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 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 of 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 Con-fucian 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, Maitraya 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.

The sonnets are arranged according to the sequence of the Mass. From the Paleolithic to the present, human beings have found ways to record sacred times and places in the midst of anguish, dread, and unreasonable rule. Even when God seems dead, love and beauty redeem. As proof, I point to the great composer of “St Matthew Passion” and more, Johann Sebastian Bach. This is no realm of reasonable things. By mortals God is killed, but still Bach sings.

84. A Postmodern Faith
For a far more extensive theological discussion of Sonnet 84, visit VernBarnet.com, click on INTERVIEWS, and go to Part 7.

84. A Postmodern Faith
From the book, a song, interviews, a "concordance," commentary, and corrections.

45. Husam - A Rumi Quartet
A tradition in Islam is that at the beginning, God was a hidden treasure, and yearned to be known. So he created the world. This idea intrigues me throughout my book, as I understand love as the urge to know and be known. Evolution’s yearning — from atoms to DNA, to bodies, to societies — gives us the chance to behold the Hidden Treasure if we love; and if we love, the body and soul of our beloved reveals to us the meaning of the whole of creation.

84. Postmodern Faith: What is Truth?
For me, religion is worship, which I define as awe + gratitude + service. So I love any story of any faith that draws me to worship. My own tradition is Christian, and I know there are serious arguments about what actually happened historically. In a world filled with illusions, what best leads me to worship is not disputed facts but rather the power of myth, the sacred story. The truth it reveals is not what is factual but what is genuine. This cannot fail to inspire my worship.

I know the Gospel is a pious tale, but who cares facts when worship cannot fail?
88. Love Locket [see *** below]
I’ve been surprised how popular this sonnet has become. It is not easy, with references to Christian, Buddhist, Chinese, and Jewish utopias. The sonnet appears personal. I am so hurt by my beloved that I lock up my love to be untouched by it, just as I would like to avert my eyes from watching the news about mass shootings, the suffering from fire and flood, and accidents and war and terrorism. It is too much to bear. Yet only when I am open to the pain of others, and feel my own, am I human enough to be worthy of paradise.

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

A Sonnet of Desire
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 Pantheon 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, I found the commitment I made in 2011 by being baptized a Christian quite puzzling.

154. Closing Instruction
This sonnet is the bookend to the Opening Instruction. I close the book with a farewell as if I were dying. My discovery is that my Beloved is everywhere about me, in every form of being, mechanical or alive as I experience the miracle of awareness. So as I prepare for my end, what remains is, in part, this book, and what I want most to say is:

READER, learn your union from your rift.
From yours and others’ ecstasy and pain draw close to whom you love, and close remain.

136. The Purpose of Sex
“Shlomo” is a Jewish form of “Solomon.” From the erotic verses of the scripture attributed to him arises my celebration of the holiness of incarnate sexuality. Desire leads us to the blessing of knowing another intimately, and thus ourselves more deeply. This means not using another person, but abandoning all intentions except being completely open to see the other. And how can we love God purely, for His own sake, if we want to use God for our own purposes?

142. Tinnitus
The Agnus Dei, Lamb of God, movement of the Mass is poignant for me as I picture the slaughtered animal and the crucified Christ. This sonnet is an unjustifiable, perhaps blasphemous pity-party for myself as I discover my trivial pains and limits in the infirmities of age. And yet I give thanks that, like Christ, I have been enfleshed, and that though my senses are dimmed, touch remains redemptive.

143. Lo! Incarnation is a word for quirks.
So let me know your flesh; my skin still works.

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 prayer list. My first reaction to Orlando was disgust that so many political leaders seem to be owned by the N.R.A. even 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.