

Jan Hus Presbyterian Church & Neighborhood House
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Trinity Sunday
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So You Say...
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Frank sometimes slides things under my door late in the week, knowing that I will be preparing for worship. As you know by now, he spent many years as a gifted Roman Catholic priest, with a robust sense of liturgy across many worshipping communities.



This week, knowing it was Trinity Sunday, he left me information from an Internet Site with the picture of the icon you see on the back of the bulletin, Anrdei Rublev's "The Trinity."

There is some information from the site on this page, but what I would like to focus on is the invitation of the picture. The inherent hospitality, welcoming, love...

Can anyone see what I mean?

There is a sense of "an enticing welcome" into the heart of these three angels who visited Abraham, which Rublev *metaphor* for the Trinity is represented in this icon. This is not some distant, faraway Trinitarian icon, of painting of Renaissance Masters - of an imposing God, crucified Christ, or Spirit in the form of a thundering and rushing wind. All important images, as well. But this icon carefully depicts the same figure, three times presented as the mystery of One God welcoming us from three places all at once; One God loving us into love by three of God; One God at a table of three hosts inviting us to join in to that which we are a part, completing the circle of love that is set for us, was set for us long ago.

Maybe if we just left it there we would be fine. But we think. And Christian doctrine, based on the Fourth Lateran Council, which was convoked by Pope Innocent III and began on November 11, 1215, explains the Trinity

- as their being only one God in three persons.
- Each person is God, whole and entire.
- They are distinct from one another in their relations of origin.

However, in this mystery, the doctrine states that it is God (Father/Mother) who generates, the Son who is begotten, and the Holy spirit who proceeds. While distinct in their relations with one another, they are one in all else. The whole work of creation and grace is a single operation common to all three divine persons, who at the same time operate according to the unique properties, so that all things are from God (Father/Mother), through the Son and in the Holy Spirit.

The explanation that this doctrine attempted to address had been in debate for more than a thousand years by the time of that council, and like other early doctrine, “Trinitarianism” was developed in the early church to fend off an heretical belief system known as Arianism: Arianism was the belief that there was one God but denied the full deity of Jesus. It wasn’t until 325 C.E. when the Trinity was clearly stated in the Nicene Creed that it became doctrine, as we state it today, and any deviation from it was officially considered heresy.

No where in the texts of the Bible can the word Trinity be found. The earliest use of anything like it was by Theophilus in Antioch in 180 C.E., using the Greek term *trias* (set of three) to refer to

- God,
- God’s Word,
- and God’s Wisdom.

It wasn’t until 215 C.E. that Tertulian used the term *Trinitas* to refer to

- God (Mother/Father),
- Son,
- and Holy Ghost.

And a word about John and this morning’s gospel reading. John was writing to establish firmly the divinity of Jesus. His gospel, the last of the four in the canon, was the one written last -- in 90-100 CE.

This literary and debated progression from the Jesus’ ministry, execution, and resurrection, told over and again over decades, was adapted for each audience – from Mark, to Matthew, to Luke and to John.

In the decades, centuries, and millennia that followed – through Tertulian to the Nicene Creed, Council after Council – the form of what we know today was finalized. Aaargh.

The problem, I think, along the way that was established and that we face today – is that we became so intent on “finalizing, defining” these doctrines – that we squeezed the life and mystery out of them for all who would follow in the centuries to come – as if God had stopped challenging us to reform and be reformed, just as before.

Our mistake, the one we repeat over and over is in an attempt to define, box, contain, “grasp” God.

I finally entered into a new spiritual place for myself when I accepted – really accepted that it can't be done. For all the work and councils that have met and argued over two thousand years; for all the scholars, professors, ministers, writers, preachers, authors – the best we can do is to approach our awesome God & every time we get a bit closer we are blown away by the power and mystery that multiplies.

Did the psalmists' words strike you as you heard them:

God's voice snaps the cedars of Lebanon; *then for emphasis:*
shatters the cedars of Lebanon.

Uh, so you think you want to "hear God's voice" let along talk with God.

"God's voice strikes with bolts of lightning; shakes the wilderness; strips forests bare;

We are talking about that which cannot be spoken. It cannot be contained in words.

We are involved in a mystery – a mystery *that involves us*.

The mystery's name is Love and we are the Beloved.

