

**Trinity Sunday, May 31, 2026**  
**St. John's Tappahannock**  
**Rev. Nanette Woodworth**  
**Matthew 28:16-20**

Today is Trinity Sunday. I would like to start my message with a discussion of the Holy Trinity, using the Icon of the Holy Spirit by Andrei Rublev (1370-1430). (For readers this icon is pictured on the last page of this document). This is regarded as one of the most famous icons in art history. I hope by taking a close look at it, we will come to understand the mystery of the Trinity a bit better. First, a little about the historical context of the artist and the artwork.

The word icon means “representation.” A religious icon is a visual representation of a holy subject.

From its earliest forms Christian art has had the purpose of illustrating the scriptures; we need expressions of God, at the same time knowing that God remains the ineffable, deeply hidden One, and no one image or word can ever capture God’s essence in full.

The word Trinity comes from the Latin ‘tri’ or ‘three’ and unitas for unity. The term was devised by 2<sup>nd</sup> c. Christian author Tertullian to express the mystery of the unity in diversity of God. So Trinity means threefold unity.

The Trinity is a perfect relationship of love. God’s love is understood to be dynamic, available to be shared in relationship with humanity for fullness of life and for salvation.

You might wonder what is the difference between an icon and a painting? The American Association of Iconographers answers it this way: “Icons are images that contain Spiritual power and grace. They do this by the combination of prayers, traditions of the Church, sacred

geometric composition, scriptural narratives and the intention of the iconographer to convey the Saints in the light of the Holy Spirit operating within them.” **1**

Icons are meant to be scripture in visual form. Thus the term ‘writing’. We say ‘writing’, not ‘painting’, an icon. We also call Rublev the author of this icon. On the other hand, the religious painting has more of the artist’s personal interpretation and is less strictly following the Word of God.

Rublev lived through a deeply troubled time in Russian history, and was hired by the abbot of Trinity Monastery in Zagorsk to write this icon, in order that the monks might overcome their fear of a world torn apart by hate, and find peace, calm and compassion in contemplation of it.

He was known for bringing forth a wistful perception of celestial beauty and a deeply pensive and introspective dimension to his art.

The Eastern church does not have a specific Sunday to celebrate the Blessed Trinity, but the mystery of the Trinity is celebrated on Pentecost, on what they call Spirit Day.

There are actually two Biblical events being told in the icon of Holy Trinity - two related stories in one.

The concept of the Trinity in this icon is linked to the biblical scene of the three angelic visitors to Abraham and Sarah under the oak of Mamre, in Genesis 18. I will read an excerpt here.

**18** *The Lord appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. <sup>2</sup> Abraham looked up and saw three angels standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground.*

<sup>3</sup> He said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord,<sup>[a]</sup> do not pass your servant by. <sup>4</sup> Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. <sup>5</sup> Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant."

"Very well," they answered, "do as you say."

<sup>6</sup> So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. "Quick," he said, "get [three seahs of] the finest flour and knead it and bake some bread."

<sup>7</sup> Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. <sup>8</sup> He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree.

<sup>9</sup> "Where is your wife Sarah?" they asked him.

"There, in the tent," he said.

<sup>10</sup> Then one of them said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son."

Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. <sup>11</sup> Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. <sup>12</sup> So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?"

<sup>13</sup> Then the Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?' <sup>14</sup> Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son."

<sup>15</sup> Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, "I did not laugh."

But he said, "Yes, you did laugh."

The prophecy of the birth of Isaac is a foreshadowing of the prophecy of birth of Jesus. In a later chapter in this story Abraham is told by Yahweh to sacrifice his only son Isaac. We all know that Abraham's faith was being tested, and he was ready to do as the Lord said, and Isaac was even obedient, but a lamb was provided instead. This is a foreshadowing of the sacrifice of Jesus the Son of God by the Father for the redemption of sins. Both of these scriptural themes are present in the icon of the Holy Trinity. The three figures represent both the three angels who visited Abraham and Sarah, and simultaneously they symbolize the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Let's turn our attention now to the imagery in the icon, as informed by Helen Weier, art historian and abbess who wrote Festive Icons of the Lord. **2**

Notice the three figures have wings of angels and halos, representing the heavenly visitors. The small tree in the upper right represents the tree of Mamre where the angel's prophecy was given.

It also serves as a foreshadowing of the revelation of the Son and the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. Let's consider how the imagery points to the relationship between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

- If we were to connect the wings of the three bowing figures, and then complete it all the way around with an arc of equal size, we would form a circle, which depicts harmony and amity.
- A circle is complete, and therefore represents how in this icon God recalls to Godself all that has gone forth from God in his completeness. This is an important image of how the Trinity relates to itself apart from everything else. However, we are invited into it.
- The similarity of each figure shows an indissoluble unity of the trinity.

