

plausible reason for its being selected most. But in thinking about the six presentations from my book this summer at St. Andrews and Grace and Holy Trinity Cathedral, I'm exploring one — possibly unconscious — dynamic that may explain its favored status.

The sonnet may appear at first to be about a merely human love relationship gone sour. The speaker chooses to confine the love to a locket because it is so overwhelming, just as we, fatigued by compassion, sometimes shut down our feelings in order to get on with our lives.

Then, in line 9, a forecast, using images from different faiths. The rapture in which the dead and living in Christ are “caught up in the clouds” to be eternally united in His kingdom is from 1 Thessalonians 4:17. In ancient Confucian thought, society would be set right by imitating the emperor honoring the gods by bowing to the South where they reside. In some Buddhist thought, the bodhisattva Maitreya is the future Buddha. Some Jews look for a Messiah who will establish the rule of Israel to bring peace to the world. All examples point to hope beyond the present distress, a desire that the mess of our world will be transformed.

But the couplet, the last two lines, if read closely, though phrased in the future, subverts itself when we contemplate “God’s desire.” God offers us now both the cross and life abundant. That’s the package for this life, both to redeem the suffering around us and to take pleasure in God’s gifts. We can bring comfort to disaster. We can find joy in duty to the world.

Ambrose of Milan wrote that we are simultaneously condemned and saved. Perhaps he meant that love brings both suffering and ecstasy. If we desire to know God, then choosing to love the world as it is, as God does, with all its evil, is, in a sense, our present salvation.

Religious maturity is found in desiring to love as God loves. Julian of Norwich wrote that it is God who teaches us to desire, and that He is the reward of all true desiring, and that all shall be well. When the locket confining our love of the world melts, we are raptured, Maitreya stirs, the Emperors bow, Messiah comes; and then, in tears or laughter or quiet presence, our desire is released and the Glory of God appears.



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2023

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## A LENTEN SERIES

Meal at 6 pm, program 6:30 pm

**The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd**

4947 NE Chouteau Drive, Kansas City, MO 64119 — (816) 452-0745



## When Even Evil Will Ordain the Good

**Lent** is a holy time to explore the powerful mysteries of the crucified and resurrected love of our Savior. As terrain for this exploration, the Reverend Vern Barnet, DMn, offers sonnets from the “Credo” section his book, *Thanks for Noticing: The Interpretation of Desire\**, with art and music for discussion.

Vern wrote the Wednesday “Faith and Beliefs” column for *The Kansas City Star*, 1994-2012, wrote a dozen essays for the diocesan magazine, *Spirit*, 2015-2017. With three others, wrote for, and edited, the 740-page *The Essential Guide to Religious Traditions and Spirituality for Health Care Providers*, published internationally by Radcliffe in 2013. He chaired the Jackson County Diversity Task Force following the 9/11 attacks. He is minister emeritus at CRES — THE CENTER FOR RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND STUDY. He founded the area Interfaith Council in 1989 and been honored by Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, and civic groups.

A layman at St Paul’s Kansas City, he has served on the diocesan Commission on Ministry and provided ministries in several other diocesan parishes.

Mar 2 - The Christ of History or Faith?

Mar 16 - The Gospel Theater

Mar 9 - A Paradox of Salvation

Mar 23 - The Mystic Vision

### \*About *Thanks for Noticing: The Interpretation of Desire*

*The poetic form does not merely contain a sentiment as a glass contains water. Rather speak of the grail containing wine; each intensifies the other. In poetry the form and the sentiment are as intimately related as the body and the soul.*

#### What’s a sonnet?

The “sonnet” (from *sonus*, sound) is a concoction of sounds contorting ordinary language so as to draw attention to itself; for this reason, it is not fashionable for those who favor everyday understandable speech.

The framework of a Shakespearean sonnet consists of 14 lines of five pairs of unstressed and stressed syllables each, with the end rimes of the lines in a pattern of *ababcdcd:efefgg*, often with a *volta*, a turn of thought, after line 8. Sometimes the concluding couplet may be epigrammatic or pithy.

#### How does one read this contraption,

To encounter a sonnet for the first time, enjoy the sounds you hear rather than concentrate on the words whose compressed meanings are seldom fully evident at once.

#### What is a prosimetry?

A book whose meaning depends on both poetry and prose. The book of Isaiah in the Bible and Dante’s *Vita Nuova* are examples.

#### How is the book organized?

These sonnets are arranged by the musical sequence of the Mass. Religious sources are included in the glosses in the resources at *cres.TFN* or *vernarnet.com*.

