

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Sunday June 12, 2022 Trinity Sunday.
Preacher: Christopher McLaren
Theme: Sacred Conversation.
Visual Image: Holy Trinity Icon by Andrei Rublev 15th Century

Introduction

I want to do something rather different today as the sermon. I want to use the famous Icon of Andrei Rublev to reflect on the nature of the Trinity and our life together here at St. Mark's.

Andrei Rublev painted this Icon or wrote this Icon as some prefer to call it, as these images are akin to scripture in that they communicate something of the divine life to us in line, color, composition, and deep symbolism.

The Icon itself is based on an Old Testament story in which The Patriarch Abraham welcomes three strangers to a meal. The story is found in Genesis

The Story Genesis 18:1-15

The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, 'My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.' So, they said, 'Do as you have said.' And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, 'Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.' Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

They said to him, 'Where is your wife, Sarah?' And he said, 'There, in the tent.' Then one said, 'I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.' And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So, Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?' The Lord said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh, and say, "Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?" Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah

shall have a son.' But Sarah denied, saying, 'I did not laugh'; for she was afraid. He said, 'Oh yes, you did laugh.'

It is a mysterious story of hospitality in the desert, of conversation around a meal, of unexpected discussion (children in their old age), and of challenge to be truthful about one's life.

The icon that Rublev allowed to be created through him by the power of the Spirit is a window into the sacred relationship of the Holy Trinity. If you look closely at the icon, you can see that the three strangers or three angels are at table. Their relaxed and graceful bodies seem to lean into one another giving and receiving in a most harmonious circle. There is a sense of calm in the scene but also a sense of movement and dynamism that undergirds its beauty.

One of the things this icon does when I gaze into its tranquil but lively depths is to invite me into the sacred meal, into the fellowship and hospitality of strangers, into the conversation.

One of my favorite books on prayer by Martin L. Smith begins with the words: "God is a conversation". I've always loved that line as it reminds me that God, is inviting and relational. A conversation involves a give and take of listening and vulnerability, of sharing and showing curiosity. Real conversations are not just one-way exchanges or at least true conversations never are. Have you ever been changed by a conversation? Has anyone ever asked you a question or observed something about your story that changed how you understood the world, influenced a major decision or helped you to understand yourself better? I will never forget the day a stranger sat down at my lunch table talked and listened to me and ultimately said, "Have you ever considered becoming an Episcopal Priest?"

The Holy Trinity Icon by Rublev invites us into the sacred conversation that is the Holy Trinity. There is a space for us at the table, an opening for us to enter into this life changing conversation with God. As we enter deeply into the sacred conversation with the maker of heaven and earth, we cannot help but be changed. The degree to which we engage the conversation, listen to what God is saying in the scriptures, in our hearts, in the lives of those who are trying to be faithful to God's ways, the more deeply we shall be shaped and changed by this sacred conversation.

The conversation that Abraham and Sarah had with the strange visitors touched them at the most tender part of their life together and to be sure it changed them, as they learned in the midst of that conversation that nothing is impossible with God.

They learned that all of life, even the parts we are most insecure about or hesitant or bothered by can be part of our conversation with God.

The conversation that is at the center of Rublev's Icon is made possible by the act of hospitality of Abraham. And I want to suggest or challenge us as a people of God that the degree to which St. Mark's continues to become a place of deep hospitality toward strangers and toward one another is the degree to which we will experience the depth of community that results in recognizing the presence of God right in front of our eyes.

The truth of the matter is that Christ plays in ten thousand places. He is hidden in every child of God waiting for us to discover the playful power of his presence. The challenge is to engage in conversations with one another that really have the potential for discovering where God is at work. It is a great privilege to discover what is important to us, what we are passionate about, what injustices make us angry in this world and ready to act, what searching questions are truly important to us, what stories from our life have really shaped us into the people we are now.

The Icon of the Holy Trinity is a summons to the depth of community that is possible but rarely enjoyed in the church. I believe that this icon calls us into a way of life to become a community of deep listening and hospitality, a community that dares to talk to one another about things that matter, not just about the weather or how good the coffee is today. The conversation that is the Holy Trinity challenges us to dare to engage one another in meaningful and thoughtful ways because the truth is that we are mostly strangers to one another. Do you really know who you worship with? Do you know their pains and struggles? Do you know the stories that shaped them into the person in front of you?

The mystery of the three strangers that visit Abraham at the Oaks of Mamre is that in engaging the stranger in our midst, the person we do not yet know, we may discover the presence of God in our own lives. For Christ is incognito in more ways that we know and what is more delights in being discovered in the art of sacred conversation.

So, this day I want to invite and challenge you to dare to talk to one another, to take the risk to be curious about the person you worship beside or in front of and find some time to get to know one another.

This summer we are inviting the people of St. Mark's to embrace an initiative we are calling the Summer of Conversation. It is a simple but radical idea. Today after

coffee hour we'll offer some teaching and experience of what we call individual or relational meetings. We'll talk more about how they work and the art of a good conversation. In short, we're learning a Spiritual practice of sacred conversation – the art of having conversations that really matter, could change us, and will deepen our relationships and sense of community and belonging here at St. Mark's.

Our hope is to have 200 or 300 conversations with people in our parish for 30 or 45 minutes each over the next several months – thus the Summer of Conversation. It is an ambitious undertaking. We want to be part of creating a thick network of relationships at St. Mark's that makes this church different than many others. We plan to do this offering to meet with members and newcomers and strangers to listen, ask questions, and by becoming lovingly curious about each other's lives.

Over the next few weeks there will be clip-boards to sign-up on if you would like to participate in our Summer of Conversation. We'll have a commissioning service next week where we formally commit to this important work as a community. If you are intrigued by this idea of learning and practicing the art of sacred conversation, please stay for coffee hour and training, sign-up over the next weeks to have someone call you to setup a conversation, or participate in the commissioning rite next Sunday. know and we can invite you to our next training. The great theologian Martin Buber once said that "All real living, is meeting." We know that making time to listen to one another and to share our stories is part of belonging, part of recognizing one another and the stuff that actually creates community. We all desire to be part of a community and it requires real relational investment. What we really desire in life cannot be purchased it must be made, created by our acts of loving care, listening and paying attention to one another.

Just as the Holy Trinity is an image that overflows with the hospitality of self-giving love we call communion; I believe that the radical work of getting to know one another through intentional or purposeful conversation is the work of a whole community that will truly change us. For in taking the risk to greater intimacy and understanding with one another we will create the kind of community that we actually are longing for, a community that this beautiful image of the Trinity beckons us toward. In welcoming the stranger and one another we create a place of deep hospitality that is capable of transforming our community through discovering the presence of Christ in one another. *Amen.*