

Luring Us to Creative Good:
Human Freedom and the Divine Embrace
(A SERMON ABOUT PROCESS THEOLOGY)
November 27, 2015 ~ Rev. Roger Jones
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Music

Hymns: #331, Life Is the Greatest Gift of All; #1029, Love Knocks and Waits for Us to Hear; #298, Wake Now, My Senses. Guitar/vocal solo: “Sea Song,” by Lisa Hannigan (offered by Sunny Baily) Piano solo: “Linus and Lucy,” by Vince Guaraldi (offered by Ina Jun at the 50th anniversary on TV, in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*).

Sermon

Is God in charge of the world? Is God in control? If that’s the case, if some kind of God makes it all happen, how can it be true that *God is love*, as it says in a famous phrase of the Bible? Look at all the destruction and suffering in the world. Consider the harm we cause to other people, to the natural environment, to ourselves. How can God know about all of that, be in charge of it and responsible for it, and still be considered good, by any measure?

This conundrum has troubled western theology and philosophy for centuries. This troubling question has led some people to give up on God, to argue against theism, to abandon any idea that there could be a transcendent and abiding source of goodness and love. But far more thinkers and believers over the centuries have stubbornly held on. They have gone to great pains to defend and explain these old ideas of an old God. Book after book of sermons and philosophical arguments explain how it can be that God is omnipotent (or all powerful), omniscient (or all knowing), AND benevolent (all good).

I am happy to say that still others have articulated another way, a way in-between these two opposite perspectives. These third-way thinkers have said that God is present, but open. It’s a relational and receptive God, with much less power than the old arguments would give to the old God.

This divine is not a bearded old man on a distant cloud with a control board and a blueprint for the future, but is right here where the action is, where creation is ongoing. The divine is everywhere, watching the continued creation of our lives. This divine is curious and expectant. This divine can be surprised by the changes in life on our earth. This divine beholds the unending emergence of the universe, beholds it with surprise.

As creation unfolds, everything that happens will enrich the divine life. The divine embrace grows and widens. This approach, this way of thinking, is known as Process Thought or Process Philosophy or Process Theology. Now nearly a century old, Process Thought has sparked and shaped the writing of many progressive theologians and the

preaching of liberal ministers of many denominations, but especially Unitarian Universalists.

Process thought is not supernatural. It is naturalistic: nature-based, nature-friendly, nature-dependent. Catherine Keller is a professor of theology at Drew University. She notes that the universe is not a static entity, but always in process. And the source of all of this--the source of life and matter and creativity--cannot be static either. The divine life is as open to change as the universe is, as open as we are.

One leader of Process Thought was the late Charles Hartshorne, a theologian and professor and a Unitarian Universalist. He said it has been a terrible mistake for too many centuries to imagine God as the supernatural engineer, or worse, as a callous dictator. It has been wrong, he said, to picture God as a static being, remote father, an absolute ruler. No, Hartshorne said, the divine is part of nature, not separate from it. Just as the universe is open ended, so is the divine personality.

This God has a stake in seeing how creation progresses, but it has no power over the outcome. It can, however, try to lure us toward creative good instead of harm. It coaxes the natural world in the direction of greater diversity and beauty. It can lure, but cannot force.

If Hartshorne was wrong about this--if God really had as much power as the old theology said, and God even had the power to smite this Professor for such a heresy--it's curious that Hartshorne lived to the age of 103.

So, what is *this* divine? As I understand it, the Divine is the source of all creative possibilities; it holds all the building blocks, all of the combinations of matter and energy that the natural world could use or might use; God is the reservoir of creative possibilities.

From these possibilities, new creations occur moment by moment in our lives and in our world. And moment by moment, those creations return to the reservoir of creativity.

I like to think about a work of piano music, and hearing that music played. First there is only silence, only potential. On the piano there are 52 white keys and 36 black ones. For any given work, a composer combines them, creating one pattern of notes from among all the potential patterns of notes. With imagination comes a new creation--a unique arrangement of their own rhythm and pacing.

Then, into the silence, that musical pattern is brought to life by a pianist's hands, and mind, and heart. The keys move, piano strings vibrate, sound happens. Moment by moment, the creation comes alive. Moment by moment, expectantly, the audience members listen, each one receiving the music in a different way. In each moment, the notes arise, make themselves known to us, and then pass away. The music is not static. It is created and heard and felt--and it passes away. It has life in a moment and then it goes. Where does it go? Hasn't it gone into us? Haven't we been changed by the experience?

In process thought, such an event lives not only in us, but also in the wide embrace of the love of the universe. Furthermore, every experience of everyone present for that event is received by the always-growing life of the universe. As every note passes away, as any audience member sighs with pleasure, those moments become part of that occasion's legacy for all time.

The divine can be understood as the source of all of that went into that musical event. It is the source of the ideas of the combination of notes, and the movement of the hands over the keys of the piano. The divine source also includes the earlier experiences of the composer's development and inspiration, and makes them available for the future.

The divine source holds the pianist's persistence and courage over the years in learning, rehearsing, and playing. It holds the guidance given by the teachers of that pianist. None of that richness of past experience is ever lost.

The divine source hasn't willed this musical event into being, it only suggests it, invites it. The divine source offers the potential ingredients. The rest happens in creative freedom.

For a moment of beauty like an experience of music, some folks would say, "I give thanks to God." This might be a metaphor. It could be a shorthand way of expressing wonder and praise for every element, every ingredient, every contribution that lies behind that experience of beauty.

But the divine life is not only the creative source, it is the receiver of all that is created. It takes in whatever emerges, whatever evolves, whatever we do, and it grows. The divine is the destination for all that is provided, all that unfolds. The divine is the keeper of the legacy of creation, of beauty, of diversity.

