

**St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Medina, WA**  
**The Rev. Alexander Breckinridge**  
**Church Year A**  
**August 6, 2017**  
**Transfiguration**  
**Exodus 34:29-35 • Luke 9:28-36**

I'll share a secret with you. I'm a lousy poker player. Or, put another way, you really do want to play poker with me. I'm an easy mark. Why is that? Well, I don't have what's known as a poker face. Not at all. As a general rule, whatever is going on inside of me will pretty soon be written all over my face. I lost what, for me at the time, was a fair amount of money, playing poker in college. One of my buddies pulled me aside one day and said, in a very kind way, "You know, it's pretty easy to tell when you've got a good hand or when you're bluffing. You can see it all over your face." I really appreciated that advice and I haven't played a lot of poker since then. And, no, I won't play with you now.

I was reminded the other day of how our faces can be very honest reflections of our souls as I was listening to an interview on the public radio program *On Being*. I can't say enough good things about this program. The host, Krista Tippett is wise, thoughtful, very smart, and well-read, and I should add, an active Episcopalian. She is interested in the intersections where spirituality, religious practice, science, and art meet: the place she calls Public Theology.

Now unfortunately, the program is broadcast on KUOW at 11 on Sunday morning which means you can't listen to it then because you'll be here in church, right? Right! But, you can listen to it like I do by downloading the podcasts which you can find on KUOW's website or on [OnBeing.org](http://OnBeing.org). Her interviews are always wonderful and often inspiring. So there's my public service announcement.

So the other day I was listening to Krista interview a fascinating guy named Matthiew Ricard. He was born into a very secular family in Paris where his father was a famous philosopher and his mother a well-known artist. He seemed destined for a brilliant career as a cellular geneticist, earned a PhD, and was working as a scientist at the Pasteur Institute in Paris. When he was 20 he saw a film, a documentary about many of the Tibetan Buddhist spiritual teachers who had fled Tibet when it was occupied by China. At the end of the film, there was a series of faces of contemplatives, some of them great masters, some simple hermits, captured in meditation. Ricard was struck by the strength of those faces, their compassion, the quality of inner awareness, that suggested that these were highly spiritually evolved people. He was drawn to see their faces in person and so he interrupted his graduate studies and went to India for six months to meet these great masters.

And what struck Ricard, who has now himself been a Tibetan Buddhist monk for over 40 years, was how profoundly these spiritual masters embodied – we in our tradition would say incarnated – the compassion, the spiritual honesty, the love that they taught and practiced.

I won't be able to quote him in his beautiful, lilting French accent, but here is what Ricard said about that insight. He's reflecting back on his younger life when he was surrounded by artists, scientists, intellectuals—the cream of Parisian intellectual life.

Mr. Ricard: Yes, because it struck me. Retrospectively, almost, I started thinking, “Well, all these wonderful people, great scientists, musicians, philosophers, painters, ordinary folks, you find a good distribution of everything – wonderful warmhearted people, you feel so good to be with them, and then people who are grumpy and not very altruistic, and so forth. So therefore, it didn't seem that to become a scientist or to become a philosopher will make you, necessarily, a good human being. Now a spiritual teacher, if you say, “Oh he's a great spiritual teacher, but wow, besides that, he's so grumpy,” it doesn't work. (laughs) It can't. This is not what you're looking for, saying he's an authentic spiritual teacher. So there has to be a perfect adequation, and also, it has to be not a façade. There are so many, unfortunately, of those who look very impressive, and then if you scratch a little bit the surface, or if you wait long enough, you will see that there are sides of them that don't fit with what they are supposed to be. So the messenger has to be the message, and it has to be integrally the message.

No grumpy spiritual masters! Don't you love that? And it certainly fits with my own experience. I have found that the most highly spiritually evolved people who I have ever known have enormous senses of humor. Their faces radiate compassion and joy. Archbishop Tutu, our own Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, the Trappist monk Fr. Thomas Keating, the Dalai Lama. These are some of the public figures whose faces embody this spiritual integrity. And you know other people like that and so do I. No grumpy spiritual masters!

So our faces will reflect our souls. Our faces will reflect God's presence in our lives. That's one of the takeaways from both the story of Moses on Mount Sinai and Jesus on the mount of Transfiguration which we read this morning. Moses' shining face reflects the steadfastness and faithfulness of God's love for Israel even despite Israel's confessed betrayal of the covenant by worshipping the golden calf, which is reported just before this morning's reading. Moses has returned to Sinai to renew the covenant. Israel is offered yet another one in a series of second chances. And Moses face reflects this.

And in our gospel reading this morning we see what is, in some ways a retelling of the story of Moses with God in Sinai. Jesus himself ascends to the mountaintop – and surely the gospel writers expect us to make this association – and his face too is transformed – transfigured – in the Divine Presence. He has this experience of God's love and compassion – “This is my Son, my Chosen one....”

But here's the most important part of this story, and we don't get to read it this morning. Right after Jesus and Peter and John and James come down from the mountain, from their God encounter where Jesus' face reflects the Divine Presence, what happens next? Jesus returns to

the mess and chaos of the real world where he meets a desperate father who has an epileptic son. Jesus heals the boy and, we are told, all were astounded at the greatness of God.

So I hope this is all pretty straightforward. God's light, the brightness of God as the old hymn puts it, shines through the faces of leaders and of ordinary folks like you and me as we make God's transforming presence known in the community. We do this through our compassionate presence in the lives of people who are hurting in mind, body, or spirit. We make God's presence shine through our action in compassionate witnessing among the poor, the hungry, the friendless, the marginalized, the ones who have no place to lay their heads at night. Will our light shine with them and for them?

Let me ask you a question. What kind of face do you present to the world? If your face is a window into your soul, what will we see when we have a look? That can be a pretty sobering question. Back to Matthew Ricard's observation that just because a person might be a great scientist or philosopher, doesn't necessarily mean that person will also be a great human being. Ah, but for a spiritual teacher – and we might expand that to say anyone who aspires to be a person of the Spirit – we can't say, oh, she's a great spiritual teacher, but a grumpy person. It doesn't work, Ricard reminds us. There has to be integration and integrity between who we say we are spiritually and how we present to the world. Ricard's life was transformed by the holy faces he encountered in India. These faces spoke to an integrity, a compassion for the other and for the self, an honesty of spirit, that this child of privilege and intellect hungered for. Might your face serve a similar purpose? Might mine?

I don't know about me personally. Remember I don't play poker anymore because you can see inside me too easily. But I'm working on it. I try to keep up with my contemplative practice which I hope brings me into God's presence for at least 20 minutes every day. I try to do my part to stand compassionately with hurting folks. More often than not, I don't succeed in any of it. But the intention is there and I keep on working on it.

How about you? Maybe the next time you have an impulse to turn a grumpy face to the world, stop and ask yourself what your soul, as seen through that window in your face, looks like. Try practicing being in the nearer presence of God through prayer and acts of love and service. Your face can shine just like the faces of Moses and Jesus. You know, it's just like Jesus said:

Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in Heaven. Amen.