



Transcending Contempt
Session One
January 6th, 2024
The Rev. Christopher H. Martin
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
San Rafael, California

The Gifts of Wonder, Attention and Gratitude

Agenda

9:05 Orientation
9:15 First Teaching: The Gifts of Wonder, Attention and Gratitude
9:45 Q & A

Orientation

You can participate in one of three ways.

1. The best is to come in person to Duncan Hall on our campus on 1123 Court St. in downtown San Rafael on Saturday mornings beginning January 6th. Hospitality is at 8:30am and the one-hour session begins at 9am. There will be hard copy handouts with the agenda, the outlines of the talks and a few supporting pages of texts by or about the writers that inspired the teaching.
2. The second best is to join us live Zoom. The first session, on January 6th, will only be on YouTube and you can access the live presentation either from this web site or on our YouTube Channel, St. Paul's, San Rafael. The remaining live sessions are on Zoom where St. Paul's parishioner Walter Tanner will be facilitating discussion. Then, at 9:30am, Zoom will transition to my next teaching. A PDF of the handout will be uploaded to this web page two hours before each session.

3. Finally, once each session has been completed, you can access the YouTube recording of the teaching and the PDF of the handout at any time on this page. The teaching each week will also be live on YouTube starting at 9:30am.
- My goal for each of these sessions is to have you leave each session eager to try a new practice.
 - The teaching of each session is aimed toward getting you to understand the practice and to trust that the practice is rooted in great thinking.
 - Each packet also has quotes, brief essays or brief descriptions by or about our great thinkers. These materials are there to support you if you choose to use them. This is not a reading course.

Teaching

I. Introduction

- A. Backstory- Lent 2017, Interview in 2004, Christian American or American Christian?
- B. Why? - Become beacons of light and love in a difficult election year- we all need help and support to not get hooked by contempt.
- C. Form - attend to the teaching, practice the weekly practice, then discuss the practice in person or on Zoom. A learning community.

II. Wonder

- A. Plato- Questions, not answers. Gadfly, elenchus, aporia.
- B. Wonder- ‘I do not think that I know what I do not know.’
- C. Habit of wonder is a way to not judge. E.g. Taylor Swift, MAGA, Woke.

III. Attention

- A. Simone Weil- “their unhealthiness is their soundness, and is what carries conviction.”
- B. Attention- Quotes and Commentary (In supplemental materials)
- C. Attention may be the most important word of this whole seminar.

IV. Gratitude

- A. Thomas Aquinas - Realism v. Nominalism, Existential Thomism.
- B. Which world do you primarily inhabit? - Universe, Metaverse or Cosmos?
- C. Gratitude - to inhabit the Cosmos means understanding that all is Gift, not given.

Questions for groups of three at the beginning of Session Two

1. Give an example from the week when you wondered about something or someone you never wondered about before.
2. Was there a time when you paid full attention to one task, one thing or one person? What was it like? How did you know you were paying full attention?
3. We all dwell in all three worlds every day. Give an example of your dwelling in each world. How does it feel to dwell there and what did you learn?

Supplemental Material

1. An excerpt from the Apology, probably Plato's earliest writing.
2. A list of quotes from Simone Weil, primarily taken from her essay Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God.
3. A page from Christina Sharpe's new book, Ordinary Notes.

The Five Practices

1. _____ ING _____
2. _____ ING _____
3. _____ ING _____
4. _____ ING _____
5. _____ ING _____

hat I take no interest in it. Part of you as witnesses to my who have ever listened to me whom this applies—to clear all one another whether any such questions briefly or at the other popular reports about

any of these charges, and if educate people and charge a wish that there were, because I qualified to teach, as in the vicus of Ceos and Hippias of able of going into any city and leave the company of their fellow-associate for nothing, and money for the privilege, and be

aros who I discovered was here who has paid more in Sophists' mean Callias, the son of Hippon, you see—Callias, I said, if should have had no difficulty perfect their natural qualities, the sort of horse dealer or agriman beings, whom do you in is the expert in perfecting the from the fact of your having the question. Is there such a per-

come from? said I. And what

, and his fee is five minas. atulated if he really was a moderate fee. I should certainly I understood these things, but

it interrupt me and say. But v is it that you have been mis-alk and gossip about you would l yourself to ordinary activities, nal. Tell us the explanation, if elves.

ble request, and I will try to ex-ven me this false notoriety. So

please give me your attention. Perhaps some of you will think that I am not being serious, but I assure you that I am going to tell you the whole truth.

