

Christian Churches Together
Morning Worship
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Austin, Texas

Genesis 18:1-14

Sermon by Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson

One of the most well known and revered icons today was painted by Andrei Rublev between 1422-25 in Russia. It is a reflection on “The Holy Trinity.” The original is in the Tretiakov Gallery in Moscow, but reproductions abound, not only in Orthodox circles but also among Protestants, Catholics, and in ecumenical settings.

The icon depicts three angels, messengers of God, seated around a table, bearing a chalice. The female figures form a circle evoking deep mutuality, inter-connectedness, and love between one another. But the circle is open, inviting the world into this profound experience of community. As Christine Challiot, an Eastern Orthodox laywoman wrote, “Rublev painted the three angels with a circular motion to signify their unity and equality, ‘thus creating a unity to represent the Holy Trinity in its movement of love.’”

A copy of this icon hangs in hallway in the Ecumenical Center in Geneva. Small reproductions are plentiful. My daughter Karis was given one when she was born, and she still treasures it today. Orthodox voices offer deeply moving theological reflections on the meaning of the Trinity based on this icon. Feminist theologians are drawn to it because they see female images depicting the Trinity.

But this profound reflection on the Trinity comes in the biblical context of giving hospitality to the stranger. The icon depicts the story of the hospitality offered by Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 18: 1-14. Having followed God's call, Abraham and Sarah were at their home, a tent on the plain in Mamre. Three strangers came by. Abraham rushed to offer them hospitality, bringing water, and then cakes made by Sarah, plus milk, and then a calf was prepared to share.

But the three migrating strangers, in fact, are messengers of God. The text says simply that they were the Lord; interpreters see the three as the presence of the Trinity. And they, in turn, bring an announcement that Sarah, in her old age, will bear a son, fulfilling God's promises. Sarah and Abraham suddenly find the tables are reversed, and they are the guests at God's table, being invited into this community of love. Theologian Elizabeth Johnson explains, "This is a depiction of a Trinitarian God capable of immense hospitality who calls the world to join the feast."

The biblical story presented in Rublev's moving icon is a declaration of the unexpected, life giving presence of God, discovered in the context of providing hospitality to strangers. That obligation is persistent in the Old Testament. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, for instance, notes that the love of strangers is declared 36 times in the Hebrew Scriptures, as opposed to the love of neighbor, mentioned only once. The love of strangers and sojourners in the Hebrew Scriptures is a primary test of one's love for God, and this is linked to the presence of migrating people, with whom we can unexpectedly encounter God in fresh and promising ways which open the future to new possibilities.

The increase in migration to the United States, and presence of 11.2 million who are not legally authorized to be in the country, has our raised attention, and the focus of this meeting of CCT, to the biblical, theological, and moral issues at stake for U.S. Christians and congregations. There's little question that the gulf between the clear biblical imperatives to welcome the stranger and the realities of present policy and practice regarding immigration constitute one of the major ways today in which faithful discipleship should result in prophetic witness and confrontation with civil authorities. It's a long spiritual and practical distance from the Trinitarian love so marvelously depicted in Rublev's icon, manifesting the hospitality of God both given and received, and the realities facing immigrants, both legal and unauthorized. This is now a test of faithfulness facing the 350,000 congregations in the United States. And it is in the concrete life of our congregations where these issues must be engaged.

While our foremost attention is on the lives of immigrants who are most vulnerable because their presence is not authorized by the government, our challenge is far more expansive. Overall, our country is home to 43 million residents who were born in another land and have migrated here. Moreover, of this number, 74% are Christian. 5% are Muslim, 4% Buddhist, and 3% are Hindu. Such immigrants come from every corner of the globe. Further, new large and growing Christian communities are shaped by experiences of faith that have been formed and nurtured in non-Western cultures.

Many find themselves in immigrant congregations that are off our ecclesiological radar and isolated from our attention. For example, in Minneapolis-St. Paul, there are at least 67 congregations

of Asian immigrants, and 73 congregations of African immigrants. A similar reality is present in any of the major cities where we live and minister. Further, Hispanic residents, who are 70% Catholic and comprise over one-third of the Catholic community, also include 9.5 million who are Protestant. In fact, there are more Latino Protestants in the U.S. than Episcopalians. All this is the new ecumenical frontier in North America, waiting to be discovered. With it comes the ecumenical challenge facing our future, namely: A post-Christian West is encountering a non-Western church.

Therefore, today extending radical biblical hospitality exemplified by the story in Genesis 18 is not only an imperative of our witness for justice. It also is an indispensable ecumenical practice for building the unity of the body desired and prayed for by our Lord.

Let us remember that when the gospel made that initial journey from Jerusalem to Antioch, following the vision given to Peter, the nature of the church as a multi-cultural body of people became intrinsic to its understanding of God's grace, power, and reconciling love.

Moreover, when the Council of Jerusalem met to resolve the major conflict around the understanding of gospel and culture, its solution constituted a "Non-Assimilation" policy of the early church. In other words, non-Jews were not required to become assimilated into Jewish culture in order to become Christian. Each was joined together in community as equals, in true mutuality. One group was not "assimilated" by the other.

As Korean theologian Chun Hoi Heo writes in Multicultural Christology:

The price of peace is not the elimination of differences. Jews and gentiles worship together in Christ while both remain Jews and gentiles. Jesus and his followers do not aim to create a generic community of cultural homogeneity, but rather to reconcile them to God and to one another by respecting both ethnic groups as mutually interdependent. We are entrusted with that ministry of reconciliation.

As we reflect on the story of Abraham and Sarah in Genesis, and on the presence of 43 million residents in the United States born in another country, knowing the trends that will increase the flow of new strangers and aliens in our land, some questions become clear. Will our congregations in the United States be capable of the transformation that is essential for them to be signs of the hospitality, justice, mutuality and reconciliation that reflects God's intention and love? Moreover, can we create new local laboratories of ecumenical life that demonstrate how the entrenched divisions in world Christianity can find expressions of unity, which is both God's gift and our obligation?

We're taken back to Andrei Rublev's icon of the Trinity. A Russian Orthodox priest reflecting theologically on this icon, wrote this:

Every Person of the Holy Trinity, living by their mutual Holy Love, strives towards their unity and perfect proximity, trying to be as close as possible One to the Other and devote Oneself to the Other as fully as possible, offering the Other complete freedom of action in Himself.

This is a moving description of how the Trinitarian love of God flows between each Person in full mutuality, responsiveness, interdependence, and equality. That's the nature of God's love, and it

is this love that has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. (Romans 5:5) Moreover, this is the love that forms the foundation for the life of the Body of Christ, the church.

This same love flows not only between the persons of the Trinity, but also reaches out in generous hospitality to the world. The circle is open in the icon, even as the circle is to be open when that love fills the Body of Christ. Welcoming the stranger in our land, an action so indispensable for God's justice, and for discovering anew the unity of the body, is nothing more, or less, than participating in the love of the Trinity.

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