

**God Whispers, "You Could Be *This*":  
An Introduction to Process Theology  
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Process theology (or *process-relational* theology as it is called by some of its proponents today) is an approach to thinking about the major claims of the Christian faith using a philosophy developed by Alfred North Whitehead in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. While much of traditional theology focuses on God's omnipotence, transcendence, eternity, and unchangingness, process theology explores ways of talking about God's call, persuasion, responsiveness, and love. Process theology envisions a universe made out of relationships and growing in creative transformation, where God is intimately involved with every creature and every creature is everlastingly cherished by God. In this course we will examine the basic features of the process-relational worldview, and see how it gives us resources to understand the central beliefs of Christian faith.

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# God Whispers, "You Could Be *This*": An Introduction to Process Theology

## Session I: Why a *Process* Theology?

### I. Intro

- A. Bible reading: (Exodus 34:5-9) The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with Moses there, and proclaimed the name, "The LORD." The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth, and worshiped. He said, "If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, I pray, let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance."
- B. A personal note: How I got interested in process theology.
1. I was first introduced to process theology in 1978, when I was a senior in college, and I took a seminar in the philosophy department called, appropriately enough, "Process Philosophy and Theology."
    - a) I was a drama and English major at the time, mind you, so taking an upper level seminar in philosophy was a cocky kind of thing to do!
    - b) And the professor for this class had taught my dad—and Harrison Ford—so it was a high-stakes seminar.
  2. I liked a lot of what I was reading in this class, especially about God and creation; but I remember especially in one of the readings from A. N. Whitehead, when I suddenly came to a new understanding of *redemption*:
    - a) Whitehead says that God is "the poet of the world" (and as an English major that caught my attention), who exercises "a tender care that nothing is lost" and who can take "what in the temporal world is mere wreckage" and still bring out of it whatever potential for good it might have.
    - b) I saw in this a way of understanding redemption, not simply as a juridical thing, not simply God deciding to treat us as good even though we are sinners, but God actually working in us to *change* our sin into the potential for good.
      - (1) That also brought a new way of understanding Jesus' redemptive work on the cross: even out of the horror of Jesus' death, God brought the potential for new, resurrection life.

3. That new understanding struck a very deep chord with me—and from that point on I have used a lot of process ideas in my own personal spirituality and in my formal theological study and work.

## II. Theology and philosophy

- A. Some religions (or religious systems) begin with philosophy and move toward a way of life; eg Buddhism, Confucianism, classical Stoicism.
- B. Christianity is a religion that begins with a story about Jesus, and a way of life that grows out of that story—and *then* tries to move toward a philosophy that grounds the way of life in a total picture of the world.
- C. Christian theology—sustained intellectual reflection on the story of Jesus and the way of life that flows from communion with him—has in fact taken up many different philosophies to use as the conceptual framework within which the story of Jesus can be told and the Christian way of life understood.
  1. St Paul used concepts out of Stoicism to try to explain the gospel to Hellenistic, pagan audiences; as, for instance, in Acts 15, when Paul quotes (probably) the Stoic philosopher Epimenides that “in God we live and move and have our being.”
  2. Origen, and patristic theology in general, was heavily influenced by Middle Platonism and Neoplatonism.
    - a) Eg, the platonic idea that the sense-world is a shadow or projection of the “real” world of the Ideas is wrapped up in a lot of early Christian thinking about the invisible and eternal reality of God and the visible and changing realm of human experience.
    - b) Think of Augustine’s contrast between the City of God and the City of Man.
  3. Thomas Aquinas in the middle ages used the philosophy of Aristotle as the framework for his huge synthesis of theology.
    - a) His argument for the existence of God as the Prime Mover, for instance, is straight out of Aristotle.
    - b) The medieval account of transubstantiation in the Eucharist, with its distinction between substance and accidents, is Aristotelian.
  4. William Paley and the natural theology of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was heavily influenced by philosophical rationalism and Newtonian science.
  5. A great deal of theological writing in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century was heavily influenced by continental existentialism—so much so that some even spoke openly about *Christian* existentialism, even though some of the first existentialists were rampant atheists.
- D. Process theology is the effort to interpret and understand the Christian story, Christian beliefs, and Christian life-ways in the framework of a

metaphysical system first worked out by Alfred North Whitehead in the 1920's and 30's.

III. Classical theism and process theism: some key contrasts

- A. We will take a more systematic approach to process interpretations of key doctrines in later classes; for this introduction, I'd like just to sketch out some points of contrast between process theology and what we can call (and what Charles Hartshorne called) "classical theism."
- B. The transcendence of God.
  1. Classical theism says that God is wholly transcendent over the world; God's way above; we're way below.
    - a) Think of the Aristotelian/Ptolemaic/Thomist view of the world as concentric spheres around Earth; the outermost sphere is the Emyperean, and beyond *that*, outside the world altogether, is the throne of God.
    - b) John Milton, in *Paradise Lost*, describes how God shows the newly-created universe to the angels: God leads them to the parapet of Heaven, and they all look down into the abyss, and there, at the end of a long chain hanging from the floor of Heaven, dangles the created world.
    - c) Karl Barth, the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century champion of neo-orthodoxy, spoke of "the infinite qualitative difference" between Creator and creature, dropping the spatial metaphor, but retaining the sense of complete transcendence of God over the world.
    - d) The problem is that if God is utterly transcendent over and different from the world, then how can God and the world interact?
      - (1) This problem reached its peak in Deism, which pictured the world as a self-sufficient clockwork, and God as the transcendent clockmaker, *who was no longer necessary* to the functioning of the clock once the clock was started.
  2. Process theism, on the other hand, says that God is transcendent over the world, yes, but God is also immanent in the world.
    - a) Charles Hartshorne identified a dualism in much theology, by which one identifies a pair of qualities, elevates one and denigrates the other, and then applies the elevated one to God.
      - (1) Thus if God is transcendent, then God must not be immanent at all.
    - b) But, logically, there is no reason not to say that *both* qualities may be predicated of God in different aspects.
    - c) So, if God is to be thought of as the supreme case of all qualities (the source of all perfections, as even classical theism would say), then *logically* God must be supremely transcendent *and* supremely immanent; God is higher

