



Transcending Contempt  
Practices for Lent  
February 17, 2024  
The Rev. Christopher H. Martin  
St. Paul's Episcopal Church, San Rafael, California

The following are three practices to pursue during Lent. You are invited to pursue these practices alone, with a partner or in a small group. To learn more, please join me Saturday, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 9-10am as I introduce the three practices and show how they can be reflected upon in a small group.

No matter how you try these practices, we'll gather again on Saturday, March 16<sup>th</sup>, 9-10am to share stories and lessons learned.

First, a word to orient your practice of Transcending Contempt:

One wise Christian said to another: "Tell me how I can become a Christian?" She replied "If you want to find rest here and hereafter, say in every occasion, Who am I? and do not judge anyone."

Each of these three practice has a rationale, a practice and a question or questions for consideration.

- I. Your Relationship to the News (Stewarding Your Halo- Part One)
  - A. Kierkegaard's goal was to make us "aware" that we are each a "single individual" and not just part of that "monstrous abstraction" the "public," where everyone has opinions but no one owns them.
  - B. For the next few weeks, follow a fast from news where you participate substantially less in the media and its glut of opinions.

- C. What shifts have you noticed in yourself as you've decreased your intake of news?
- II. Your Relationship to Your Family and Friends (Stewarding Your Halo- Part Two)
- A. James K. A. Smith, in the wake of Virginia Woolf, invites us to imagine that we each have a “temporal halo” containing all that is present or potentially present to us in each moment, including our family and friends. This “temporal halo” is as unique to us as our fingerprint. Becoming aware of our temporal halo is one way to become aware that we are a “single individual.”
  - B. Every morning for the next few weeks, attend to your temporal halo. Begin by picturing your grandparents behind you and thinking of/praying for them. Then picture your biological family to your right and think of and pray for them. Then picture your friends and acquaintances to your left and think of and pray for them. Finally, in front of you, dwell on hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of your soul. (Hope is akin to Love because it's a desire, akin to Wonder because we cannot fully know what we hope for, akin to Attention because it is unhurried, akin to Gratitude because it is labor toward a gift. Love + WAG.)
  - C. Who among those in your halo do you have a hard time forgiving? Can you want to forgive them because you want to love them?
- III. Your Relationship to Your Neighbors (Attend to Your Neighbors)
- A. There are three ways we're invited to look at our neighbors differently. With Simone Weil we can attend to them and ask, either silently or aloud, “What are you going through?” With Christina Sharpe we can look at a frequently ignored neighbor and say with them, either silently or aloud, “We see each other.” With me, you can look at a neighbor as a PERSON, a theotropic enigma.
  - B. Look at a neighbor this week with the lens of Weil, of Sharpe or of me.
  - C. Which lens did you try? What happened?

#### Supplemental Material

1. A Collection of quotes from Simone Weil on attention.
2. A page from Christina Sharpe's Ordinary Notes.
3. A Chapter from my book, With Gladness.

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?'"

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*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 mo-  
practices in which e-  
ogy. Then all of th-  
ambitions lodge in-  
either does this dir-  
rectly, by way of exc-  
trap by writing tha-  
might then draw a c-  
and imagine this a c-  
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Black-writers who c-

These readers ar-  
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These readers c-  
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## GENTLE PRACTICE

Look at each face and remember  
that they are a PERSON

### WORDS

Gladness  
Theotropic

PERSON  
Enigma



*O God, send me this day to do the work  
you have given me to do, to love and serve you  
with gladness and singleness of heart. Amen.*

## Look at Each Face

Nothing is more fascinating than a human face. One of the great pleasures of going to a great museum is the opportunity to stare as long as you want at a human face in a great portrait painting. Paintings by masters such as Rembrandt or Diego Velázquez seem to capture all the subtlety, ambiguity, and emotional shading of a real face. It is no mistake that the world's most famous painting, the *Mona Lisa*, is of an elusive and compelling human face. Even so, not one face painted by any of these masters is greater than the human faces you will see in the coming week. The first gentle practice invites us to look at each face with the reverence due to one made in the image and likeness of God.

This gentle practice invites us to remember the word “gladness.” The source of our liturgical phrase, “with gladness and singleness of heart,” is a passage from the book of Acts that describes the ideal beginning of the church. Through the centuries, many have used these descriptions of church in the second chapter of Acts as a motivator to be a thriving and holy church in different times and places. In chapter two of Acts, we are told that the disciples gathered together and broke bread “with glad and generous hearts” (Acts 2:46). The word gladness expresses a kind of joyful conviviality, evoking lively and deep gratitude for the gift of being human together, of knowing that we are brothers and sisters in Christ as we share life together. Our outward unity in Christ makes explicit a deep truth that

our unity is not only all people but also with all creation. The Gospel of John tells us that “all things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being” (John 1:3). In Christ, all are one, all of creation. This unity includes each human face we see, and so each face has the potential, when we remember this deep truth, to bring gladness.

