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Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

# A Theology of Joy: God in the Process

a service presented by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene and Bernard Zaleha  
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## Readings

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### **A Story** -- Elizabeth

When I was a girl, I spent my elementary school years in a rural community in the foothills of California's Sierra Nevada Mountains, about 50 miles north of Sacramento. My Quaker mother felt that religious education was important for us children, but there were no Quaker meetings in Butte County at that time, and it was a long haul into town, in the '41 Plymouth, with four young kids, to go to the Methodists. She was very happy when Mervin and Dorothy, a young couple from the neighboring town of Richvale came over and started a Sunday School in our community hall. We kids were pretty happy, too- my recollections were that mostly, we learned the books of the Bible, sang a lot of neat songs, and learned Bible verses and stories. I don't

recall that we talked much about the nature of God or Jesus, although I liked Jesus quite a bit.

Then came: Vacation Bible School! In Richvale. Mervin and Dorothy pretty much disappeared, to be replaced by joyless, nigh-fanatical grownups. We were taught that God the father-a definitely male being-was in a realm apart from humanity, whom he had created. He was the divine lawgiver and judge-I never quite got how it was that we managed to slip by Him and sin, since he clearly knew and controlled everything, but that's how it was.

And, most importantly, the only way to avoid eternal hellfire was the one true way God had determined, which was to accept His Risen Son as your Savior. The final straw for me was the flannel board lesson, in which a six-year old child is denied entrance to heaven by St. Peter, because she had not affirmed this one true path. And here I was, already four or five years older than she was!

The other kids from my community didn't seem to be so affected, but I was truly terrified, so I marched up to the most rational of the adults there and announced that I was ready-she turned me over to the woman who wept every day as she taught us (to my acute embarrassment). I was not lifted up by the experience; I was traumatized. I felt the immensity of Divinity and sensed the power of the forces we were dealing with, but also felt something was very wrong. I was scared and uncomfortable, operating out of fear, feeling no heart or soul tie with the threatening, "out-there" God with which I was confronted. I had nightmares for weeks afterward.

### **Another Story -- Bernie**

My indoctrination into Christian fundamentalism was, I believe, even more thorough and exhaustive than that just described by Elizabeth. I spent my school years all the way through my first quarter in college in sectarian schools run by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The God I

learned about was very much like the one Elizabeth learned about in Vacation Bible school. The end of the world was just around the corner and sinners had a terrible judgment awaiting them. Ultimately, when I discovered Thoreau, Emerson, and the thrills of nature, my intellectual assent to Adventist theology vaporized almost immediately, and eventually I was, by my early twenties, able to struggle my way clear of the emotional burden as well. I became non-Christian, and jumped all the way over mainstream Christianity, and become a UU. Based on my understanding of Christianity and what I understood to be its interpretation of the life and death of Jesus, I could see little there that was of use.

My view began to change when I encountered a passage by Brother David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine monk, describing his understanding of what the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of Jesus was all about. Brother David stated as follows:

"The life of Jesus is so important... Looking at Jesus, we see how one lives when one has [a] mystic intimacy with God... If one lives this way in the kind of world we have created, one will be squelched or in one way or the other crucified. Now the question arises, Is that the end? The teaching of the resurrection is the affirmation that it's not the end. This kind of aliveness cannot be extinguished. He died, he really died, and behold, he lives!

Where does he live? Let's not make the mistake of saying he is here or there. ... Christ's life is hidden in God. God's presence in this world is hidden, and yet it is the most tangible thing for anybody who lives with full awareness... Jesus died, and yet he is alive ... in us. There is no way of pointing a finger and saying, "Look!... He came out from the tomb." Resurrection is not revivification; it is not survival; it is not a matter of saying, "There he is!" It's a hidden reality, but ... we can live in the strength of its power. And that is all we need to know about the resurrection.<sup>1</sup>

This passage by Brother David hit me like a thunderbolt. I realized he was being a little cagey, perhaps fearing the wrath of the Pope. But it was obvious to me that he was saying the historical religious teacher known as Jesus of Nazareth didn't literally die and then come back to literal, eating and breathing life. Jesus is resurrected when we, who living after Jesus, actually choose to incorporate his teachings of love and peace into the way we live our lives. To the extent we do this, Jesus lives eternally. This opened a whole new way of thinking about Christianity for me, a way that is quite consistent with the thinking of process theology, which Elizabeth will explain further.

## **Process Theology: God and Reality -- Elizabeth**

Process theology turns upside down all the notions Bernie and I learned about God and reality, in our early fundamentalist experiences. We will use the term "God" this morning, because that is what process theologians use, meaning an overarching reality beyond any group's conception of that reality. Feel free to translate (Spirit of Life, Great Mystery, Independent Reality, Divine Unknown....)