#### What is its theme?

The “interpretation of desire” is this:  
*When we empty ourselves of our own purposes to behold another as the other is, our love becomes divine.*  
The sonnets explore failures and intimations of such divine love in human relationships.

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## When Even Evil Will Ordain the Good

Session 1, March 2: The Christ of Nature, History, or Faith?  
 Sonnets 82 [Easter Morning](#) and 79 [The Quest for the Historical Jesus](#)

1. Some writers (Sir James Frazer is the famous late 19th Century example) imply or argue that Jesus is modeled on ancient dying and resurrected vegetative gods such as Adonis, signifying the dying and growing seasons of the year.

Jesus says, "Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a seed; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." (John 12:24) And Paul writes, "What you sow does not come to life unless it dies." (1 Corinthians 15:36) Before consecration, the elements of the Eucharist are visible products of the natural vegetative growth cycle. The word *Easter* appears to be related to *East, estrus*, and the pagan goddess *Oestern*. *Lent* refers to the lengthening of days of sunlight.

Yet Christians teach that God entered history in Jesus once (Hebrews 9:28) to redeem humankind, not like the cyclical nature gods of the Hellenistic world.

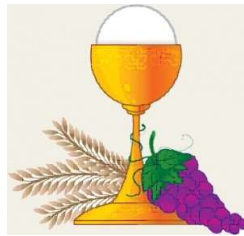
Is making a spiritual connection between Easter and springtime (with Easter bunnies, Easter eggs, and baby chicks) helpful or blasphemous?

2. In a simple sentence, without mentioning the Christian story, what is the meaning or message of Easter? —  
 Sonnet 82, line 14?

3. Was Jesus fully human and tempted like us (Heb. 4:15)? He said that only God, not himself, was good (Mark 10:17-18). If he were sinless, how could he know feelings like guilt?

4. Many Christians believe Jesus was God. Many scholars agree with Albert Schweitzer's view that Jesus was an apocalyptic preacher proclaiming that the wickedness of his time would soon end with God destroying all evil and establishing a righteous rule.

To what extent and to what degrees are the **Christ of faith** and the **Jesus of history** important to you, to the Church, and to the world? —



*Pantocrator Icon* by Thomas J. Dolphens in the Chapel of the Risen Lord at Grace and Holy Trinity Cathedral, Kansas City, Missouri, with normal lighting and with only the side candle illuming the painting

	Jesus of history					Christ of faith				
you personally	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
the Church	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
the world	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5

communion at the altar rail — a fresh vision of the flow of generations, responding with varying degrees of illumination to the same call that Isaiah heard, in Chapter 6 of his book.

"I'm not prescribing behavior for anyone else, just reporting that both in church and throughout the week, I seem closer to tears, a little less hard-boiled. I've a long way to go to emulate the love and compassion and embrace of Jesus; but however minute the improvement, I like myself better."

### Compassion Fatigue

Still, when I saw the news about the gun slaughter at the gay Orlando night club, and again the attack at the place in the Istanbul airport where I have been, my first reaction was to shut down emotionally, just as I did immediately after Sandy Hook, Columbine, Charleston, Virginia Tech, and so many other shocks.

No tears. "Well, what can we expect with the Supreme Court's Second Amendment ruling?" the analyst in me said aloud in anger. I thought about the year when I was responsible for obtaining the names of those killed in gun violence in Kansas City each week, and how emotionally weary I became adding them to the prayer list. My first reaction to Orlando was disgust that so

many political leaders seem to be owned by the N.R.A. even though the public favors measures to reduce our orgies of violence.

As the news continued, I recognized my "compassion fatigue," but God's love never falters. God became human to suffer as we do. Finally I began to weep.

There is so much to weep about, the refugee crisis, the fires, the floods, the accidents, and the impaired health of those we love. Usually I put these things out of mind. But sometimes I look at the obituaries and see a young person I do not even know whose life has been snuffed out, and I start to weep.

### A Sonnet of Desire

I've been puzzling why, from my new book, *Thanks for Noticing: The Interpretation of Desire*, one sonnet was the most popular in a contest with a score of racially diverse readers, young and old, gay and straight, professional and amateur, of several faiths, held at a Kansas City library for the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death.

While the sonnet is in perfect Shakespearean form, I don't think it is my best. I don't think it is particularly easy, either. No one has given me a



## When Even Evil Will Ordain the Good

Session 3, March 16 — The Gospel Theater: A Postmodern View

### Sonnet 84 Postmodern Faith: What is Truth?

1. Some might say that the Anglican tradition emerged as a middle way (*via media*) between the Roman and the Protestant forms of Christianity, with attempts to accommodate much of both of those traditions, and that the Anglican Church continues to welcome an evolving range of views and practices grounded in scripture, tradition, and reason.

