Abraham becomes the temple (above the left angel); the oak of Mamre becomes the tree of life (behind the middle angel); and the rock escarpment (that faint thing above the right angel) becomes the mountain, the upper room. The hospitality of Abraham and Sarah to the angels now shifts from the three angels outward to us. We are invited in to join them at the table and to participate in their intimate conversation.

The twentieth-century Dutch priest, professor, writer, and theologian, Henri Nouwen, wrote a small book called *Behold the Beauty of the Lord: Praying with Icons*. He reflects on four icons, one of which is Rublev's "Holy Trinity". He asks, "How can we live in the midst of a world marked by fear, hatred, and violence, and not be destroyed by it?" He responds to his own question by saying, "The spiritual life keeps us aware that our true house is not the house of fear, in which the powers of hatred and violence rule, but the house of love, where God resides." [Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Behold the Beauty of the Lord: Praying with Icons*, Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, © 1987, p. 19] For Nouwen, the most beautiful expression of this house of love is Rublev's icon. For Nouwen, contemplating this icon became a way for him – in his words, "to enter more deeply into the mystery of divine life while remaining fully engaged in the struggles of our

hate-and-fear-filled world.” [Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Behold the Beauty of the Lord: Praying with Icons*, Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, © 1987, p. 19]

Whole chapters have been written offering quite detailed interpretations of this icon. Consideration has been given to the colors; the implied or actual geometric shapes, such as a circle and a cross; the attitudes of the angels; and the contents of the table. (What is in the chalice is indistinct, such that it may seem to be holding a bunch of grapes, while some have said it contains the Lamb of God.) Interpreters even differ as to which angel represents which person of the Trinity – which, for me, is part of the beauty of this icon. Not only that, but the angels are not obviously gendered; thus, more of us may find a place at that table in the House of Love.

During a hard period in Nouwen’s life, “in which verbal prayer had become nearly impossible” and during which his mental and emotional fatigue led to feelings of despair and fear, it was “a long and quiet presence to this icon” that became the beginning of his healing. He writes:

As I sat for long hours in front of Rublev’s Trinity, I noticed how gradually my gaze became a prayer. This silent prayer slowly made my inner restlessness melt away and lifted me up into the circle of love, a circle that could not be broken by the powers of the world. Even as I moved away from the icon and became involved in the many tasks of everyday life, I felt as if I did not have to leave the holy place I had found and could dwell there whatever I did or wherever I went. I knew that the house of love I had entered has no boundaries and embraces everyone who wants to dwell there. [Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Behold the Beauty of the Lord: Praying with Icons*, Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, © 1987, p. 21]

And this love from the heart of the Trinity overflows and flows out to the world. As Paul says, “[W]e have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” [Romans 5:1b, 5b, NRSV]

To depict the Trinity, Eastern Christians have used the story of the hospitality of Abraham and Sarah. Rublev’s icon is an example of this.

However, arising in the Middle Ages in *Western* art were different artistic expressions. The Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit could be seen as an old king, a crucifix, and a dove. A wood carving from Poland depicts a bearded old man with a halo in the shape of a triangle holding a lamb with a dove hovering overhead. Some years ago, a campus ministry conference in New York City included a field trip to an art gallery in Harlem. I can't remember the style or culture of the art we were viewing, but there we saw several boxes about a foot high each containing an image of the Trinity: Two bearded men stood on either side of a dove hovering between them.

Evelyn Bonander told me that she and Ann Himmelberger have been "working on the Trinity". They have particularly been drawn to images of the Trinity suggested by Kathleen Norris in her book, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*. Ann has appreciated reading that **quarks** could be an image for the Trinity. Kathleen Norris writes: "[A]lthough I have very little grasp of how science is done, I love to read about quarks, those subatomic particles that exist in threes. There is no such thing as one quark, but only three interdependent beings; [she continues] I picture them dancing together at the heart of things, part of the atomic glue that holds this world together, and to the atomic scientist, at least, makes all things on earth more alike than different. [She concludes:] The quark is a good image for the Christian Trinity, I think . . ." [Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, New York, NY: Riverhead Books, © 1998 by Kathleen Norris, p. 290] I confess that I also have "very little grasp of how science is done," so I looked up "quarks." I read that inside a proton are three quarks in three different colors. And that: "Forces between quarks are mediated by gluons." To me, these forces can represent the love that flows among the members of the Trinity and is poured out on us.