I have gained this reputation, gentlemen, from nothing more or less than a kind of wisdom. What kind of wisdom do I mean? Human wisdom, I suppose. It seems that I really am wise in this limited sense. Presumably the geniuses whom I mentioned just now are wise in a wisdom that is more than human. I do not know how else to account for it. I certainly have no knowledge of such wisdom, and anyone who says that I have is a liar and willful slanderer. Now, gentlemen, please do not interrupt me if I seem to make an extravagant claim, for what I am going to tell you is not my own opinion. I am going to refer you to an unimpeachable authority. I shall call as witness to my wisdom, such as it is, the god at Delphi.

↓ You know Chaerephon, of course. He was a friend of mine from 21 boyhood, and a good democrat who played his part with the rest of you in the recent expulsion and restoration. And you know what he was like, how enthusiastic he was over anything that he had once undertaken. Well, one day he actually went to Delphi and asked this question of the god—as I said before, gentlemen, please do not interrupt—he asked whether there was anyone wiser than myself. The priestess replied that there was no one. As Chaerephon is dead, the evidence for my statement will be supplied by his brother, who is here in court.

Please consider my object in telling you this. I want to explain to b you how the attack upon my reputation first started. When I heard about the oracle's answer, I said to myself, What does the god mean? Why does he not use plain language? I am only too conscious that I have no claim to wisdom, great or small. So what can he mean by asserting that I am the wisest man in the world? He cannot be telling a lie; that would not be right for him.

After puzzling about it for some time, I set myself at last with considerable reluctance to check the truth of it in the following way. I went to interview a man with a high reputation for wisdom, because I felt that here if anywhere I should succeed in disproving the c oracle and pointing out to my divine authority, You said that I was the wisest of men, but here is a man who is wiser than I am.

Well, I gave a thorough examination to this person—I need not mention his name, but it was one of our politicians that I was studying when I had this experience—and in conversation with him I formed the impression that although in many people's opinion, and especially in his own, he appeared to be wise, in fact he was not. Then when I began to try to show him that he only thought he was wise and was not really so, my efforts were resented both by him and by d many of the other people present. However, I reflected as I walked away, Well, I am certainly wiser than this man. It is only too likely

that neither of us has any knowledge to boast of, but he thinks that he knows something which he does not know, whereas I am quite conscious of my ignorance. At any rate it seems that I am wiser than he is to this small extent, that I do not think that I know what I do not know.

After this I went on to interview a man with an even greater reputation for wisdom, and I formed the same impression again, and here too I incurred the resentment of the man himself and a number of others.

From that time on I interviewed one person after another. I realized with distress and alarm that I was making myself unpopular, but I felt compelled to put my religious duty first. Since I was trying to find out the meaning of the oracle, I was bound to interview everyone who had a reputation for knowledge. And by dog, gentlemen, for I must be frank with you, my honest impression was this. It seemed to me, as I pursued my investigation at the god's command, that the people with the greatest reputations were almost entirely deficient, while others who were supposed to be their inferiors were much better qualified in practical intelligence.

I want you to think of my adventures as a sort of pilgrimage undertaken to establish the truth of the oracle once for all. After I had finished with the politicians I turned to the poets, dramatic, lyric, and all the rest, in the belief that here I should expose myself as a comparative ignoramus. I used to pick up what I thought were some of their most perfect works and question them closely about the meaning of what they had written, in the hope of incidentally enlarging my own knowledge. Well, gentlemen, I hesitate to tell you the truth, but it must be told. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that any of the bystanders could have explained those poems better than their actual authors. So I soon made up my mind about the poets too. I decided that it was not wisdom that enabled them to write their poetry, but a kind of instinct or inspiration, such as you find in seers and prophets who deliver all their sublime messages without knowing in the least what they mean. It seemed clear to me that the poets were in much the same case, and I also observed that the very fact that they were poets made them think that they had a perfect understanding of all other subjects, of which they were totally ignorant. So I left that line of inquiry too with the same sense of advantage that I had felt in the case of the politicians.

