

We continue our Lenten series on creative spirituality with a reflection on visual prayer. The plan for this morning's sermon time is to consider various ways in which the visual arts impact us, our theology, and hopefully our actions. Icons have the power to shape us and our communities for the better. We have three icons to consider this morning, so we better get to it.

The picture you are seeing is the oldest known icon of "Christ Pantocrator" from St. Catherine's Monastery in Egypt. At the end of 2021 Lanta Davis had a very well written article in *The Christian Century* addressing the role of imagination in bridging the gap between Christian nationalism and a Christianity which promotes values such as peace, mercy, love, justice, and other lofty intentions of Jesus Christ. Davies writes,

When I first saw an icon, I dismissed its strange appearance, assuming that whoever made it simply hadn't learned to paint very well. It surprised me to learn that icons are *intended* to be strange. Familiar images of Jesus tend to function like a mirror in which we recognize ourselves and therefore leave the image unchanged. Icons defamiliarize us, deliberately unsettling and disorienting us so that they can invite us to encounter a different reality. [It] is not a self-reflection but a window that transports the viewer from the earthly to the sacred.

A Christ Pantocrator icon, for instance, offers a startling alternative to the Jesus images seen in many Christian gift shops today, in which Jesus tends to look like a man of White European descent. Christ Pantocrator uses reverse perspective, meaning that the viewer, not the image, is the focal point—a technique that reminds viewers that the icon's purpose is not simply for us to look at with our eyes. The point is for us to be transformed by the eyes that look back at us. Christ is not made over into any viewer's likeness. We are made over into Christ's likeness.

Icons also merge imagination with doctrine. In contrast to images in which Christian symbols are put into the service of unorthodox beliefs and nationalist sentiments, icons such as Christ Pantocrator are embedded with symbols of credal Christian belief. The Pantocrator icon highlights Christ's twofold nature. The red of his clothing represents his humanity: the red earth, his shed blood. So does the fact that the left side of his face is darker and more hollowed out than the right: it's the darkened face of the Word made flesh, with all its pains and burdens.

The brighter right side of his face reflects his divinity. Jesus' left eye is stern, to remind us of Christ's role as judge. His kindly right eye, however,

reminds us that he who judges us has already granted us mercy through his death. Finally, he holds his hand in a sign of blessing, with two fingers pointed up as a reminder that he is both fully human and fully divine. The other three fingers touch to symbolize the Trinity.

In some Pantocrator images, Jesus is holding a closed book, a reminder that “it is finished”: his birth, life, death, and resurrection fulfilled the prophecies and promise of the Jewish scriptures...The three dots on the book are yet another sign of the Trinity, with the four sets of dots indicating the four Gospels in which Christ’s story is told.

Looking at an icon during prayer, then, effectively overlaps practice, image, and creed. Icons remind us that while we are created in the image of God, we ought not to make God into our own image. Contemplating the strangeness or otherness of Jesus and the otherworldliness of the divine kingdom reminds us that we are first and foremost citizens of God’s kingdom, not an earthly kingdom. And since icons also feature faces of saints from around the world, they enlarge our view of the church beyond [any nation state]...

Of course, such traditional practices are not enough to combat competing imaginations like Christian nationalism. But we need to do more than just dismantle and deconstruct. Practices like iconography...can offer a way forward. Intentionally cultivating the imagination can begin to help replace the red, white, and blue of the American Jesus with the rather unsettling Jesus of the gospel. We worship a distinctive, peculiar Savior, and if we wish to be citizens of the kingdom of heaven, we need to train our eyes to see the distinctive, peculiar light pointing the way.<sup>1</sup>

This next icon is entitled “The Holy Trinity” and it was written by perhaps the most famous of all iconographers, Andrew Rublev. It is dated in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, which was not a particularly friendly time in most of Europe but particularly difficult in Russia. The black plague, civil war, and a Mongolian invasion racked Rublev’s Russia. Part of his intention in writing this icon was an effort to bring people together around the Name of God so that they might overcome the tragedies of their world through contemplation of the Holy Trinity. It was his faith filled response to unexplained misery and suffering intentionally and unintentionally imposed.<sup>2</sup> No convoys to occupy downtown Moscow or war rhetoric for Rublev; he went to his paints and sought a way for theology to engage social ills and personal woes on the canvas. Rublev believed that icons might be an antidote for the violence which rages within and among us.

