

Gen. 28:10-17; 2 Cor. 2:14-17; Matt. 6:19-23
Feast Day of Andrei Rublev

The Hospitable Eye*

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Good afternoon! It feels great to be back on campus after my sabbatical. It's true what they say about absence making the heart grow fonder. I've missed being part of the EDS community during my time away, and I'm delighted to be preaching once again in St. John's Chapel.

Today we celebrate the feast day of Andrei Rublev, the 14th century Russian Orthodox monk and iconographer. I'm so grateful that Dean Miriam Gelfer agreed to preside and to celebrate, in no small part because she is a talented iconographer herself. I don't know if you knew this, but several icons on display in the chapel were written by her.

I'm also grateful for Ellen Oak for putting together – with the help of Stephen Burns – this beautiful liturgy that honors the multiple traditions within Eastern Orthodoxy. I want to emphasize the term “multiple” because Christopher Duraisingh has reminded me that there are many traditions within Eastern Orthodoxy, just as there are many traditions within Western Christianity.

It's been such a beautiful service so far. My students and I spoke about apophatic vs. kataphatic ways of knowing God last night in our systematic theology class, and I am tempted to pursue the silent, or apophatic, way and just sit down. But I have a job to do, and so I will deliver the sermon that I prepared.

Andrei Rublev, whom *Holy Women and Holy Men* describes as one of Russia's great iconographers, was born near Moscow around the year 1365. He entered the monastery of The Holy Trinity at an early age, and he transferred to another monastery at the age of 40, where he studied iconography and received his tonsure. For Rublev, writing an icon was much more than making art. It was a deeply spiritual exercise, during which he would repeatedly pray the words of the Jesus Prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

If you are interested in learning more about Rublev, there is a 1966 Russian feature film about his life called “The Passion According to Andrei.” I'm sure there was quite a bit of dramatic license taken with the film, but a number of clips from the black

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and white film are available on YouTube. Rublev died peacefully in 1430, at the age of 65.

Perhaps the most famous of Andrei Rublev's icons is his depiction of the Trinity, which is reproduced on the cover of our service leaflet and is the icon right across from me, under the cross. Instead of trying to make sense of abstract theological notions like *homoousious* or *perichoresis* – which should be familiar to those of you who have taken Early Christianity – Rublev depicts the Trinity in terms of the story of Genesis 18, in which three angelic strangers visit Abraham and Sarah under the Oaks of Mamre.

As some of you might recall, the overriding theme of Genesis 18 is hospitality. Abraham and Sarah welcome their three angelic visitors in an incredibly generous way. They give them water with which to wash their feet, and they feed them with freshly-prepared bread and meat. Later on in chapter 18, Abraham even exercises hospitality by bargaining with God over the fate of the people of Sodom, who, ironically, were famous for their lack of hospitality towards strangers. And we all know what happens to the people of Sodom in chapter 19 of Genesis.

For me, Rublev's icon is striking because he builds the notion of hospitality into his representation of the Trinity. There is an empty space at the center of the table for the viewer. We are literally invited to enter into the world of the icon and, in turn, into the perichoretic dance that is the Trinity. The icon is a window into the divine. Like the ladder in Jacob's dream in today's Hebrew Bible reading from Genesis 28, the icon leads us into another world, into the community of hospitality that is the Trinity.

I often think about hospitality at the beginning of each new term. Each class that I teach starts off as a unique collection of students – all of whom need to be welcomed with hospitality and kindness. And the same holds true for those of us who are teachers. Hospitality has been especially important to me this January, as I reenter the EDS community after being away for eight months.

As a professor of early church history, I am also struck by how the theology of icons teaches us to be hospitable to our bodies. As you may recall (or not), Nicaea II, the seventh and last ancient ecumenical council, involved a dispute over icons. Those who opposed icons – the iconoclasts – argued that the veneration of icons were equivalent to idolatry. How is worshipping a painted image any different, they asked, than worshipping a golden calf at the foot of Mount Sinai?

In the end, Nicaea II concluded that the veneration of icons were *not* idolatry. Icons were simply a means by which we could enter into a deeper relationship with God. They were not objects of worship in themselves. Theologically speaking, however, icons also affirmed the doctrine of the incarnation, that is, the Word made flesh. Just as the incarnation teaches us to be hospitable to the goodness of God's flesh, icons teach us to be hospitable to the goodness of matter, whether formed as a painted image or formed in the shape of our bodies.

Indeed, each of our bodies – sitting around the altar in this holy space – can be understood as icons of the living God. We are, after all, made in the image and likeness of God. Like icons, our bodies are windows, or ladders, into the divine. As Paul writes in his second letter to the Church of Corinth in today’s epistle reading, we ourselves are the aroma, or fragrance, of Christ. As such, we are called to exercise hospitality with each other, just as we would show hospitality to Christ.

Today’s gospel from the sixth chapter of Matthew talks about the healthy eye and the unhealthy eye. For me, the healthy eye – the *ophthalmus haplous* in the Greek – is an eye that sees all bodies as icons of God, whether female, male, or trans; old or young; large or small; short or tall; disabled or temporarily abled; of all shades and colors; queer or non-queer; traditionally beautiful or not. We live in a secular world that ruthlessly values certain bodies over others. But that is simply not the case in God’s kin-dom, or *basileia*.

As some of you know, I am taking a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education this term as part of the ordination process in the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts. Between now and the middle of May, I’ll be at Massachusetts General Hospital at least three days a week – on Mondays, Thursdays, and Fridays. Because my group education day is on Mondays, I won’t be at Monday Eucharists this spring. And there may be other times when I might not be available on campus. As such, I wanted to thank all of you in advance for your understanding about the intensity of my spring schedule, and I would be grateful for any prayers that you might send my way.

Although I’ve only been doing CPE for less than a month, I am struck by how many different kinds of bodies I’ve already encountered in units ranging from surgery to cardiology to oncology to psychiatry. In the hospital – which is, of course, derived from the same root as “hospitality” – I am reminded constantly of the precious living icons with whom I minister. Although many of these bodies are consumed or broken by the ravages of time or disease – much like the “moth and rust” in today’s Gospel – I am reminded that a healthy eye sees these bodies as icons that point to “treasures in heaven.”

As we move to the celebration of the Eucharist in today’s service, I invite you to reflect deeply on the theme of hospitality – not just in Rublev’s icon of the Trinity, but also in seeing each of our beautiful bodies as windows, or ladders, to the divine. I also invite you to reflect upon the divine hospitality of the broken Body of Christ, which welcomes us all to a place at God’s table.

In the words of *Holy Women and Holy Men*, the act of venerating an icon is to “find some of the ineffable beauty that is God, that is manifest in Christ and the saints, and is also in each one of us.” May you find that ineffable beauty all around you, now and always.

+Amen.