

THE SOLEMNITY OF THE MOST HOLY TRINITY (A)

First Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 28:16-20

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The Rev. Peter C. Jacobson, STS

Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

Wichita, Kansas

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

On the cover of today's bulletin, and also in front of our Baptismal font, is the Russian Orthodox icon of the Holy Trinity, painted, or as the Orthodox say, "written" by the monk, Andrei Rublev. The oldest icons of the Trinity date back to the fifth century, and they are known as the "Hospitality of Abraham." They depict the story from the 18th chapter of Genesis, in which Abraham and Sarah serve three men — messengers or angels — who at the oaks of Mamre announce that Sarah will indeed bear a long-promised son in her old age. Early Church Fathers, such as St. Irenaeus of Lyons and St. Augustine, saw this story of the three visitors to Abraham and Sarah, as the earliest revelation of the One God in Three Persons.

The three angels in this icon appear in perfect harmony and oneness, and yet each remains unique. Their harmony and unity is expressed in the color blue which is present in each of the angels' garments. Harmony and unity is also expressed in the fact that their faces all look the same, and gesture toward one another in a circle of love. And finally, each holds a slender staff of equal length, because they are one in authority, and equal in authority.

In the midst of this harmony and unity though, the individuality of each angel — each person of the Godhead — is also maintained. And so, besides the color blue, each angel also has a unique color. Likewise, they all look in different directions, and each one uses a subtly distinctive gesture.

On the left, the angel symbolizing God the Father, wears a robe of pale pink, almost with a white glow. And his right hand is raised as though blessing the second angel's mission. Burning with love, the Father *gives* the Son for the sake of the world.

The second angel, in the center, symbolizes God the Son. He is dressed in dark purple, expressive of kingly majesty. And he looks at the Father, submitting to his will. His right hand extends over the chalice placed on the table. And his two extended fingers over the chalice, are expressive of his dual nature. He is true God and true man.

The Father also looks toward the third angel, symbolizing God the Holy Spirit, dressed in a robe of green. Green is the color of life and growth. Even so, the Holy Spirit is the life-giver, and green is expressive of the season after Pentecost, in which the faithful are called to grow in holiness and discipleship. The Spirit's right hand is said to be shaped in the form of a descending dove.

Also, behind each of the angels, there are three distinct and symbolic elements. Behind the Father, there is a building — originally Abraham's home. Now it symbolizes the Creator God who laid the foundations of the world.

Behind the Son, we see one of the oaks of Mamre, mentioned in the story in Genesis. This tree is now a symbol of the tree on which the Son is crucified, and which is therefore the tree of eternal life.

And behind the Spirit, we see a mountain. It symbolizes the spiritual heights given to those who in prayer and contemplation meditate on the beauty of God.

Yet another striking thing about this icon, is the fact that at the front of the table there is a vacant spot. Now, to some, that might seem like only good art. If you're making a painting of three people, you wouldn't want one of them with their back to you. So of course, you'd have the three positioned at the left, the back and the right, with all three clearly visible. But icons are painted, or written, so that most every aspect, every detail, every feature, proclaims something. There are no practical concerns in iconography — only theological meaning and truth.

So, when you see the icon of the Holy Trinity, you have to ask, "*Why is the fourth place at the table empty? Since it's an icon of the Trinity, why not have a triangle-shaped table, with three sides, inside of four?*"

The reason for the fourth side — what we might call the *vacant place* in the icon — is that it shows the *open-ness*, the *welcome* of the Holy Trinity, towards humanity. Because in fact, that *open* place, is *for us* — *for you* and *for me*, and for each and every person that the Blessed Holy Trinity would like to invite and bring into divine fellowship and communion. That's what this icon signifies — the truth that the triune God invites each of us to share in his divine life, and to share in the communion — the fellowship — of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. There is always *one more open place* at God's table. Father, Son and Spirit desire, not to exclude anyone from the kingdom.

And not only does God not want to exclude anyone, but God earnestly desires to *welcome* everyone, to His table!

If you or I were to paint an icon, we might envision God in all kinds of places: majestic places, perhaps on a mountain-top, or in a celestial palace. We might envision God floating in the sky on a cloud. But who would think to depict God, the Holy Trinity, sitting together at a table, as comfortable and as natural as three good friends? But again, iconography is very intentional, and this icon proclaims — it preaches — that God doesn't entertain His children up in some kind of chrome and glass mansion where you stand, uncomfortably afraid that you might spill or make a mess. And neither does God look down upon you from some lofty judge's bench, peering over his glasses just to make you feel all the more insignificant and puny.

No, this icon proclaims that God invites us to come in, and sit at His table. He wants *to share* with us. He wants us to *be at home* with him. Indeed, on the table is a chalice — making it clear this is no table of inquisition — this is no table for money collecting or recording accounts. This is a table for feeding, for nourishing, for breaking bread together, for being family together.

And what a powerful image that is for us, and for all people in a world where the most common feelings seem to be alienation, loneliness, hostility, *dis*-connectedness. What a powerful promise for our world today, to know that our graceful, loving God invites and welcomes all to come and eat with him; to be reconciled with the Holy Trinity, to the point where Creator and creature, can sit down at table together and share a meal.

And of course, not just any meal, but the food of the kingdom. The holy meal of the holy family, that is not just for the rich and powerful. That is not just for some “in-crowd.” It is not just for those who are happy and successful. This meal is not just for those who have it “all together.” This meal is for *all* — even and *especially* for those who are *struggling*. Even and especially for those who feel like a *failure*. Even and especially for those whose lives are coming apart at the seams. This meal is for those who feel most disconnected and confused and alienated, those who *most need* to be connected with God.

And at this meal, there are no place-cards. There is no waiting list. It’s wide open, and everyone is invited.

And that is why Jesus says to us, to you and to me, as to his first followers,
Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.

The Great Commission is really nothing more, or less than a Great Invitation! As Jesus sends us forth, from here, to make disciples, by inviting them to be baptized, to become part of God’s family, to take their place at the table!

The first step in making disciples is simply to go and invite — to invite people from all nations, races and backgrounds, people from all families and neighborhoods, to *come*, to come and *be a part* of God’s family. To come and *take a seat* at the table, where all are fed, where all commune with God, and where all are taught what Jesus has commanded.

The Great Commission is not so formidable as it might seem, when you think of it as the *Great Invitation*. Because, who likes to be on the outside, looking in? Who wants to be left out? No one wants to be excluded. No one wants to feel they’re not wanted. There’s a ready opening for us to simply say, “*Come — the table is ready — there is a place for you!*”

This week, consider someone you might know, or several “someones” you might know, who don’t know that God has a place waiting for them at His table. Or perhaps you know someone who has been at the table before, but has gotten so busy, or so pre-occupied that they’ve all but given up their place at the table. This week, look for an opportunity to extend to them the Great Invitation! Let them know *they are invited*, and *they are welcome!* Let them know that God wants to *embrace them* in Holy Baptism, that God wants to *love them* in the Communion of his Church, that God wants to *feed them* at his table. Let them know that God

has a place, ready and waiting for them.

And perhaps, they've just been waiting for an invitation. And perhaps, you're just the one to extend that invitation!

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Credits: David Wendel, *The Festival of the Holy Trinity*