Would you go so far as the Rt. Rev. Peter J. Lee when he said the following? — “If you must make a choice between heresy and schism, always choose heresy. For as a heretic, you are only guilty of a wrong opinion. As a schismatic, you have torn and divided the body of Christ. Choose heresy every time.”

Anglicans defended the moral fiction of the Elizabethan stage against the Puritans. Anglican poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge said the enjoyment of fiction arises from a “willing suspension of disbelief.” How far is this from describing PostModernism as “incredulity toward meta-narratives”? (Jean-François Lyotard)



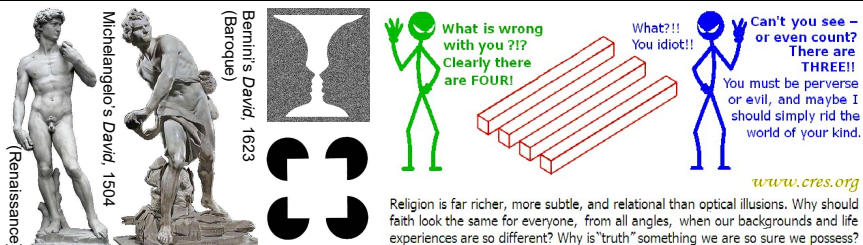
A modern enactment of the crucifixion.

*“The incredulity of the Gospel story does not trouble me. The Christian tradition reveals a cosmic drama within which I embrace the Creeds of the Church without reservation. Through the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist, I commit myself to shaping my life by the wisdom of that story.”*

2. In this age of quantum indeterminacy, is the inset statement, which treats the Gospel as fiction, heretical?

3. When have you been deeply moved by the story in a book, a play, a movie, and opera, or even a song? What character was especially meaningful to you? How does the story suggest how you want to live your life and understand those around you and the world?

4. What did you notice in the sonnet? What feelings did the various parts evoke? Where did it make sense, please, or intrigue, and where fail? Why is the octave concerned with illusions? In what sense may the sonnet be Postmodern or “neo-baroque”?



Religion is far richer, more subtle, and relational than optical illusions. Why should faith look the same for everyone, from all angles, when our backgrounds and life experiences are so different? Why is “truth” something we are so sure we possess?

## When Even Evil Will Ordain the Good

Session 4, March 23: The Mystic Vision: Do Things Fit Together?

### Sonnets 86 Interbeing and 88 Love Locket

#### Review

An overarching problem in Christianity, made visible in the Easter story, is how an almighty, all-loving God can permit evil.

Session 1. We asked if the seasonal cycle helps with insights from the Jesus of history and/or the Christ of faith.

Session 2. We examined theories of theodicy and a painting by Velázquez with the suggestion that Christ represents the suffering world, and that by identifying with Christ we can be means of redemption to us and others.

Session 3. Because of illusions, perceptual errors, limited knowledge, and the fragility of language, more important than assent to propositions (“belief”) about historical details or claims of faith is acting as if they are so. (See Sonnet 84’s gloss citations of insurance executive-poet Wallace Stevens and Anglican poet W H Auden.) In the Baroque period, before the “dissociation of sensibility” (Anglican poet T S Eliot’s term) “belief” meant “be-love” or “trust” — *liebe, libido*).

Can worship, and especially the Eucharist, be regarded as concentrated play-acting that rehearses us for living each day as members of the Body of Christ?

#### The Mystic Vision

1 Have you ever had a mystical experience anything like Boehme’s, cited in the Sonnet 86 gloss? or at least, “goose bumps”? If not, would you want such an experience? What would it be like for you?

2. The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss says myths (stories of paradigmatic meaning) arise from opposites. Myths embrace binary conceptions like life and death. For this Lenten series, the duality for our focus is good and evil. Does the Christian story resolve opposites into an inexpressible unity, by showing us how *even evil* (the murder of the ultimate good, God, in the crucifixion) *can ordain the good* (the Resurrection and our salvation)? —What opposites are joined together in the Eucharist? Ordinary perception arises from distinctions; how can the mystic vision transcend partiality in wonder, gratitude, and service?

3 How do we both embrace an evil world and protect ourselves from it? or should we? Does Easter solve the problem of unmerited suffering around us? Does the Christian find joy in duty to the world?

