

Trinity and Hospitality

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

Columbus, Ohio

October 9, 2011

Genesis 18:1-8 NRSV

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.

John 17:20-26

John’s Gospel records what is sometimes called the high priestly prayer of Jesus.

At the center of that prayer, Jesus prays for his disciples.

But he doesn’t stop there.

Here’s how the prayer concludes.

I’m not just asking about these, but also about those who will have faith in me because of what these have to say, that they all may be one, just as you, Father, are in me and I am in you, that they too may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me. And I have given them the glory you have given me, that they may be one, just as we are one: I in them and you in me, that they may have complete unity, that the world may know that you sent me and that you loved them, just as you loved me.

Father, those you have given me, I want them to be with me where I am, that they may see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. Righteous Father, the world doesn’t know you, but I know you, and these know that you sent me. And I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, that the love you have had for me may be in them, and that I too may be in them.

Sermon

From time to time, I mention old cartoons that I remember from Leadership magazine. Here’s another one. The preacher is sitting at his desk. The Bible is open in front of him. Books, magazines, and newspapers are to his right and to his left. Behind him stand floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, filled with biblical commentaries, reference works, and more. The

preacher himself wears an expression of desperation, and he says, “There’s nothing to preach!”

Well, I had some preaching plans for this Trinity Season. I had a series of sermons mapped out. The focus would be on God the Father and on his great works: creation, providence, covenant love, justice, and so on. But last Sunday, my plans got not derailed, but shifted to another track. Blame it on the icon! Marlena put it here on the table last Sunday. And she has loaned it to us for Trinity Season.

We don’t do icons in our tradition. They’re not part of our experience. Go back five hundred years, and we had statues, statues that we got rid of. “God wants his people instructed by the living preaching of his Word,” we said, “not by idols that cannot even talk” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 98). But icons are something else. Not statues. Not idols. Something else. Something ancient. Something largely unknown to us.

This particular icon was painted early in the 15th century by a Russian Orthodox monk named Andrei Rublev. The original is nearly five feet tall and four feet wide. It’s usually called “The Holy Trinity.” It’s part of a tradition that used the story of Abraham’s hospitality as a way to depict the Trinity. We read that story from Genesis 18 a few minutes ago.

In the story, Abraham welcomes three visitors to his tent. He shows them generous hospitality. But it turns out that, in entertaining these three visitors, Abraham is entertaining none other than the LORD! And since, when the LORD shows up, there are three visitors, the story provided a starting point for icon painters who wanted to depict the Holy Trinity.

Most icons in this tradition show elements of Abraham’s hospitality. In those icons, you see Abraham, you see Sarah, you see the fatted calf. But Rublev is not so concerned with Abraham’s hospitality. He is solely concerned with the identity and nature of Abraham’s visitors. Only those three are depicted in his icon. Those three and a chalice.

All of this got me thinking. And it got me remembering. Remembering some remarks from Neal Plantinga back when he was teaching at Calvin Seminary. Remarks about divine hospitality. Hospitality that begins within the Holy Trinity. And so my preaching plans were moved to a different track and given a different focus. Hospitality. Hospitality and creation. Hospitality and covenant love. Hospitality and justice. But it begins within the Holy Trinity, and so shall we.

There’s an old theological term that fits here. I ought to mention it. It’s *perichoresis*. Like many theological terms, it comes from ancient Greek. This one refers to the nature of the relationship between the three persons of the Holy Trinity. It’s a relationship of profound intimacy. So intimate are the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, that they are “with” one another and at same time “in” one another. They are standing “alongside” one another and at the time “inside” one another. Or something like that. Jesus talked about his being “in” the Father and about the Father’s being “in” him. I don’t know that we can say just what that means or how that works. But we can point to it.

