

I love Trinity Sunday, which makes me an oddity among preachers. I love it because it is not simple. It is an invitation to dive into the complexity of our relationship with the divine, to explore what we do know and to admit all that we do not. It is ultimately an opportunity to revel in mystery.

The preachers who dislike it tend to feel compelled to try to preach systematic theology, a generally thankless task for preacher and congregation alike.

I like it because I see it as about image and experience, rather than systematic theology. When this doctrine was formulated in the early church, they were trying to understand and explain how the various aspects of their experience of divinity in their own lives and thoughts and in history all fit together.

The oneness of divinity was a given for them. The source of all that is is one. From the Hebrew tradition they all knew the Shema – “Shema Israel, adonai elohenu, adonai ehash – Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” From the Greeks they knew the *λογος* the Word, a grand organizer that gave shape and meaning to all being. They knew this oneness in the depths of their being.

They all knew this Holy One to be the source of all the grandeur of the natural world, so beautifully described in that lovely long reading from Genesis, the first creation story, meditating on the relationship between creator and creation. They knew that to each aspect of creation, this Holy One proclaimed “*Qi tov!*” “How good!”

But they also knew Jesus of Nazareth, his unique relationship to God, and his sacrificial death. They knew that God had proclaimed him the Beloved, the Messiah, the Anointed One. This was there in their histories, along with the experiences of the Risen Christ, conquering death and opening a whole new possibility of relationship. Somehow this man was also divine, was also God.

And they had their own experiences and the shared stories of the Divine Spirit coming upon people and enabling them to live lives of sacrificial love in the pattern of Christ. They knew what Jesus said about the Spirit and what Paul said. And this too was divine.

This was their experience, as individuals and as a community. They knew it sounded strange to speak of God in three such distinct ways and yet to claim the ancient tradition of

absolute oneness. So they wrestled and thought – and sometimes even fought terrible battles about the best way to express this reality.

The fruit of that struggle is the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed we recite each week (without the cumbersome title). Each section begins with the Greek word πιστευω whose meaning is closer to “rely on or give my heart to” than what we have come to mean by ‘believe’. So after all the fighting, and sharing experience, they came to a common agreed expression – We give our hearts to the Father, the Creator. We give our hearts to Jesus the Anointed One. We give our hearts to the Spirit, the Ruach, the Πνευμα, the very breath of God.

For some of us, the creed is a source of comfort and enlightenment as it connects us to centuries of the faithful. It is filled with images that form our common vocabulary and resonate with our experience. But some get caught in particular parts, not sure that they truly express their experience and relationship with the divine.

It is good to have a common statement connecting us with one another and the whole Communion of Saints. But it is not all we have. We also of course have all the wonderful stories, stories in scripture, stories from centuries of holy lives lived in communion with the divine in all its beauty and complexity, and stories from our own experience.

We also have all the artistic expressions, meditating on the nature of God and our relationship to God. Music is one of the most direct expressions of spirituality, saying so much that rational discourse cannot. Similarly poetry and painting, sculpture and architecture all provide avenues of expression and understanding.

Today I have brought a new icon to spend time in the Chapel. I have wanted to have a copy of this one for a very long time. I fell in love with it decades ago, back in my earlier life as a Slavic scholar.

It is by Russia’s greatest writer of icons, the 14th century monk Andrei Rublëv. It is his vision of the Trinity. Using the story of Abraham and Sarah’s three angelic guests by the oaks at Mamre as types of the Trinity was well established by this time. What distinguishes Rublëv, beyond his extraordinary artistry, is his choice to omit all of the other characters and story elements, leaving only the three angelic figures at the table, with a bit of background. This makes a very simple pure image.

Many icons stare out with such intensity that they seem to engage and challenge the beholder. Tradition says that icons are meant to be windows into divine reality, so that we are

meant to look through them, not at them. With those intensely staring icons it seems that if this is a window, someone has his face up against it looking back at us.

This icon has an entirely different feeling. It is very gentle and calm. The three figures are sitting peacefully at the table with a space left for us to join them. I feel myself drawn in, through the window.

As a way of presenting the idea of the Trinity, it seems comforting and accessible. Here is no list of attributes or proper titles – or angry arguments.

In Rublëv's time there were theological disputes and a great concern over teaching the people about this important but complex idea of a Trinitarian God. Instead of argument or discourse, Rublëv presented this extraordinary image, as if to say. "Here they are, the three persons of the Trinity. Come and meet them.

Sit down at table and enjoy their company. Everything will be fine." No test, no challenge, no worry, just welcome.

People have written extensively about this icon, about the faces, the postures, the gestures, the colors, finding all sorts of meaning, but the most important thing, the thing that the commentators agree upon is the love. They all speak of the obvious love among the three. And that of course is one of the critical aspects of this Trinitarian understanding of God – that within God's self there is this continual activity of love. Rublëv shows that to us.

As I mentioned, this icon became a favorite of mine early in my Slavic studies. It is interesting to me that it has become extremely popular in the last decade, particularly among groups seeking to respond to new movements of the Spirit, discovering new ways of being Church in our post-modern world. One finds this icon all over, in churches very much like Saint James and in house churches and in grand cathedrals.

I think that part of the appeal is this ineffable sense of welcome and invitation. This image is infused with a sense of God and the world that is open to us, that offers us a place at the table no matter who we are. We are all hungry for that sense of being at home and welcome in the universe, that sense that it is good for us to be here.

This image not only welcomes us and invites us deeper into the heart of God, it reminds us of the duty and joy of always welcoming others, particularly strangers, as the author of Hebrews tells us "for by doing this some have welcomed angels unawares". The icon provides a

pattern of living in the world, with the door always open, always a place at the table for the unknown but expected guest.

With the Trinity, specifically as portrayed here by Rublëv, we have a God waiting to welcome us, to include us, to embrace us with delight. It is a graceful, grace-filled image.

Meditating on this image and allowing its peace and beauty to enter our hearts, we can hear the divine voice saying to us, as to the sun and moon and creeping things in the beginning: “Qi tov! How good!” Good that we are here. Good that we are. Amen.