Evelyn has been drawn to the image of the Trinity as a **plant**; she showed me this passage in Kathleen Norris' book, where Norris writes: "...I happened across a metaphor for the Trinity, in Tertullian, of all people, arguably the most curmudgeonly theologian of all the curmudgeons of the early church. It's an image of the Trinity as a plant, with the Father as a deep root, the Son as the shoot that breaks forth into the world, the Spirit as that which spreads beauty and fragrance, 'fructifying the earth with flower and fruit.'" [Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace*:

A Vocabulary of Faith, New York, NY: Riverhead Books, © 1998 by Kathleen Norris, p. 290]

A few years ago, one of our full Communion partners, the Presbyterian Church, USA, produced a study document called “The Trinity: God’s Overflowing Love.” This richly nuanced paper sought to expand rather than to limit the church’s vocabulary of wonder and praise. The document states, “No one name, no single metaphor, no set of words or phrases – however thoughtful, poetic or profound can say everything that could be said about the mystery of God’s love made known to us – in Jesus Christ and sealed in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.” [p. 2, lines 96-99; <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/trinityfinal1.pdf>]

The report cautions us:

As we explore diverse possibilities for trinitarian images, we are mindful of the temptation to bring the mystery of God under our control. [p. 7, lines 354-355]

(In this regard, Evelyn said, “So when I think of the Triune God as a plant or quark[] or shamrock – these all have huge limits but show merely and humanly that many threes exist but are all grossly inadequate.” [E-mail received from Evelyn Bonander evelyn.bonander@gmail.com Thursday, 6.13.2019])

[The report on “The Trinity” continues:] Therefore, we must always be guided by the words of scripture and creed that speak of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

At the same time, we should not insist on the exclusive use of the traditional trinitarian names, lest we quench the Spirit and even foster idolatry. Such a view would insufficiently acknowledge the divine mystery, would neglect the freedom of God’s children to glorify God imaginatively with all our hearts and minds. And would diminish the joy of knowing God ever more fully.

[pp. 7-8, lines 355-361]

Joy – that’s what the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu experience, even though they have each been through life-threatening experiences and turbulent times. The goal, Tutu says, is “to be a reservoir of joy, an oasis of

peace, a pool of serenity that can ripple out to all those around you.” [Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu, Douglas Abrams, New York, NY: Avery/ Penguin Random House LLC; © 2016 by The Dalai Lama Trust, Desmond Tutu, and Douglas Abrams, p. 63]

Because God is love, because God first loved us, and because we are made in the image of God, we are called to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength – and to love others – even those whom we don’t like very much or who are our enemies. Martin Luther spoke of “faith active in love.”

Desmond Tutu’s life of faith illustrates for me just such an embodiment of God’s overflowing love. From *The Book of Joy* comes this example:

During the days of apartheid, the Archbishop would pray daily for the government officials who were maintaining the oppressive system. He prayed for them to transform their hearts and to transform the racist system that they created, but he also prayed sincerely for their well-being. It helped him to love them rather than hate them, and ultimately made it possible to work with them to help transition the country to democracy.

[Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu, Douglas Abrams, New York, NY: Avery/ Penguin Random House LLC; © 2016 by The Dalai Lama Trust, Desmond Tutu, and Douglas Abrams, p. 319]

And so, by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit we are invited to participate in the life of the triune God – who is love. [PC(USA), p. 9, lines 432-433]

And may it be so!