It's open to everything which evolution might bring forth, all that might be combined of atoms and molecules. It is open to anything that a poet, musician, painter, or cook might bring forth into the world. Any *kind word* or patient silence that a friend might offer. Whatever we make or give, the divine receives it. The embrace widens, and all it holds will become part of the source for the future unfolding. It all matters.

A pianist's recital may conclude, a composer's work may fall out of favor, but the experience, once passed away, lives forever in a growing legacy of creativity. A letter may be read and thrown away, a meal may be prepared and consumed, a loved one may die, but they are not lost. The fact of their having existed never leaves that everlasting, divine embrace.

What this means... why this is important... the reason I wanted to try to talk about Process Thought this morning: is that everything matters. Every choice we make, word we speak, gesture, contribution, gift, or moment of beauty in which we participate—they all enlarge the divine life. None of it is lost. All of it, all we do, can raise the odds for more beauty and creativity and love. Every bit of patience, persistence or courage we muster, all moments of gratitude and joy that we generate, can increase the odds for more creative good on down the road, and for all time.

Alfred North Whitehead said: "The image ... of this growth of God's nature... is an image of tender care that nothing be lost." *Tender care, that nothing be lost.*

Alfred North Whitehead was the founder of Process Thought. Born in Britain in 1861, he was the son of an Anglican clergyman. At Cambridge University he studied the classical authors and languages, including the Bible, in Greek. He studied philosophy, the sciences and mathematics. Then Whitehead became a professor of mathematics and logic, producing important books on the subject. He and his wife, Evelyn, had a daughter and two sons, one of whom was shot down in the First World War. After 40 years of teaching,

when he could have retired, Whitehead was lured to America to the philosophy department at Harvard University.

He thought of divinity not as a remote creator, but as the creative principle in the universe. Whitehead said:

God is in the world, ... creating continually in us and around us. This creative principle is everywhere, in animate [beings] and so-called inanimate matter--in the ether, water, earth, [and] human hearts.

Human beings have the freedom to participate in shaping the future. To be sure, the record we have achieved so far has been... a mixed one. When love knocks and we hear and respond, we might use our freedom creatively. Yet when we don't hear love, when we don't feel the lure to creative good, we may turn away from the needs of the world. When we ignore the call to love, we can reject mercy and compassion. When we twist the idea of the divine call to our own ends, we can be cruel. We can deny the humanity of others, and destroy them. Human beings have abused our freedom.

So many times, too many times, the divine embrace has had to take in tragedy. The divine has had to make account of the damage of war, greed, selfishness, resentment, ignorance, and cruelty.

Such ugliness tarnishes the divine life, but love still invites a better future, and waits for it. The divine life holds the legacy of creative goodness, continuing to show a tender care that nothing be lost.

The divine life knows that destruction is possible, but offers us a lure to do otherwise. You may prefer seeing this lure as the call of our conscience, the legacy of our upbringing, or the outgrowth of our sense of wellbeing. This lure may show up as the spark of a community's courage. It might emerge as the yearning for a better way. When the results are good—creative, inspiring, generous, beautiful—the source of love delights in those results. Love delights in luring us toward the good.

Many of you may question the use of the term *God*. Is it necessary? After all, the old promoters of the remote God would say this new idea isn't what the divine is like, so why should we? Can't we call it something other than *God*?

Well maybe it's not essential, but I'd rather not leave God (or theology) to those who have used God to justify the status quo, who have used theology to say that life can't be better and that God's okay with cruelty.

In any case, I think most religious language is metaphorical. Religious words and images hint at a larger picture. They invite us to a deeper feeling. A word can be a cudgel or it can be a hint or an invitation. That's what a metaphor is, an invitation.

You may resonate more with a metaphor like that used by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., when he said: "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny." That resonates with Process Theology.

The main point of process thought is not really making a case for using *God* as a term, but in showing the enduring promise of creativity. The point is to see and recognize that life itself is open ended. As Catherine Keller has written: “The future is open—alarmingly or promisingly.”

So, you may not feel a need to conceive of a *divine source* to this open-ended universe in which we find ourselves. You may not need to imagine an embracing, loving receiver and keeper of the legacy of all that we do, of all that nature creates. But it keeps *me* going. When I speak of divinity, I do so out of a longing to be connected and to move forward in life.

It helps me to think of myself as being *lured* in the direction of creativity and courage and hope instead of resignation or despair. It helps me to pause and to listen for the voice of love.

If I take the time to open my mind and heart, I can imagine the mysterious presence of love, the lure of love. It not only reassures me, it also nudges me toward letting go of control and living in hope. It reminds me of the value of showing up, doing what I can and sometimes doing more than I thought.

When my strength is faltering, when I’m not feeling so good about myself or my world, when I’m being stingy with my goodwill, it can reassure me to speak as if I belong to a *greater source* of goodness, generosity, courage and love.

Furthermore, if I ground myself in that Greater Source, I feel responsible to it. I want to live in creative partnership with life. Alfred North Whitehead said that this is our true destiny. It is to see ourselves as co-creators of the world, as being important to life and the future. He said that from our human freedom and the generous use of our gifts come our dignity and our grandeur.

Let us rest in the embrace of life and feel ourselves beheld with an attitude of tender care. When beauty surrounds us, or beauty surprises us, may we give thanks.

The times are often tough and life can be hard. Even so, let us be stirred by the lure of love. May we find the courage and the hope to go forward with arms open wide, embracing all that is, as full partners in the divine adventure of life. So may it be.