In process theology the nature of God is creative-responsive love. God's nature involves urging all existence toward creative transformation.

God created the universe out of chaos. The nature of created reality is process, a long, long series of events-occasions-all of which are interdependent upon each other. It is not a bunch of material realities developed by the Creator: it is a series of "concrescences," of "comings-into-existence," of which everything in the universe partakes. Rev. Rebecca Parker, president of Starr King School For the Ministry gives this poetic description of process theology's God-related reality:

You can picture it like Indra's net, an image from Hinduism. Indra's net is an interconnected web of countless strands, and at every intersection

there is a jewel drop of water, and that jewel drop reflects the whole....

If you can picture this bejeweled net-like an intricate spider web covered with dew-just do one more thing in your mind's eye. Picture this web lasting only for an instant; then it blips out of existence and in the next instant it reappears only it isn't exactly the same as the previous moment. It is slightly different. In each moment the whole is configured in a different way, and over time-over a series of blips-the net appears to be in motion-shimmering or undulating, and these shimmers are people running, tides moving, comets soaring, grass growing, suns burning rocks eroding. And in the people running there are emotions flowing, thoughts forming and passing, things remembered, things forgotten, and all of it is the cosmos, in an ever-changing, pulsation of becoming and ceasing, becoming and ceasing, becoming and ceasing...(3)

God's role, now that God has gotten things rolling, is radically different from the omniscience, omnipotence and judgment with which many of us are familiar-in process theology, God is always interacting with creation. God's nature is relatedness with creation; God's nature is creative and responsive love. The Creator endowed each thing in the universe with the Creator's "initial aim," which is, in process theologian John Cobb's words "to actualize the best possibilities open to it, given its concrete situation." (51)

If we and other created beings do our very best to be in harmony with God, we will be most likely to be making a moral, just, beautiful universe. But, of course, we may live in such a way that we ignore our God-relatedness and do otherwise. Process theologians make it clear that we have the power of self-determination, and may choose to be one with the initial aim-or not. In our ongoing responsiveness to God and to others, we may choose either good or evil.

God responds to the created world-to our choices-in sympathy and compassion, for God is interdependent with the created world. And so,

we affect the Divine Creative Force, just as it affects us in infusing us with its creative initial aim.

God is here and God is now, calling us to the highest. We are inescapably related to the Divine, and our choices affect it. Our lives profoundly affect other living and non-living beings. In this complex web of interdependent processes, we have the options of choosing death or choosing life.

### **Process Theology: What It Means For Us -- Bernie**

What are the ramifications of process theology? In my view, several aspects of process theology are most intriguing. First is its affirmation that the cosmos we experience through our senses is real. While it does not deny, and indeed affirms, an unseen reality beyond that provided by our senses, the universe we experience through our senses is also real, not the illusion that at least some oriental philosophy seems to suggest. Teilhard de Chardin's "Hymn to Matter"<sup>2</sup> that we read together, and Veronica's poem, call us to joyously embrace the material aspect of reality. Process theology affirms this call.

Second, process theology answers the question, If God is all good and all loving, why is there evil. This question has bedeviled most human efforts at understanding the nature of God. With near uniformity, those who through whatever means--mystical, intuitive, or otherwise--believe they have encountered a divine reality, perceive that reality as good, loving, benevolent. If this is so, Why is there evil? Process theology posits that previous efforts to solve this riddle have run aground on the insistence that God is both all love, and all powerful. One critic has noted that if "God is all powerful, he is not all love. And if God is all love, he is not powerful." All previous Christian theology has illogically insisted that both propositions are true. However, if God is all powerful, then at a minimum, God is responsible for existing evil, because God is allowing evil she could prevent. In a radical departure from previous Christian thinking, process theology chooses instead to

affirm that part of the biblical tradition which suggests that God does not have all controlling power.

God does not allow or affirm evil. Indeed, God is constantly calling us to "Choose life, not death." However, the potential for evil is in the very structure of things. God is co-creator with the rest of creation, including us humans. Because of our unique capacity for self determination, moral evil can enter, and has entered, the world through our choices. And process theology posits that God is literally without the power to prevent this outcome. God cannot compel her human cocreators to not choose evil.

