

*An Iconic Feast*

John 3:1-17

Whitefish UMC

Trinity Sunday, June 7, 2009

- † My dear friend, retired pastor Marvin Northcutt, and I spoke on the phone the other day. What started out as a perfectly normal conversation turned into a bad case of the game “telephone.” You know the game—it’s when one person says a word or phrase and then others try to repeat it after it is whispered into their ear.
- † What usually happens? You end up with a perfectly garbled message—often hilarious. That’s what happened with Marvin and me. He had tried to convey a simple sermon title.
- † At first I thought he said “Lenten Leap Out.” But Marvin, it’s not Lent, it’s the season of Pentecost! No, that wasn’t it. He repeated the title very slowly and patiently. “Oh—‘lint in, leap out!’” I said. Even when he spelled it, I got stuck on his slightly southern accent. Finally, we got it straight. “Limp In—Leap Out.” Come back next Sunday to hear more....
- † Why am I telling this embarrassing story on myself? To illustrate how easy it is to struggle to understand something—even a thing that is relatively straightforward. And if it’s so easy to misunderstand something so simple, how much more natural it must be to really get mixed up about an important idea such as the Holy Trinity.
- † In today’s scripture from the Gospel of John, a young, learned man, a Pharisee with everything going for him, seemingly, comes to Jesus

- under cover of darkness and by the power of the wind to seek the light through this Jesus he has heard about.
- † Something is missing for this young man who on the surface has it all. He longs to understand what he is searching for when he says, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.”
  - † Nicodemus, like you and I, longs to understand more about God, to gain some deeper knowledge. And Jesus replies, cryptically, “...No one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above.”
  - † Nicodemus doesn’t get it, though, and asks how this is possible. “How can a person be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”
  - † Jesus tries to help. “Trust the wind, Nicodemus.” Of course he is really speaking about the Spirit, the Holy Spirit that has blown Nicodemus to Jesus so he can become closer to God.
  - † Jesus tells Nicodemus about how the Son of Man, God’s son, must suffer and die and ascend to heaven—all concepts we’ve learned about in the last three weeks. That God sends his only Son so that whoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.
  - † For good measure he adds this beautiful reassurance: “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”
  - † And there you have it: the doctrine of the Trinity explained, right? As Steve Garnaas Holmes says, “Once Jesus has done his thing during Easter and the Holy Spirit has arrived on Pentecost, we have the whole cast on stage—so the Sunday after Pentecost we can celebrate that God is Three persons in One.”

- † Of course if it were that simple, Christians wouldn't have been arguing about what it all means for centuries. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. People have argued over which comes first, what gender each person of the Trinity is, which aspect is greater. Sounds very human, doesn't it?
- † It is our uniquely Christian idea that God comes to us and is known in three ways. Not three gods. It helps to know that person, persona—from which the word personality comes—used to refer to the masks an actor wore in an ancient Greek drama. One actor could play three parts. One God comes to us in three ways.
- † For many of us, God is Creator. And God came into human history in Jesus Christ—God the Son. Then that unpredictable Spirit, God the Holy Spirit, holds the rest of it together.
- † We experience God's presence through the Spirit—the energizing, empowering, comforting, sometimes challenging and irritating presence of God in the midst of life.
- † Such a foundational idea, doctrine of Christianity ought to be perfectly clear. But it's not. And I think that's how it should be. A mystery, an experience, an invitation.
- † When I was in seminary, I had a very young friend, just out of college, who introduced me to Eastern Orthodox icons. She had taken her junior year abroad in Russia and become fascinated by them.
- † For the Eastern Orthodox church, an icon is not a painting in the sense that we normally regard pieces of art, although it is an image that is painted. An icon is a window out of the obvious realities of everyday life into the realm of God. Every paint-stroke has a meaning made holy by centuries of prayer.

- † Icons are religious images that hover between two worlds, putting into colors and shapes what cannot be grasped just by the intellect. Not every religious painting can be considered an icon. For some, icons are religious pictures that convey inner spiritual meaning of their subject matter. As one writer says, “The Son of God came to restore the divine image in human form. Iconography is the graphic witness to this restoration.”
- † Many scholars consider Andrei Rublev’s “Trinity” the most perfect of all Russian icons and perhaps the most perfect of all the icons ever painted. Rublev lived in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and painted Trinity to help ordinary, uneducated people understand the confusing and often controversial doctrine of the Trinity.
- † A fascinating and wonderful history of interpretation of this icon drew me in as I prepared for this sermon, but if I tell you all of it, I’ll never get to the point. If you’re interested, though, let me know and I’ll share it with you.
- † If you’re like me, you probably first look at this icon somewhat dismissively. Old. Foreign. Obscure. Even though my seminary friend had shown it to me and I had observed it in books, it didn’t mean a thing until Tom and I visited the Taize community in France last year.
- † A copy of this icon is placed in a corner of the large gathering center where the community meets to pray three times a day. I’ve told you that people come from all over the world to meet, pray, sing, and learn at Taize. People come seeking common ground for peace and understanding.