Looking at each face makes use of our eyes. The spiritual life is filled with visual images. When God creates the world in Genesis, we are told that God “sees” everything that is made and that it is “very good” (Genesis 1:31). Two of the most moving stories in the gospel involve sight. In a story found only in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus partially heals a man. He tells Jesus, “I can see people, but they look like trees, walking” (Mark 8:24). Jesus lays hands on him again, and the man’s sight is fully restored. In John, an entire chapter is dedicated to the healing of the man born blind, who at one point famously decrees, “I do not know whether [Jesus] is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see” (John 9:25). These stories invite us to imagine both the bestowing of visual sight and the gift of spiritual sight. The story in the Gospel of John inspired the line, “I once was blind, but now I see,” in “Amazing Grace.” Englishman John Newton was a slave trader who became an abolitionist after his conversion to Christianity. I imagine that he wrote the song when he realized that the people in his boat were not commodities but people, and so he recognized that each one was made in the image and likeness of God.

As we move through the coming week, we will encounter three kinds of faces: planned, unplanned, and anonymous. A

first step is to simply be alert to which type of face is before your eyes. A planned face is a known face. As I write this, I am sheltering in place with my family, which I have been doing for two months. I always wake up first, followed by my wife, who gets her coffee before her prayers, then my younger son, who gets a bowl of cereal before going downstairs for virtual high school, and then my older son, who gets up last of all to make a smoothie before a virtual college class. I have a view of these planned faces from my home desk. As I move into my gentle practice of looking at each face, I ask myself: Can I look at these faces in a fresh way, or am I in a rut? Can I remember each day that this face, known well to me, was made in the image and likeness of God? Am I in a rut with how I view this face, in my relationship and in how I see the face of Christ in this familiar person?

The second kind of face is unplanned. When I first taught this material, I made my way to a meeting at church. I arrived about ten minutes early so that I could be there to welcome the known and loved faces of Jacob, Judy, Tanner, Michael, Joan, and Kate. As I pulled into the parking lot, I saw Samantha sitting on an outdoor bench, waiting for me. I got out of the car and sat down next to her. She and I had been texting earlier in the week because she had some things she wanted to tell me, and she needed my help. Samantha was part of a support group for teen mothers I had helped facilitate. Samantha explained that her phone had died, and she didn’t have the means to fix it or get a new one. She then began to speak and cry, and I settled in for what I knew would be a long time with Samantha.

I am confident that, even before arriving at the teaching in this chapter, I would have chosen to stay with Samantha, at least for a time. But now that I was embracing the gentle practice of looking at each face, I was more aware of the mystery that unplanned faces during my day may not be part of my plan but were probably part of God's. I settled fully into being with Samantha, my heart undivided, allowing her to set the time. I was late for my other meeting, but the work of the day was very near me, in the face of Samantha. Our time together was a piece of the good work God had prepared for me to walk in that week. When we encounter unplanned or expected faces, are we alert and responsive? Do we set aside our own timelines and to-do's and focus on the person in front of us?

When I was able to join my planned meeting, I found they had (as I had hoped) started without me. When I briefly explained why I was late, they could not have been more gracious. It was easy to look on their faces with gladness. Yet my time with Samantha, though unexpected, had tapped into an even deeper sort of gladness. Jesus has a special love for those of us who are broken, poor, or on the margins. When we are invited to intimately love those whom Jesus especially loves, it is a taste of the gladness of the gospel.

The third kind of face can be the most difficult. We experience two types of challenges with anonymous faces, those of people we don't know. The first is the way we tend to project onto people. It is far too easy to look at people and have our lust, envy, or judgment triggered. Our primal emotions, if we are putting words to them on our minds, frequently create thoughts we wouldn't want to say out loud: "What a nice butt!" or "I

wish I had hair like that!" or "What was he thinking with that shirt?" The habit of these unholy thoughts is, I suspect, a sin that plagues all of us. When we go into places with crowds, before we start gazing at faces, it's important to remind ourselves how easily our fellow human beings can trigger uncharitable thoughts. We need to attend to our thoughts, such that we become aware when our mind begins to teem with dehumanizing observations of our brothers and sisters.

We may need to hit the reset button. This often means practicing stewardship of the eyes, looking down at the ground and negotiating our way through the space without the temptation to judge others. It can be particularly helpful at this time to say to ourselves the Lord's Prayer, a few Hail Marys, the Jesus Prayer ("Lord Jesus Christ, son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner."), or a favorite piece of scripture. After a time, we may then be ready to look on our fellow human beings with gratitude, not judgment.