#### NOTE ON THE MUSIC:

In 1567 Thomas Tallis contributed nine tunes for a collection of vernacular psalm settings intended for publication in a metrical psalter then being compiled for the (first Anglican) Archbishop of Canterbury, Matthew Parker. The Third Tune rendered Psalm 2. It has two settings in *The Hymnal 1982*, #170 “To mock your reign, O dearest Lord” and #692 “I heard the voice of Jesus say.” It is also the basis of the Ralph Vaughan Williams 1910 work for string orchestra, *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*.



Dalí's *The Sacrament of the Last Supper* (1955)

## An interpretation of Sonnet 88 Love Locket

From *SPIRIT*, the magazine of the Episcopal Diocese of West Missouri,  
2016 August, pages 8-9

### Loving the World as God Loves the World

*Our desires to save the world, on one hand,  
and to savor it, on the other,  
can be reconciled only in God's love.*

“How have you changed since you became an Episcopalian?” a friend asked me. He knew about my life-long and career-filled interest in world religions. He knew I still cherish Buddhist, Muslim, American Indian and other spiritual paths.

#### Closer to Tears

My friend knew I do not approach world religions “cafeteria-style,” choosing this feature from one religion and that idea from another. I embrace each faith fully. One can relish both Rembrandt and Mapplethorpe, and find enchantment in both the Parthenon and the Taj Mahal. One is not violated by enjoying both a Mozart opera and a tune by Steely Dan. Somehow I’ve escaped the literalistic curse of thinking that religions must be mutually exclusive. Still, he found the commitment I made in 2011 by being baptized a Christian quite puzzling.

“Well,” my answer stumbled out, “by seeking to follow the

example of Jesus with my whole heart, particularly through a kind of ongoing dialogue between ardent worship and the choices before me everyday, I’ve come to understand the creeds as pointers to the geography of life, with its horrors and its glories, manifested in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

“That’s pretty abstract. Give me one specific example of how you have changed,” he demanded.

“I’ve noticed that I cry a lot more easily,” I confessed. “Sometimes I weep just sitting in the pew and watching the acolyte prepare the candles, a reassurance that out of all the ugliness and misunderstandings of the human condition, the folks gathering for worship need, as I do, to recognize the sacred and align ourselves anew with the Power that gives us hope and life abundant.

“Sometimes I am full of laughter as the service begins, but perhaps my eyes moisten when I see a parent and child taking

## When Even Evil Will Ordain the Good

Session 2, March 9: A Paradox of Salvation  
Sonnets 80 The Cosmic Christ and 85 Theodicy 9/11

1. List examples of natural and human adversity, such as floods, earthquakes, tornados, disease, racism, sexism, and genocide.

2. Many writers contrast the world as we know it with the world as it should be. The world of misfortune and evil is not the world of justice and peace toward which we aim.

For Christians, the problem of *theodicy* arises with the seeming conflict between an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving God allowing accident and wickedness to afflict us. “If God is God, He is not good; if God is good, He is not God.” (MacLeish) Here are some attempts to solve the problem:

- 1. God is all-good but **not all-powerful** and works within us (through evolutionary processes including tragedy) to save us and the world.
- 2. Misfortune is God’s **punishment** for sin, one’s own or the sins of others. (Amos)
- 3. God allows people to do bad things because he gave us **free will**, and as a result they and others may necessarily suffer.
- 4. God uses suffering to **teach** those who cannot learn any other way (Hosea). 4a. Unmerited suffering borne gracefully may lead others to God (Second Isaiah). 4b. God allows suffering to give us opportunities for **the soul to grow**.
- 5. Evil is **not real**, merely an absence of the good.
- 6. This is the **best of all possible worlds**.



*Christ after the Flagellation contemplated by the Christian Soul* (1628) by Diego Velázquez

3. Is Christ simply an historical figure or does He live within us, and us within Him?

If so, how does His finitude (Incarnation) and His suffering (and resurrection) relate to ours, and what does this mean for how we live our lives?

*Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi* becomes in BCP, Rite II, *Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world*. Considering this sacred text and the Velázquez painting, could the suffering of Christ be considered a metaphor for the suffering of the world? If so, how do we participate in receiving and offering redemption?

“In Christianity the solution to the problem of theodicy is found in Christology—the incarnate God is also the God who suffers. Without this suffering, without the agony of the cross, the incarnation would not provide the solution to the problem of suffering. Only the sacrifice of an innocent god could justify the endless and universal torture of innocence.” — from Michael R. Leming’s summary of Peter Berger’s *Sacred Canopy*