Last of all I turned to the skilled craftsmen. I knew quite well that I had practically no technical qualifications myself, and I was sure that I should find them full of impressive knowledge. In this I was not disappointed. They understood things which I did not, and to that extent they were wiser than I was. But, gentlemen, these professional experts seemed to share the same failing which I had noticed in the poets. I mean that on the strength of their technical proficiency

they claimed a perfect understanding of things which were of great importance, and I felt that this excessive wisdom was a kind of stupidity. So I made myself ask myself whether I would rather be wise than stupid with their wisdom nor stupid with their stupidity as they did. I replied through my interpreter that I would rather be as I was.

The effect of these investigations has been to arouse against me a great deal of ill-will, particularly bitter and persistent malicious suggestions, including the suggestion that I am ignorant of wisdom. This is due to the fact that I have been failing another person's claim to wisdom, and I have assumed that I know everything about the matter, gentlemen, and that human wisdom has little or nothing to do with it. I do not refer literally to Socrates as an example, as if he would say that he has realized, like Socrates, that wisdom is worthless.

That is why I still go about to the divine command, if I think of myself as a stranger, and when I think of the cause of God by proving that I am too busy to do much either in my own service or in the service of God.

There is another reason for my going about to the divine command. I have seen many young men with wealthy fathers who are naturally attached themselves to me and are often cross-questioned. These often try to question other persons. With a limited number of people who really know little or nothing, I am annoyed, not with themselves but with me. I am a pestilential busybody called Socrates, who has wrong ideas. If you teaches that has this effect, the result is to say. But as they do not war back on the stock charges against me, I have to teach my pupils about things in the heaven which I do not believe in gods, and to make them believe in gods. They would be very loath, I fancy, if they are being convicted of preternaturally ignorant. So, jealous, I am also energetic and numerically

Quotes From Simone Weil

Transcending Contempt, Session One: The Gifts of Wonder, Attention and Gratitude

Taken Primarily from Her Essay: Reflections of the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God.

1. "Attention is the only faculty of the soul which gives access to God."
2. "The development of the faculty of attention forms the real object and almost the sole interest of studies."
3. "There is a way of giving our attention... a way of waiting, when we are writing, for the right word to come of itself at the end of our pen while we merely reject all inadequate words."
4. "A latin prose or geometry problem, even though they are done wrong, may be of great service one day, provided we devote the right kind of effort to them. Should the occasion arise, it may one day make us better able to give someone in affliction exactly the help required to save him, at the supreme moment of his need."
5. "Never in any case whatever is a genuine effort of attention wasted."
6. "Every time that we really concentrate our attention we destroy evil in ourselves."
7. "Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object."
8. "Not only does the love of God have attention for its substance; the love of neighbor, which we know to be the same love, is made of the same substance. Those who are unhappy have no need for anything in this world but people capable of giving them their attention. The capacity to give one's attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing... The love of neighbor in all its fullness simply means being able to say to him 'what are you going through?'"

NOTE 96

Tate Modern, London, England, March 22, 2018

I meet a friend at the Tate Modern. Y is an art historian, a writer, and a teacher from South Africa who lives and works in London.

We've known each other for several years, but we are meeting in person for the first time.

We go to see the Joan Jonas exhibition that had been at the Venice Biennale, and we walk through the other galleries and then we decide to get a coffee at the café.

It is sunny in there and crowded, but I see a table emptying and I head toward it.

I pass a young Black woman clearing the tables and I pause in order to speak to her. "Hello," I say, and, "How are you today?"

When she doesn't respond I look at her and speak again. "Good afternoon," I say, "how are you today?"

The young woman stops. She looks at me and then she asks me if I am speaking to her.

I say, "Yes," and that I was asking how she was.

She says, "I have been working here for months and you are the first person who has ever spoken to me to ask me how I am doing. I want to thank you for that. For seeing me and asking about me."

"You must be kidding me," I say although I know that she is not kidding, and I am also not surprised. We are at the Tate Modern. I have seen very few Black people. It is always like this.

I say, "I see you."

She says, "I know."

I say, "We see each other."

She says, "Yes. We do."

This exchange reverberated throughout that day and the days that followed.

NOTE 97

There is a certain mod-
practices in which eve-
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ambitions lodge in a j
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might then draw a con-
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