- † One day we happened to sit in front of this icon during evening prayer. And instead of seeing it as an object, I began to experience it as an invitation. Notice that the figures are seated around a table with a chalice at the center. It's a four-sided table, with only three figures circling it.
- † Although primitively depicted, you can still see that the fourth side of the table is open and that the three figures, though surrounded by haloes of light, are humbly and graciously offering hospitality to the one who gazes on the scene.
- † It's as if the Trinity is welcoming us into relationship with God—in all God's mystery and nourishing presence. Take a moment and open yourself to that invitation. Maybe you can experience something of that hospitality yourself.
- † Relationship. Hospitality. Nourishment. That's what the Trinity is meant to be—not some dividing, alienating, bludgeon—a test, a certainty.
- † One of my favorite films is called “Babette's Feast.” Based on a short story by the Danish writer Isak Dinesen, the movie portrays the life of two elderly maiden sisters, the daughters of a long-dead prophet-founder of an austere Christian sect. The sisters lead simple lives of charity and piety to carry on their father's memory.
- † As young women, they were beautiful and desirable but rejected two suitors—an opera singer retreating to the lonely village for rest and a young and callous military cadet sent to the village in exile for bad behavior. Marriage was considered too worldly for them, and so they contented themselves with service to the poor.

- † One stormy night a young mother, a refugee from the terrors of the French civil war, whose name is Babette and whose husband and son have died, arrives on their doorstep. The sisters take her in as a maid, and she helps them do their untiring work among the poor.
- † As the years go on, the remaining members of the sect have grown old and have taken to quarrelling with one another. Old disagreements have reawakened, and past sins have cast a heavy pallor over the congregation. The sisters, seeking to reinvigorate their failing flock, plan a simple ceremony in honor of their father on what would have been his one-hundredth birthday.
- † As the date for the celebration approaches, the maid Babette receives word that she has won one hundred francs in the French lottery, thanks to a ticket an old friend of hers had renewed each year.
- † Babette reflects on what to do with her winnings and asks the sisters if she can prepare, just once, a real French meal, and serve it for the pastor's celebration. The sisters reluctantly agree, and Babette begins to assemble a meal the likes of which the little community has never seen.
- † The preparations cause the little community to fear something akin to a witches' Sabbath and they all resolve to attend the dinner but not to like it. As the determined villagers gather, it appears that Babette has gone to a whole lot of trouble for nothing. The community will remain cantankerous and grim.
- † One of the members has brought her visiting nephew, now a general. The general doesn't know of the plan to remain aloof from the beauty and sumptuousness of the meal. (Of course he is the callous young cadet, now famous and grown up.) He sees the feast and speaks

- lovingly of a famous Parisian woman, a chef, who in the years before the civil war was fabled for her culinary gifts.
- † She had made dining a love affair in which there was no distinction between the spiritual and physical appetites. Gradually warmed by the general's example, the guests begin to respond, not only to the feast itself, but to one another. Old quarrels are healed and past sins are genuinely forgiven.
  - † The general rises, and echoing the deceased pastor's words, acknowledges the reality of a world illuminated by love. The dinner comes to a close and the disciples leave, and they spontaneously join hands in a circle and dance. Inside the sisters thank Babette, thinking that she will use some of her winnings to return to France.
  - † But Babette has spent all her money on the feast and will remain in the little village with the sisters. The general's closing words ring in their memory: "Grace makes no conditions, it takes all to its bosom and proclaims amnesty. That which we have rejected is poured out on us."
  - † Some say that Babette's Feast demonstrates the Trinity better than any other artistic depiction. The feast is given in honor of the Father. The servant is not seated but serving (the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve...) from the Kitchen—Babette.
  - † The General is the Holy Spirit. He explains the Father and the Son. He quotes the Father and explains the significance of the meal and has only one reference point to compare it with—the love feast back in Paris. Jesus said that the Spirit would remind us of everything Jesus taught us. "And he came, not to testify to himself, but of the One who sent him."

- † We are about to take part in our own iconic feast—Holy Communion, which is a remembrance of the past, a sustaining joy in the present, and an anticipation of the heavenly banquet to come.
- † The Holy Trinity is an invitation to you—not a certainty, a doctrine, a dividing cudgel. As in Rublev’s icon, and in *Babette’s Feast*, there is a table prepared for you—and for everyone. It is a table of love and forgiveness and nourishment for your life and the life of the world.
- † For we remember that on the night he gave himself up for us....

Sources:

Wendy Wright, “*Babette’s Feast: A Religious Film*”

<http://www.unomaha.edu>

Explanation of Andrei Rublev’s Icon of The Trinity,

[www.stjohnscamberwell.org](http://www.stjohnscamberwell.org)

Steve Garnaas-Holmes, “Unfolding Light,” a daily devotional email