In all the ways God comes to us, it is always with some recognition, some tinge, some sense, some emotional resonance from inside that we know it has happened – inside beyond, beneath, before the flesh.

We are involved in a mystery – a mystery that involves us, because it *chooses to involve us*. It involves us with Love and the invitation to Love in return. Listen in love, talk in love, love in love, sing in love, pray in love –

be the love in and with the love of the God of three in One, the God of all in One. Our God. Our mystery. Still unfolding...

In John's gospel, Nicodemus, this learned member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling court, comes to Jesus in the dark of night and is so tightly wound up in rules, laws, fears, proscriptions that he cannot get that you must be *born again*.

Born again into the mystery that preceded all rules, laws, fears, proscription.

Born again into the Love that created you and Loves you.

Born again out of the love that created you – love others.

You have to believe. If you don't believe...how will you believe? Jesus says. The intimation being that if you don't believe – you won't.

You won't.

Jesus says, “we are talking about what we know...” and we believe. Believe us. Believe me. Believe that you cannot understand or grasp any of this.

As a Teaching Elder and minister in the reformed tradition of Presbyterianism, I can tell you much about what it feels like for me to believe, about the sense of God I have that is so much greater than I, what the Trinity and its mystery leads me to – *that* being a sense of an even more mysterious and loving God accessible to me in more ways that I know...

I can say all that in words with some degree of success...

But I cannot tell you the meditations of my heart in words that reflect what is happening between God and me. I don't understand it. I know it and I believe it...and I can't explain it.

And that's why I pray and meditate. That's why I come to this same mysterious table as a table of Love that we all have, don't understand, can't explain, and share in worship and company with one another – with this inner desire to carry it forward.

That is what emanates from the Trinity, that is what “begotten” is to me, that is what being “beloved” is to me.

If you would like to see it, take some time later. Look into the picture, the icon of Rublev and see if you are not drawn in in some way that you can't explain; see if you are not comforted in some way you cannot quite describe; see if you don't feel a bit more loved and need nothing else at that moment of knowing; at that moment of believing.

And know that doctrines and dogmas can never touch you the way God does. God was and is long before any of it was written down.

So I say. Maybe, too, so you say...

About the icon...

The Trinity, by Andrei Rublev (1360-1430)

This icon takes as its subject the mysterious story where Abraham receives three visitors as he camps by the oak of Mamre. He serves them a meal. As the conversation progresses he seems to be talking straight to God, as if these 'angels' were in some way a metaphor for the three persons of the Trinity. In Rublev's representation of the scene, the three gold-winged figures are seated around a white table on which a golden, chalice-like bowl contains a roasted lamb. In the background of the picture, a house can be seen at the top left and a tree in the center. Less distinctly, a rocky hill lies in the upper right corner. The composition is a great circle around the table, focusing the attention on the chalice-bowl at the center, which reminds the viewer inescapably of an altar at Communion.

On one level this picture shows three angels seated under Abraham's tree, but on another it is a visual expression of what the Trinity means, what is the nature of God, and how we approach God. Reading the picture from left to right, we see the Mother/Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The table or altar lies at the center of the picture. It is at once the place of Abraham's hospitality to the angels, and God's place of hospitality to us. That ambiguity lies at the heart of communion, at the heart of worship. As soon as we open a sacred place for God to enter, for God to be welcomed and adored, it becomes God's place. It is we who are welcomed, it is we who must 'take off our shoes' because of the holiness of the ground.

Contained in the center of the circle, a sign of death. The lamb, killed. The holy meal brought to the table. All points to this space, this mystery: within it, everything about God is summed up and expressed, God's power, glory, and above all God's love. And it is expressed in such a way that we can reach it. For the space at this table is on our side. We are invited to join the group at the table and receive the heart of their being for ourselves.

We are invited to complete the circle, to join the dance, to complete the movements of God in the world by our own response. Below the altar a rectangle marks the holy place where the relics of the martyrs were kept in a church. It lies before us. It invites us to come into the depth and intimacy of all that is represented here. Come follow the Spirit up the hill of prayer. Come, live in the shadow of the Son of God, rest yourself beneath his tree of life. Come, journey to the home, prepared for you in the house of your Father/Mother.

(www.sacredheartpullman.org)



The table is spread, the door is open. Come. All are welcome.