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<sup>1</sup> Lanta Davis, “A Vandalized Imagination” in *The Christian Century* (Dec 29, 2021), pp 29-31.

<sup>2</sup> Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Behold the Beauty of the Lord: Praying with Icons* (Notre Dame, IN: Ava Maria Press, 1987), p. 20.

This picture places the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the setting of a home, at the very least a back yard or roof patio. The figure on the left with the blue undershirt is the Father; in iconography blue is always the color of divinity. The son, in the center, has a blue and red tunic; as noted earlier red being the color of humanity. The Father and the Son seem to be gazing at each other. The face and eyes of the Father figure exude love and care, and Jesus looks to be resting in that grace. The right hand of the Father is upturned in an expression of blessing.

The figure on the right, the Holy Spirit, is also cloaked in blue. The fingers of the Holy Spirit point downward to the rectangle beneath the table. Some suggest that this table could as easily be an altar alluding to the sacrifice Jesus makes on behalf of all creation. The rectangle to which the Holy Spirit points, and her eyes direct, references the tomb. The Spirit reminds us that Jesus incarnated a sacrificial love which leads to the cross and the tomb. While suffering and death are part of his story, and our stories, Jesus offers us the sign of peace with his fingers. The personal and social challenges we face should not cause undo anxiety; he blesses us with a peace the world can not give. The tree of life behind him is another visual testifying that the way of Jesus is none other than to way to live most fully. This, too, invites us to a deeper trust of the Risen Christ and his ways of living in the world.

As we look at this image we come to realize that we are the fourth member of the scene, and not just us. All who sit with the icon, in fact, are a part of the scene. It is not just me who is invited to this table, this altar. The Holy Trinity are the hosts of this home and they receive all who come for a visit. We may not agree with the person next to us or even like them, we may not agree with our neighbours or like them, but they too are a part of the circle. The icon does not allow us to exclude any person. They, like we, are there by invitation of the Holy Trinity.

Just like in Rublev's Russia, the spiritual lessons reflected in *The Holy Trinity* have something to offer our lives and world. Perhaps dwelling on this icon can help de-escalate the mistrust in our country or the violence in a region Rublev called home. Maybe.

Images like *The Holy Trinity* are also important for our prayer life because we do not always have words for the prayers of our hearts. In relation to this icon Henri Nouwen wrote:

During a hard period of my life in which verbal prayer had become nearly impossible and during which mental and emotional fatigue had made me the easy victim of feelings of despair and fear, a long and quiet presence to this icon became the beginning of my healing. As I sat for long hours in front of Rublev's Trinity, I noticed how gradually my gaze became a prayer. This silent prayer slowly made my inner restlessness melt away and lifted me up into the circle of love, a circle that could not be broken by the powers of the

world. Even as I moved away from the icon and became involved in the many tasks of everyday life, I felt as if I did not have to leave the holy place I had found and could dwell there whatever I did or wherever I went. I knew that the house of love I had entered has no boundaries and embraces everyone who wants dwell there.<sup>3</sup>

Another feature in this Lenten series is that we have had a variety of people from the congregation reflect on the topic of the day. Today we have Stephanie Epp offering a few words on icons. Stephanie.

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### May Magdalene Icon – Stephanie Epp

This section is not posted on our website at the request of the speaker. If you wish to receive Stephanie's reflections please contact Patrick Preheim at the Nutana Park Mennonite Church offices.

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### Conclusion

The eye is the lamp of the body. May we choose to gaze upon those things which bring light to our bodies and souls; which point us to the moon. And may the light of God kindled within renew us, those around us, and the society in which we live. Amen.

Patrick Preheim, co-pastor Nutana Park Mennonite Church

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### Benediction

Through Jesus, oh God, you have told us the eye is the lamp of the body; that those things we take in with the eye have the power to fill us with light or darkness (Matt 6:22). Guide our gaze, we ask, to those images which reveal your radiance that we might be filled with light. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 21