

St. Paul's – May 5, 2024
Easter 6, Year B
Acts 10:44-48; 1 John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17

“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.” Let’s take a look at Andrei Rublev’s icon, *The Trinity*, which you can find on the back of Sunday Notes, the insert in your bulletin. Rublev is one of the great iconographers of all time. This icon dates to the early 1400s. An icon, despite being an image of someone, is not created to be a physical portrait. Western art, especially since the Renaissance, seeks to represent figures or events so that the viewer might better imagine them. Icons are an entirely different form of art. Icons seek to provide access to the spiritual and the divine. Creating an icon, often described as writing an icon, is a spiritual exercise. Praying while writing, Rublev created a window into the Divine. His icon invites us into God’s love, into transformative love.

The three figures in the icon are the three visitors to Abraham as described in the Book of Genesis. The tree in the background points to the setting of the story, by the oaks of Mamre. The three figures are the ones who told Abraham that Sarah, though advanced in age, would bear a son. The three visitors, or angels, are a metaphor for the three persons of the Trinity. On the right is the Holy Spirit. The blue and green robes indicate that the Holy Spirit moves over all the earth. The Son is in the middle. The brown robe representing the earth and the blue robe representing heaven are the two natures of Christ united in one. The band of gold over his shoulder indicates divinity. The Father is on the left. His robe is transparent representing our inability to fully know God. The table they sit around reminds us of an altar with a meal to be shared. With the way the three are seated, you can feel a circular motion around the altar. And, there is an opening in front...we are being invited into the circle. We are being invited into Divine Love. Abide in my love.

This circular motion around the altar emanates the nature of love. We are being invited into what is the essence of our existence, our interconnectedness with one another. We are individuals only in the sense of the gifts we have to offer one another. We are individuals only in the sense of the gifts we have to offer one another – whatever talents, whatever skills, whatever fruits of the Spirit: love, peace, patience, kindness, generosity. The icon draws us into agape love, love that is primarily interested in the good of the other person. No one is less or more; each is inclined towards another.

Here's the kicker. Living in agape love is not easy. Even though we might not act as outrageously as those we see in the news these days, we are imperfect in loving, which hit home for me just a couple of days ago. Often when I am in the middle of writing a sermon but for some reason, I need to get into the car to go somewhere, phrases that would work well in my sermon come to mind while I am driving. It happens so often that I usually have pen and paper with me to jot down notes, which I do when I reach the next stop light. Gary, my husband, had surgery for thyroid cancer about ten days ago. He is home now and doing well. On Friday, two days ago, when I went to visit him in the hospital, I knew he was being discharged, so I wanted to park valet to make it easier for him to get in the car for the drive home. On my way to the hospital, I started thinking about my homily. I was thinking about our need to reflect on our interactions with others to be sure we are staying true to God's love. Yes, I jotted down a couple of notes...at the stoplight. As you can imagine, after a week of parking in the hospital garage every day, my body was on autopilot, and I was somewhat distracted thinking about my homily, and I drove right into the parking garage. I realized what I had done. I wanted to park valet, so I turned around, came back out, and landed in a long line of cars trying to get up to the circle drive in front of the hospital. The traffic was practically at a standstill, and, of course, I was anxious to

get up to Gary's room to be with him. The cars were creeping along at a snail's pace. Finally, I got close to the door...only to be told that I was in the wrong lane and had to circle around. I was so frustrated with what seemed to me was an imperfect system for dropping off cars at the valet. I was so close to having words with the young man directing traffic, when I caught myself and laughed. I'm in the middle of writing a homily about God's love and I was about to let loose on the valet. We are imperfect in loving. When we are honest with ourselves, we recognize our impatience, or critical judgment, or dismissive behavior towards others. Agape love challenges us, requires prayer and a disciplined habit of care and concern, only perfected over a lifetime.

Yet, what more does Jesus tell us about abiding in his love? Jesus says, "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." Jesus wants us to know the joy, the peace which comes with abiding in God's love. The "peace which surpasses all understanding" is a real thing. It's a peace that helps us navigate all of life's challenges, to endure, to forgive, to reconcile. It's a peace that inspires us to hope, to create, to live in the newness of life. Jesus tells us to abide in his love so that our joy will be complete. We talk about abiding in God's love so that when we experience this peace which surpasses all understanding, when we feel it, we will recognize it for what it is, and with prayer and attention, we will learn to live in that peace. Agape love, selfless love demands something of us, and that might be scary. What will I need to give up in order to care for, to honor, to fully value my neighbor: the friend, the colleague, the stranger? Agape love can be scary, but, ultimately, this love is where peace and joy lie. We search for satisfaction in jobs, activities, possessions, relationships. Yet, the only place where we will find the peace which surpasses all understanding is in Christ. In that peace, we open our heart to endurance, gratitude, inspiration, and joy. From that peace, we love most fully. Jesus invites us into the circle: "Abide in my love." Amen.