Let's explore this a bit further. In the view of Process Theology, evil exists, at least on this planet, because with the arrival of humans also arrived a true capacity for self determination. And the capacity for self determination brings with it an increased capacity to knowingly form ourselves in ways that promote either good or evil. We bring moral evil into the world when we "form ourselves in such a way as to make ourselves objectively destructive elements in the environment of"3 other humans, and the earth as a whole. In other words, when we do this deliberately, understanding the consequences of our actions, we give birth to moral evil. In Cobb's words, "increasing the freedom of the creatures was a risky business on God's part. But it was a necessary risk, if there was to be a chance for greatness."4

Process theology does not totally absolve God of responsibility for moral evil. God did choose to allow a cosmic structure that would eventually allow for the arrival on the scene of true self determination, with all risks that entailed, including the risk of evil. God choose this because God wanted a cosmos with a capacity for intense enjoyment, and was willing to run the unavoidable risk of intense suffering. However, having made that choice, God is now literally without the power to force you, me, and all our fellow humans to act morally.

The staggering consequence of process theology is we cannot avoid moral responsibility for the consequences of our actions. Satan does not

make us do evil, and God cannot prevent us from doing evil. We bear sole responsibility. Further, the consequences of our actions are eternal. While process theology remains completely neutral on the question of whether our personalities survive death, it affirms that in very real sense, we are unavoidably eternal, because our choices will have eternal consequences. Process theology affirms Shakespeare's Antony: "The evil that men do lives after them."<sup>5</sup> In like manner, so too does the good we choose to do live eternally. In an image from my Christian youth, God is in that "still small voice" that is always calling us to choose the good. God is indeed good.

I will conclude with a quote by John Cobb, explaining his view of the call on lives of process thought:

For process theology the future is truly open, and that means that there is no assurance that human beings will avoid all those means now becoming available to them to destroy themselves. The danger is real, and an attitude of confidence that God will prevent the worst horrors is irresponsible. The God who "permitted" Auschwitz will permit anything the creatures choose to do. God is not another agent alongside the creatures. God acts only in them and through them.

But the fact that the future is truly open also means that selfdestruction is not inevitable... That which has never been may yet be. What has been until now does not exhaust the realm of possibilities... God offers to us opportunities to break out of our ruts, to see all things differently, to imagine what has never yet been dreamed. God works to open others to respond to the new visions and to implement them. Insofar as we allow God to do so, God makes all things new...

This means that we should trust ... that God's call is wise and good... It is the renewed willingness to give up the security we experience in accustomed ideas and customs and to enter into the adventure of the trusting life, even when we cannot foresee a favorable outcome. Trust is thus true responsibility, the ability to respond to the concrete situation

and God's quite specific call within it.

God offers possibilities that would lead us into the new life we need. God lures, urges, and persuades. We decide. If we decide to enter into the reality into which God calls us, we choose life. If we decide to refuse it, we choose death, a continual dying throughout life and a contribution to the planetary death... The choice of life, which is the choice of God's call, is the highest freedom... The refusal of life expresses bondage to the past and to the self and it progressively reduces our capacity for freedom and life. Hope grows with the ability to respond; despair grows with the selfchosen closing in of horizons.

To be responsible in this context is not finally to shoulder an unendurable burden. It is to share in the divine adventure in the world. Although its outcome is never assured, and although it entails the sacrifice of many past forms of enjoyment, in itself it is joyful. The one who experiences the joy of this participation in the divine life hopes urgently for success, but accepts the risk that the only reward may be in the joy itself.<sup>6</sup>

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### **Sources Consulted:**

1. Capra, Fritjof, & David Steindl-Rast, *Belonging to the Universe*, (1991), p. 65. Brother David is even more explicit in a later work, *The Ground We Share: Everyday Practice, Buddhist and Christian* (1996), co-authored with Roshi Robert Aitken. There, at page 16, Brother David states:

The relationship between the historic Christ and what I call the cosmic Christ is very subtle. You could say that the historic Jesus was totally alive with the cosmic Christ reality but did not exhaust that reality. Each one of us, when we find our fulfillment, is totally filled with the Christ reality, but none of us exhausts the Christ reality because that is the spirit or the life of the totality... "Christ" isn't the name of a person. It's a title like "Buddha." So to say "Christ reality" is a perfect parallel

to saying "Buddha nature."

2. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "Hymn to Matter", reprinted as Responsive Reading No. 549 in *Singing the Living Tradition* (Beacon Press, 1993), from *Hymn of the Universe*, (1961), English translation, 1965.

3. Cobb, John B., & David Griffin, *Process Theology: an Introductory Exposition*, (1976), pp. 157-78

4. Id.

5. *Julius Ceasar*, Act III, Scene 2.

6. Cobb, John B., & David Griffin, *Process Theology: an Introductory Exposition*, (1976), pp. 73-74

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