Again and again, Jesus says that the Father sent him. So the “in”-ness of the Trinity includes a shared purpose. Again and again, Jesus says that the Father has given him glory. So

the “in”-ness of the Trinity includes a shared substance or weightiness. That’s what glory is about. Again and again, Jesus says that the Father loves him. So the “in”-ness of the Trinity includes mutual love. And again and again, Jesus says that he knows the Father. So the “in”-ness of the Trinity includes mutual self-disclosure and awareness of the other.

Here’s how Neal Plantinga has gathered it up. He writes:

Self-giving love is the dynamic currency of the trinitarian life of God. The persons within God exalt each other, commune with each other, defer to one another. Each person, so to speak, makes room for the other two. I know it sounds a little strange, but we might almost say that the persons within God show each other divine hospitality. . . . When the early Greek Christians spoke of *perchoresis* in God, they meant that each divine person harbors the others at the center of his being. In a constant movement of overture and acceptance, each person envelops and encircles the others.¹

That sounds amazing. I wonder what it means.

Lately I’ve had people squawking at me. The complaint is about those of us who keep talking about the Kingdom of God. “What is this kingdom you keep talking about?” they ask. And, of course, when we’re faced with a question like that, our first impulse is to try to come up with an answer. We know the pattern. Questions demand answers. Questions deserve answers. Certainly questions as important as “What is this kingdom you keep talking about?” – questions as important as that deserve answers.

So when someone asks me, I try to answer the question. And I always fail. I come up with some completely inadequate definition that only raises more questions. I need to remember the approach Jesus took. What’s the kingdom? “The kingdom is like a man who had two sons . . . The kingdom is like a woman demanding justice . . . The kingdom is like a mustard seed . . .” No definitions. Just stories. Just illustrations.

So, when it comes to divine hospitality, I don’t think I ought to try to define it. To list necessary characteristics. To set boundaries. I think I ought to try just to point to it. To illustrate it. And to get some idea of what sort of hospitality the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit show to each other, it might be a good idea to wonder about the kind of hospitality God shows to us.

“Come to me,” Jesus said, “all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). That’s hospitality, the kind you really need after a hard day. I hope over the next six weeks to wonder with you about how divine hospitality surrounds us. But for today, let’s stick with what Abraham’s hospitality suggests.

Abraham’s hospitality, of course, involved serving a meal. Have you ever noticed what a common theme that is in the Bible? And have you ever noticed how often it’s the LORD who sets the table?

¹*Engaging God’s World*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans; 2002; pp. 20-21

- Psalm 23 says, “You prepare a table before me . . . You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows” (v. 5) That’s hospitality.
- The prophet Isaiah promises a day when God will swallow up death forever, a day celebrated by a feast given by God, a feast for all peoples (Isaiah 25:6,8). That’s hospitality.
- One of the final images in the Bible is of the marriage supper of the lamb, a feast that will be shared while the *Hallelujah* chorus echoes in the background (Revelation 19:6-9). That’s hospitality.
- And Jesus, of course, told parables about dinners not just for the chosen few, but for all and sundry (cp. Matthew 22:8-10). That, too, is hospitality.

Hospitality begins within the Holy Trinity. The same hospitality is the cornerstone of our life. Listen to a poem by George Herbert.

Love (III)

Love bade me welcome, yet my soul drew back,
 Guilty of dust and sin.
 But quick-ey’d Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
 Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
 If I lack’d any thing.

“A guest,” I answer’d, “worthy to be here”;
 Love said, “You shall be he.”
 “I, the unkind, ungrateful? ah my dear,
 I cannot look on thee.”
 Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
 “Who made the eyes but I?”

“Truth, Lord, but I have marr’d them; let my shame
 Go where it doth deserve.”
 “And know you not,” says Love, “who bore the blame?”
 “My dear, then I will serve.”
 “You must sit down,” says Love, “and taste my meat.”
 So I did sit and eat.

God welcomes you with generous hospitality. Welcomes you into the kingdom. Welcomes you to the great feast. Welcomes you to this table. Come. Taste and see that the Lord is good. Come, you guests of God.