

“Love Makes Us Welcome”

It was the last days of May. I was in the process of moving out of an apartment and I was in a fix. I was sick as a dog with a 101-degree fever. I could not line up anyone to help so I was moving on my own. I was doing my best moving the boxed up stuff slowly to a storage facility one pickup load at a time. By early Saturday afternoon I had most everything moved into storage. I was down to the big stuff, and I had no idea how I would get the china cabinet, bed and sofa out of the apartment into the truck and then into the storage unit all by myself. They were too heavy and unwieldy for one person. My task seemed impossible.

As I was headed to the storage unit to drop off the last of the boxes I noticed a couple of sketchy looking guys walking down the street. They had exited the bus station that stood in front of the storage facility. I did not think much of them at the time, but when I was driving back to the apartment there they were standing on the corner. Traffic kept me stopped long enough for them to approach me and ask for a ride. It was not a big favor they only needed to go a couple of miles, but I felt sick, tired, and had no idea how I was going to move the last of my things. Still I could not turn them down. So they hopped in. They asked me some questions about who I was and what I was doing. At which point I told them I was moving. Surprisingly, they asked if I needed help.

It had not occurred to me that they might be the answer to my dilemma until they offered. I was a bit afraid of them. I just wanted to get them to where they were going before something bad happened. After all, my dad had always said to never pick up hitchhikers. Yet, despite my trepidation about these guys I took them up on their offer. They moved everything with ease and soon we were back on the road to their destination. As I was about to drop them off I offered them some money and they asked if I could spare some more. I gave them what I had which wasn't much, and dropped them off. As I drove away I had the feeling that something supernatural had happened.

As I have further reflected on it I feel somewhat like Abraham in today's reading from Genesis. He too was visited by men that seemed to be angels, and one of them seems to be God. The difference between Abraham and me is that Abraham only saw travelers in need of hospitality while my eyes were clouded with fear, illness, shame, and frustration. Even when presented with the solution to my problem instead of seeing the two men as a gift I saw them as fearful and a burden.

The divine visitation to Abraham is depicted in one of the most famous pieces of religious art the icon by Andrei Rublev called “The Old Testament Trinity”. It is an icon showing the three travelers that visited Abraham and Sarah. They are shown seated under the oaks of Mamre.

The table around which the angels sit has a chalice or bowl containing, on close inspection, a lamb. We might wonder exactly which figure is which member of the Trinity. Rublev gives us ways to discern that. As we look at the icon we notice that the center and right figure have dipped their heads to the figure on the left. This indicates that the figure on the left is the Father. The central figure has his right hand in the pose of blessing therefore that figure is the Son. The figure on the right by process of elimination is the Holy Spirit.

However, the colors in the icon give us clues. The Holy Spirit is clothed in pale blue representing sky and sea, and green representing life. The Holy Spirit lives with us and surrounds us in the earthly realm. The Son is robed in the blue of heaven and the brown of earth. These represent the heavenly and human while the band of gold is the divinity that shoots through it all. The colors of the Father's robes are reflective of all the colors. There is a sparkling translucence under laid with silver that shines in transcendent glory.

It is a remarkable piece of art and also a remarkable sermon on the meaning of the Trinity (Note that all of the figures are in the same plane none above or below the other.) There is also something very important that took me a long time to discern.

First of all, one must realize that icons are not meant to be prayed to but rather prayed through. They are windows into heaven. They help us concentrate our minds on the holy and draw us out of our daily trials and tribulations into another place. As we gaze in wonder at this image we might realize that there is a place at the table that is open. The open side which faces us is our seat waiting for us. We are being invited to the table to partake of the holy meal with the Trinity, whether they are the angels at Mamre or the Trinity of Christianity.

The place at the table and invitation were ones I did not accept when the two angels met me on that hot summer weekend. It took me time to figure out that I had been invited into something holy and profound that day. It reminds me of the verse from the Letter to the Hebrews which reads "Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers: for by doing so some have entertained angels unawares."¹

I believe we are surrounded by angels. They may be in the pew sitting next to you. They may be a helpful stranger on the street. They may be someone we fear, the way the Israelites feared the Samaritans, yet in Jesus' parable it was the Samaritan who is the righteous one. We have to train our eyes to see and our hearts to know when an angel approaches. We have to push aside fears, prejudices, and notions of what an angel might look like.

Mary of Bethany recognized the gift that was presented to her and sat at Jesus' feet. Martha is like most of us too busy with the tasks at hand to recognize the gift. She is trying to fulfill the commandment to show hospitality to strangers, not realizing that the most genuine hospitality is to just sit and listen. She was invited into the same place that we are invited into when we gaze upon this icon.

Poet and priest George Herbert grappled with the predicament of our perception of the angelic invitation to commune with God and our self-perception of worthiness to do so. In his poem "Love" (III), the final poem in his collection of poems called *The Temple*, the person invited into communion with God protests his unworthiness to be there. He protests that his sinfulness has marred the work of God. When he starts to accept the invitation he still does not understand and insists on serving. Finally, Love tells him his only choice is to accept the gift regardless of worthiness. At which point he surrenders to Love and sits and eats.

"Love" (III)

¹ Hebrews 13:2 the author's paraphrase

Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back
 Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
 If I lacked any thing.
A guest, I answered, 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 marred 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.

Love is the host (yes, it is no accident that word reminds us of the host in the Eucharist) who graciously (a reminder of God's grace) invites you and me despite our many flaws and failings to the table of Holy Communion. Don't let your fears, shame, sadness, frustration or anything else separate you from this table. There is no need for those feelings here. At this table let gratitude, joy and hope abide, for this is the table of the Feast of Love.