- Yet, the robes of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are of distinct colors, illustrating their different roles of creation, redemption, sanctification.
- The author of Festal Icons of the Lord, Helen Weir, suggests, “God the Father on the left appears to be grieving; he inspires the Son to obey in the face of sacrifice, while he himself painfully surrenders his only Son to the free will of sinners so that, through his perfect sacrifice, they may be redeemed.”<sup>1</sup> The color of his robe is more somber than the others.
- The Son in the middle wears a bright blue color. At the middle of the table is a symbol of the Eucharist, a chalice like bowl with a symbol of the sacrificial lamb within it. He blesses the cup. He appears composed and alert, with an understanding of his purpose.
- The Holy Spirit figure on the right has green colors – green is always the color of growth and spring time, that the spirit might revive and renew all things in love.
- Because the Divine Son became man, and because we have seen his face at an exact historical moment in time, he is clothed in precise, clear colors - purple, brown and a bright blue. This distinct coloring of the central figure contrasts with the soft, less precise colors of the others, and yet there is a color common to the clothing of all three - the blue that brightens the tableau.
- The unification brought about by the coloring and by the compositional rhythm of the circular motif reveals the mastery with which Rublev depicted the mystery of the threefold unity of the Trinity.
- In addition, journey is a theme of this icon. Each figure holds a staff, and there are three additional symbols at the top of the icon: the hill, the tree, and the house.

- On our journey God goes before us along the path. This path leads to Jesus, the Son of God, and it leads to a tree. It is the tree of Mamre, but it is also a great tree in the heat of the day that spreads its shade. It is a place of security, a place of peace, a place where we begin to find out the possibilities of who we can be. It is no ordinary tree. It stands above the Son in the picture, and stands above the altar table. Because of Jesus' sacrifice for us this tree grows. The tree of death (the cross) has been transformed into a tree of life for us.
- The tree is on the way to the house. Over the head of the Father is the house of the Father. It is the goal of our journey. It is the beginning and end of our lives. Its door is always open for the traveler. It has a tower, and its window is always open so that the Father can scan the roads for a glimpse of a returning prodigal. For God allows our departures, mourns our sufferings, and restores us to wholeness upon our return through his unconditional love.
- Finally, rather than position his worshipers outside the scene, Rublev invites the viewer into the mystery of the Trinity through deep contemplation and spiritual reflection. We are invited to complete the circle, to join the dance, to complete the movements of God in the world by our own response.

A Reading from Isaac of Ninevah provides a clear understanding of the fruits of such reflection.

“When the Spirit dwells within a person, from that moment the person has become prayer, and the Spirit never leaves them. For the Spirit itself never ceases to pray within us...In every moment of our life, prayer is secretly at work within us continuously....Prayer is the silence

of the pure in heart, for their very thoughts are the movements of God, and such people never cease to sing in secret to the hidden God.” **3**

The amity of the triune God transforms all enmity that might reside there, so that we each can be a hopeful presence in the world.

Now, as we turn to the topic of the Great Commission, let us remember what we have said about prayer and action in the past. We cannot have one without the other.

Let the Spirit of the Trinity icon dwelling within, be the foundation of our actions, as we respond to what Jesus said to his disciples:

**“Go** therefore and **make disciples** of all nations, **baptizing** them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **and teaching** them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

This command is packed with action words – *Go, Make disciples, Baptize, Teach*. Last week the apostle Paul reminded us that we are all called to be the body of Christ according to our particular gifts of personality.

No one would argue the wisdom and truth of Jesus’ message for all people everywhere: the results of loving God and loving our neighbor is a world that more and more will reflect the Kingdom of God.

Jesus is the bearer of the Spirit who acts to liberate people, restore justice and offer mercy to the marginalized. The Spirit creates a flow of love that reconciles people into new forms of community. Difference that had previously been the cause of enmity can become the basis of a rich diversity.

These diverse gifts are given by the Spirit for the common good. The presence of diversity is necessary for the body to function and fulfill its calling. The Spirit animates the growth and expansion of Christian community as cultural lines are crossed and the gospel is translated into different expressions. The Spirit is poured out in surprising ways as the new Community of Christ becomes a visible sign of God's promised future of reconciling all people and all things. **4**

This public, community-forming, and restoring dimension of the Spirit's work is vital for the church at large to live into its ideals for diversity and reconciliation.

Biblically, reconciliation is God's work in which we participate. It is not our project, or program or primarily a human effort.

In 2 Corinthians 5:20, Paul says, "Therefore we are ambassadors for Christ." We find that our role is that of ambassadors, we are caught up through the Spirit, in God's reconciliation of the world in Christ. We are charged with the sacred commission of announcing and interpreting that reconciliation across cultural and social lines.

Finally, the church can give credible witness to the new humanity reconciled and restored in Christ without being idealized as a community of perfect diversity and harmony. The early church had its fair share of misunderstandings, failures and conflicts. Christ has restored God's image in humanity perfectly, to free us from the burden of trying and failing to do so. We can share, through the reconciling power of the Spirit, in his life and witness. But we can't do it alone.

Let us pray therefore, for discerning hearts, as we move through these troubled times. Let us pray that God opens our eyes to the future of St. John's, so that we can participate in what God has

already done, is doing, and wants to do in us and in the lives of our neighbors. Let us be ambassadors of reconciliation within and without our walls, as we imagine our future together as church.

Let us gaze upon the Icon of the Holy Trinity when we need to find the peace which surpasses all understanding.

Now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you always. Amen

**Resources:**

1. The American Association of Iconographers; "*Why Icon Writing and not Painting*"; wordpress.com;  
<https://americanassociationoficonographers.com/2017/02/28/why-icon-writing-and-not-painting/>
2. Meier, Helen, M.; Festal Icons of the Lord; The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota; 1977
3. Atwell, Robert; Celebrating the Seasons; Canterbury Press, Norwich England; 2015; p.296
4. Zscheile; Dwight J.;People of the Way - Renewing Episcopal Identity; Morehouse Publishing; 2012



(Google images)