Twentieth-century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstien wrote, "The face is the soul of the body." He reflects here a truth that the face is the fullest possible image on earth of our soul. Because this is so, and because our souls, by God's grace, can be eternal, what we look at in a human face is a shimmering of eternity in time. Our work as followers of Christ is to look at each human face as a PERSON. The word is purposefully written in all capital letters. Many translations of the Bible, including the New Revised Standard Version, show reverence for God by always covering the letters that refer to God's name with an all capital letters version of the word "lord." The letters JHWH refer to God's words to Moses from the burning bush.

Some choose to say the letters aloud as one of two names, either Jahweh or Jehovah. Following the lead of the NRSV and as a practice of reverence for God, I choose not to say those names of God aloud but know they are there when I see the word LORD. It is one way to honor the divinity of God.

Similarly, I encourage us to honor Christ in each PERSON we encounter. As part of the gentle practice of looking at each face, I repeat to myself two words that remind me of the PERSON's holiness. The first word is "theotropic," a real word even though my computer doesn't recognize it! Sunflowers are heliotropic. This means that the surface of the flower always tilts toward the place in the sky where it will receive the most sun. This is why, when you go past a field of sunflowers, they are tilting in the same direction. They are doing the thing that God created them to do. In a way similar to sunflowers and the sun, God created us to tilt toward God.

We were made in the image and likeness of God, each human being, with no exceptions. No matter how ugly, depressed, distracted, depraved, angry, judgmental, or mendacious a person appears to us, they are theotropic, created to tilt toward God like sunflowers tilt to the sun. Remembering this word, and believing it to be true of each face, shifts us.

The second word is enigma. I once read a review of a movie with one of my favorite actors. This actor is one of a handful of people who will motivate me to see a movie, even if I'm not convinced by the plot description. In this movie, she played a Russian spy with secrets. The reviewer said the film failed because, regardless of this actor's formidable gifts, the character

came across as a "cipher" and not an "enigma." A cipher is one on whom we project a flimsy and disposable set of assumptions. They appear as a shallow paste-up job out of our imaginations and our desires. An enigma, on the other hand, is a compelling mystery. The character-driven movies we return to repeatedly are filled with characters who are enigmatic. The actors have persuasively inhabited the lives of full human beings, with all of our contradictions, evasions, and depths.

This week's gentle practice is to look at each face and remember that the human face before us in any given moment is the face of a PERSON who is a theotropic enigma. Together, these words remind us that the person before us, whether a best friend or a stranger, is both known by us and unknown by us. As a person of faith who believes with scripture that we are each made in the image and likeness of God, we can also believe that the person before us is made in the image and likeness of God and desires to be one with God. This is true of us from the moment of our conception to, God willing, our partaking of eternal life at the heavenly banquet. Remembering this deep reality can be particularly powerful when we encounter someone who is mean, angry, or unpleasant. We know they have a desire for God within them, and we also humbly acknowledge that there is much we don't and cannot know. The person before us is a mystery to us, whose thoughts, joys, sufferings, vices, and virtues are known fully only to God. The practice is to refrain from claiming to know more than we possibly could of the human being before us.

Tanner found a way to perform this daily practice. He takes the bus into the city for his work as an insurance agent. The bus



has tinted windows, allowing him to look out at people without being seen in return. As part of his spiritual practice, Tanner looks at the faces of the people on the street and remembers the words that I have shared with you. He sees each PERSON as a theotropic enigma. By consciously naming the face of each person, he recognizes that they are made in the image of God, full of holy mystery.

One way we love God is to give the honor due God's name. We sing and pray the Name above all names and refer to the Source of all being, an incomprehensible mystery in whom we live and move and have our being. When it comes to God, we now see through a glass darkly, but in the age to come, we will, according to reliable Paul of Tarsus, see God face to face (1 Corinthians 13:12). We now see other human beings face to face. We don't have to wait for the life to be revealed to each of us after our death to see the faces of our family, friends, brothers, and sisters in Christ and the anonymous crowd. Those faces are there for us to gaze upon with wonder and gratitude. It is True with a capital "T" that each human being was made in the image and likeness of God, and so is, like you, a theotropic enigma. This week, look at each face and remember that each is a PERSON. See if remembering this truth makes your heart glad.

## THIS WEEK

Look at each face and remember that they are a PERSON.

## SHIFT

Practice stewardship of your eyes, particularly around people.

## REPETITION

Each day, attend to the faces you see regularly, such as family, friends, and co-workers, and remember that each one is a PERSON.

## CAMINO BOOTS

Commit to weekly worship and twenty minutes of prayer.