



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

**Be an Icon**  
**The Second Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Sunday, June 6, 2021**  
**The Rev. Paul McLain**

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

In the basement of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist monastery in Boston is a small, intimate worship space known as the Chapel of the Holy Spirit. In that chapel, there is an icon, which is a religious expression of art similar to a painting. This particular icon depicts Jesus with the beloved disciple, whom we believe to be John, draped across his lap.

One day, I prayed with that icon for forty minutes. As I gazed into the eyes of Jesus over time and was drawn into the tender way he held the disciple in his lap, Jesus in those moments came to me as a father.

Of course, that is counter to his position as Son of God in the Trinity, but that was how I was experiencing him right then. In those moments, Jesus came to me as a father figure to touch and soothe an ache at the core of my being that I did not even realize was still there – unresolved grief over the death of my earthly father over 20 years earlier.

I confess that it was hard for me to stay focused on this icon for such a long period of time. But as I gazed into the eyes of this Jesus as father figure gently stroking the head of his beloved disciple, it seemed like he had something to say to me, if I could just stay and pray with him for a little while longer.

In our scripture reading today from Second Corinthians, Paul writes about the moments in which the eternal intersects with the temporary. He assures us that the Father who raised our Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us into his eternal presence.

It is not surprising that this is one of the recommended scriptures for funerals. It includes this phrase: "Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day." I think we can mistakenly see this as a dichotomy between body and soul, which I have come to believe are one.

It may be a deeper dichotomy that is a fight for our very essence. Is our being oriented toward the temporary or the eternal? While Paul is writing about what will happen to us at death, he is also writing about us being raised to the eternal presence of God in the here and now, right in the midst of these temporary moments. He tells us what it means to see as a Christian – we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen. How do we even begin to see what cannot be seen? In other words, how do we see the eternal?

An icon is different from a painting in that the perspective is reversed. In a painting, the viewer is the subject who looks at the object of the painting, which recedes away from the viewer as it diminishes. In an icon, the perspective seems to gain in width as it goes back, so that *the viewer is the object, being viewed by the icon itself*.

An iconographer puts a lot of her thought and effort into depicting the eyes such that they are looking at you instead of the other way around. When we gaze into an icon of Jesus, it is *we* who are being seen *by the eyes of Christ*. It is not so much us seeing the eternal. It is the eternal who sees us, and who sees into us.

According to tradition, an artist does not *paint* an icon. An artist *writes* an icon. It is much like writing a poem or a prayer. One icon writer put it this way, "The icon is 'written' insofar as it continues the work of communicating the gospel of Jesus Christ, albeit through line, form, and color rather than words."

Seeing an icon as a written prayer teaches us a profound lesson – prayer is not just up to us. Christ sees us, knows us, and prays through us. When we pray in faith before an icon, our spiritual gaze penetrates through the icon to Jesus' actual presence. But Christ's gaze also penetrates us. His life enters into ours. The eternal sees and comes into the temporary to heal us, to change us, to challenge us, and even to make us eternal. He calls us not only to look at and pray with icons, but to be icons!

When people gaze into our eyes, do they see the eyes of Christ? For we are called to see into those around us through the eyes of Christ, and be his instruments of healing, transformation, and love.

What would it mean for us to be icons – at work, at home, and around this city with everyone we encounter? What would it mean to look at each situation we face, even our biggest problem or our deepest hurt, as an opportunity to be raised up to the eternal presence of God, and to invite others to be raised up alongside us? What would it mean to write your whole life as a prayer?

After 40 minutes of praying with the icon in the Chapel of the Holy Spirit, I felt Jesus the father figure praying through me. As he gently stroked the hair of his beloved disciple lying in his lap, his eyes penetrated into me and through me, and his words reached down to my deepest longing, a longing buried deep within my subconscious, of what I most needed to hear from my own dad. The words of Jesus, the father, were simply this – "Paul, I'm proud of you."

Jesus is seeing and praying through each of us. He sees our deepest longings. He sees our greatest gifts and opportunities to serve him. He sees us as his icons in this world, gazing inward and outward to help him both to see and to transform the temporary into the eternal. *Amen*.