

Proper 22A

October 2, 2011

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Psalm 19; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46

Week before last, on retreat. Icon painting workshop: “A Brush with God.”

Some experience with painting, in western (as distinguished from eastern) style: expression of what artist sees, feels, imagines, in shapes, lines, relationship between forms, colors.

Nothing re icons. I wondered—would I have to decide what figure to paint, which saint, angel, Christ? Have to draw it? Choose colors?—how would I know what to do??

As it turned out, the instructions were provided: ordered, precise, step-by-step. Felt right at home: there was a flip chart, newsprint. Second entry was “Follow the instructions.” Don’t make it up.

One choice to make: which of two icons of Jesus to paint. Look. (Gaze.) Which one draws you? Then began the very orderly process of transferring that image to the prepared board and putting on paint, color by color, layer by layer; one area and color at a time.

As we went along, someone would ask: “What about this part? (Robe, hair, skin, eyes, halo, etc.) Answer was always, “That will come later. Do this now.” Don’t anticipate, thinking about something else. Get out of your head. Be present to what is in front of you now. Breathe. This is prayer.

Trust the process. Born of centuries of tradition and practice.

An icon is a window onto God, a place of encounter with God. Not created by imagination or force of will. Process is prayer, a cooperation with, or surrender to, God working through the painter.

Lo, and behold: eight icons of Christ were painted. Emerged over four days. Recognizable as from the same original image; but each also a little different.

Each of us followed the rules as we were able, and out of our own backgrounds and experiences. Each of us made our own mistakes; each of our icons has its own imperfections. And yet, in each one, the image of Christ is so present. He is beautiful. Something deeply serene and luminous shines through.

On “painting” vs. “writing.” In English, the words derived from the Greek, *grapho*, indicate the recording of both words and images. Think of graph, autograph, photograph, a graphic image, graphic arts, a graphic account, and the like. So either “writing” or “painting” will do.

To paint or write an icon is about communicating, showing the beauty, goodness, holiness, glory of God in color and image. Icons proclaim the good news of God revealed in Christ, archangels, holy men and women, as in proclaiming the Gospel, in word, written or spoken.

At the deepest level of meaning, both the Word and the Image are given; not made up by us. They are given by God, as Christ is given to the world in human form.

In Psalm 19, we sing, “the heavens declare his glory” A song of the beauty of the day and the night, the created lights of sun and stars. The psalmist moves us into song about the Word of God that is as beautiful and resplendent as these created lights. The law of the Lord is perfect, and revives the soul. God’s statutes are just and rejoice the heart. His commandment is clear and gives light to the eyes.

Some of us may bristle a bit at the very word “commandment.” At some level we all may be like the young child who when instructed or corrected by a parent would say, “You are not the boss of me!”

Here is that issue of authority, again, so evident in last Sunday’s readings. We humans so often assume that authority = dominance, limits us in negative ways. There is another view, though. Heard in David’s sermon last week: an authority that tirelessly and joyfully serves the world. That is “implanted in us by the servant authority of Christ.” We have only to welcome it, and let it shine forth in us, in our living.

The Word, God’s law/statutes/commandment is for us good news of living a well-ordered life, even in the wilderness, in time and place of chaos and fear. The psalmist sings that the Word is as inherent in the created order as the motion of sun and stars, the alternation of day and night. Like these, it is a blessing for the well-being of all people and all creation.

The Word is gift that transforms chaos into coherence; slavery into freedom—whether the slavery be to empire or despot, or to our own cravings and disordered impulses. The Word is instrument of new creation.

And yet, Words alone are not enough to convey the transforming power of encounter with God. So, more, much more, is provided, on offer from God, present and waiting for us to see, hear, receive.

We know well that what we listen to, read, watch, gaze on, affects us—positively or negatively, consciously and unconsciously.

This is why we do our best as parents to monitor what our children see, watch, listen to. We do our best to shield them from what would be too scary, violent, profane; to provide them with words and images that are life-giving windows onto the world and themselves. And we may practice the same care for ourselves.

For four days, I looked at the image of Jesus as I painted. For four days his face was my focus. “You are so beautiful,” whispered my heart. “He is so beautiful,” I quietly exclaimed to my neighbor. Shining with love even as a xeroxed line drawing on paper. His beauty took my breath away, brought me back, steadied me, even when I was frustrated with my mistakes, my inability to make the brush and paint do what I wanted.

“Trust the process. This is prayer. Don’t futz, don’t try to fix anything now. We will do that later,” our teacher repeated, as one or another of us sighed or groaned over our work.

Looking now at the icon I made, I see a lot of my unsteadiness recorded there. I could focus on the imperfections and my shortcomings. But he is *so* beautiful; that outshines everything else.

After four days, some of that light seemed to begin to be reflected in me. Just from the looking, from the encounter, from the continuous silent conversation. The time, the focus, the daring to put layers of paint on his image, were gradually, quietly transformative.

“Silence is not the absence of sound—it is the absence of self.” This was the first message on the newsprint/flip chart. Paul writes of something like this, to the church at Philippi. A loss of self, a putting aside of the ego: credentials, righteousness of self, accomplishments.

It is a willing loss, he says, “because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” Of becoming like him in his death and resurrection. How does this happen? By seeking. By striving. By letting be, allowing him to be present to and present in.

Not that I have already attained the goal of becoming like Christ, Paul writes. Or, another translation is, *Not that I have already been perfected*.

But he is on the way of becoming part of Christ, attuned with the beauty, holiness, self-giving love of God in Christ, the goodness and love at the heart of the universe. God’s purpose that creates order out of chaos, brings us out of slavery into freedom.

The third direction on the flip chart. “Do your best—and let go.” Stop trying to control the process yourself. Let God work in and through you.

Let God make you part of God’s creating and re-creating purpose. If we do this, we will find that we are becoming “a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.”

Don’t have to go to an icon retreat or become painters (or writers) of icons. We are surrounded day in and day out by the image of God’s good order and beauty. Look out the windows. Look at the windows, the spaciousness of this room, flowers, altar. We encounter God here, in hymns, psalms, the music of choir and organ. We encounter Christ in bread and wine. All these are icons, windows onto God and windows onto the soul.

In the beginning, God created the human being in God’s own image; male and female he created them. Each of you, each of us, bears in us the image of Christ.

I am going to invite you now to do something we do not ordinarily do here in church. I am going to invite you to turn and look at your neighbor, the person sitting beside you, in front of you or behind you.

I invite you to turn gently, without fear; to see the image of Christ. To gaze with love on the face of Christ in your neighbor; to see Christ gazing back with love on you.

I invite you into a Brush with God.