

St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Albuquerque, NM
Feast of Saint Luke
Homily
Preacher: Lin Marksbury
10/20/2019

Saint Luke's Feast Day – Homily

We are celebrating the memory of Saint Luke, the First Icon Painter.

People ask me, "Is that true?" – I don't know! Very little is known about any of the writers of the Gospels – there are a lot of stories and legends about Luke – that he was a physician, that he was Greek and not Jewish, he was a friend and companion of Paul, that he met people who had known Jesus, including Mary. His gospel and the Acts of the Apostles are major portions of the New Testament.

Our church has been through hundreds of years of sometimes very violent reformation and iconoclasm – people often feel uncomfortable with religious images in the church, and don't know how to deal with artwork that isn't intended just for decoration or education. People often ask me, "What do I do with icons?"

It's a good question.

The answer is, of course, is that you pray with them – but that can mean lots of different things. You can say your prayers or sing the psalms with them – many times I just sit quietly with my favorite icons and meditate with them – see what thoughts and connections come to mind and what I think or feel about what crosses my mind. This is also prayer of a kind.

Good art sparks an interaction or a conversation – not with the artist but with ourselves. It's a dialogue.

An interesting thing about good icons is the facial expressions of the people depicted in them. They often look rather "blank" or even "doll-like" – this can be very off-putting -especially to westerners encountering icons for the first time. Western artists strive to depict very highly nuanced facial expressions in art -and icon faces can seem weird, strange or I've even heard them described as looking "mean".

Of course, the expressions are intentional- as everything is in iconography - and are intended to show you something significant.

Christianity is an Oriental religion, and came under the influence of many, many other Oriental religions and cultures in its Middle Eastern Homeland, including Hinduism and Buddhism, down along the famous Silk Road, which began in Xian, the T'ang capitol of China, and terminated at Damascus, in Syria. Art and ideas and armies and missionaries traveled up and down the Silk Road, meeting, mixing and quarreling for thousands of years. All the little Greek kingdoms in what we now call Afghanistan were Buddhist, and produced some of the most beautiful religious Art from the ancient world. Images of Buddha also often have this tranquil, sad sometimes "sleepy-eyed" expression. What is that?

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Orthodox Christian believers often talk about icons as being “Windows into Heaven” – which is a good image. Another and more interesting image about icons is that, in a very special way, they are also like mirrors. A good icon is a mirror. It reflects – something of significance – back to you. Not your physical self, your appearance – but something about your authentic, your interior self.

What does your “authentic face” look like?

Not the physical one – it's a metaphor – your interior one. Your “heart”. What does that look like? Who can you show that to? Anyone? Who can you share your authentic, “true” self with?

Icons look like that because the people in them are thought to have “transcended” the entanglements and attachments of the temporal; the temporary world. It's a value in all ancient religions – this “attached non-attachment”; this “interested dis-interest”. It's actually the goal of spiritual practice – the Buddhists call it “Enlightenment”; Christians call it “Salvation” - a similar concept.

It doesn't mean that you don't care, don't feel, aren't involved. You care deeply and wisely. You care with an understanding about life's turmoil and have a broader perspective. You understand that life's pains and confusion, however awful, however devastating, are temporary. You do your best and try your hardest; but you know that most things are always outside of your control. Our perspectives are limited by what we can see and experience; we perhaps can't really “know” anything very precisely, even about ourselves, our own bodies, our own motivations and emotions remain mysteries.

Do you have any friends that you can share thoughts like that with when you're suffering, or even when you're elated about something? Deeply wise, listening carefully, completely attentive, not trying to insert themselves into your narrative, but genuinely caring about you and your experience?

If you do – you are very, lucky. Many people seem to go through their entire lives never encountering another person they can have a real, “Heart to Heart” with. That is a rare kind of friendship that takes years of careful and loving cultivation to have grow and flower. Some people may not even have that kind of experience with themselves!

That's what's reflected in the face in the icon! Your highest, best Self, the most important part of you, the part of you that is uniquely you, that lasts forever. Wonderful house, amazing car, beautiful body, well-paying job, lovely family – all the things that we acquire and accumulate during our busy lives have to be surrendered ultimately. Finally, the only thing you're left with is ... you. The real you. What does that look like? Whom can you show that to? Whom do you trust enough to share that with?

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We all of us acquire “masks” – duties, responsibilities – roles – commitments – they all require that we show a particular, often very carefully arranged “face” for the performance. Sometimes we become so caught-up in the performances that we may forget they are roles, “masks” – and not our true selves. Mother, father, boss, teacher, friend, priest, deacon, husband, wife ... all of them come into our lives and must go out of our lives at some point. What is underneath them all?

It's not something that just grows by itself or happens, you know. This authentic “self” – must be cultivated and cared for – you have to love it and listen to it and share deeply and kindly very often; it takes years of careful intention to nurture a friendship with yourself like that. You can't take it for granted or neglect it – just like a pet, or a child, or a houseplant – it requires the investment of support and love to flourish. It can wither and even die if ignored. It can turn into something quite ugly, closed, and self-centered – even violent and delusional.

Offering a candle to the icon is a prayer that the peace and wisdom embodied by the person in the image will encompass your own life and that you will grow in awareness.

The original, ancient icon of Mary and Jesus that Luke was supposed to have painted – at her house in Ephesus where she was living with John, the Beloved Disciple, was lost long ago, but many, many churches in Eastern Europe are popularly supposed to have an icon that is believed to be that icon, or a copy of it. Its title is “She who shows the way” and it is this beautiful image that Brett painted for us.

Mary is showing you her son. He is dressed like a Byzantine Emperor, not like the peasant child he really was in Nazareth. Oddly, he is shown also with the features of an adult man, not of a child. This is also a poetic metaphor, because of course it is, really, a picture of you; and you may not have been introduced, yet.

Mary represents, and has always symbolized a kind of “Every-man and Every-woman”. A true Human person. She represents what all of us, men and women, are called to be – the beautiful child she is showing you is the “Authentic Heart-Self” we've been meditating on. This is the highest, best, most beautiful and true part of you.

It's dressed like an emperor because it is the most brilliant and valuable part of you – it looks like an adult man because it has the wisdom and equanimity of a mature adult – but it also has the vulnerability, spontaneity and joy of a small child.

The icon is a meditation on what it means to live a human, humane life. Sorrow and joy, it's fleeting temporality, it's ultimate grace and beauty. Having and loving a child is probably the most human metaphor for selfless love we humans can imagine. Mary is showing you this gift

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of selfless, wise and devoted love for ... yourself. For your own soul. It's yours to care for and to share with the other people you love deeply, and who also reflect its love back to you.

You see, your bothers and sisters are also Holy "icons"!

Holy Mary, Mother of our Savior Jesus, pray for us and help us!

Amen.