than the world in one aspect, yet in another aspect thoroughly involved in the world.

- d) Hartshorne called this view *panentheism*: all is in God, but God is more than just the sum of the parts.

C. The impassibility of God.

1. Classical theism says that God has no passions, God is not affected by the world, God has no feelings in the sense that human beings have feelings.
  - a) This is related to a Greek idea of perfection: if God is perfect, then God must not change, since any change from perfection would be something less than perfection, ie, a change for the worse, and God does not change for the worse. So:
    - (1) God doesn't change.
    - (2) But to have feelings is to be changed, to be affected by someone or something else is to be changed by that someone or something else.
    - (3) Therefore God must not have feelings.
  - b) Put another way, this rests on the idea of being active or passive.
    - (1) God is *actus purus*, completely active, not passive in any way or in relation to any thing.
    - (2) But to have feelings is to be passive with respect to the thing that you are feeling, it is to be subjected in some way to the thing that you are feeling; the word "passion" is from the same root as the word "passive."
    - (3) Therefore God must not have passions or feelings.
  - c) The problem, of course, is that the Bible talks about God as a God of love, and the Bible speaks often about God's feelings.
    - (1) This forces classical theists to do some verbal gymnastics around words like "love," "compassion," "mercy," "wrath," "indignation" and other such feeling-words in the Bible.
    - (2) Anselm of Canterbury, in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, handled this in a typical way: he said that God acted toward us in ways that looked *to us* like compassion and mercy, even though God *in Godself* had no feelings or passions such as we would have if we were to act in such ways.
    - (3) But this means that words like "love" mean one thing when applied to us, and something totally different when applied to God—so why even use the same word? This approach drains all the real meaning out of the words we use for God.
2. Process theism says that God is not only transcendent but also immanent in the world; God is not only supremely active, but

supremely passive (or receptive) as well; therefore, God also supremely *feels* the world.

- a) Process thought does not have the same idea of perfection as Greek thought: perfection is not remaining unchanging, but is being able to integrate, to hold together, all changes in a recognizable continuity.
  - (1) Greek thought on perfection was driven in part by a fear of decay, change that takes away from what a thing is.
  - (2) But process thought sees also change that is growth, change that adds to what a thing is.
  - (3) The ideal in process thought is change-with-continuity, so that each moment adds something new, but that something new never overwhelms what's already there, but is a continuous self-recognizable growth.
- b) Therefore God is supremely *changeeful*, in that God is able to take all the changes that happen in the world and integrate them in a way so that God remains God.
- c) That means that God has real feelings—love, compassion, maybe even righteous indignation—but those feelings never *overwhelm* God or cause God to act in an un-Godly manner, as such feelings sometimes do in us.
  - (1) What is unchanging in God is God's character, God's purposes, God's disposition to be loving; what is changing in God is God's response to us and God's immediate vision of what would be good for us *next*.

- 3. We can put God's immanence and God's passibility together to make a further point: God not only feels God's feelings, but God feels the entire universe's feelings. Everything that happens in the world is felt by God, and felt in the most intimate way.

D. The power of God.

- 1. Classical theism says that God is omnipotent, able to do anything that is possible to do.
  - a) God's power is imposed directly on the world, from above or from without—although classical theism skirts around the problem of *how* God's power can be imposed if God is completely other from the world...
  - b) An unavoidable corollary, however, is the problem of theodicy: if God is all-powerful, then why doesn't God act powerfully to stop evil?
    - (1) Classical theism's typical answer to this is that the evil we see around us *isn't really evil*:
      - (a) It's part of God's plan, that will eventually lead to good, so it really is good.
      - (b) It's just punishment for sin, so it really is good.

- (c) It's an unavoidable side-effect of the freedom God has given us, and freedom is a greater good, so it really is good.
  - (2) But this gets us into the same kind of conundrum we saw with words like "love" or "compassion": if "evil" means one thing when applied to our behavior, and another thing altogether when applied to God's behavior, then either it undercuts all our moral sensibility, or it makes God a monster.
- 2. Process theism contends that God's power is persuasive rather than coercive.
  - a) God's power is not to impose things on the universe, or to force creatures to act in a certain way.
  - b) God's power is to call the universe into being, to summon creatures to act in certain ways, to lure or draw people to act to fulfill God's will and purposes.
  - c) Marjorie Suchocki: "God works with the world as it is, to call the world to become what it can be."
  - d) This means that creatures must cooperate with God for God's will to be done (at least in the short term); and this means that creatures put real limits on what God can do in the world; and this means that God is not omnipotent in the usual sense of the term.
    - (1) This is a point of criticism from more classical theism.
  - e) But this is also more in line with the biblical witness to God's way of exercising power in the world.
    - (1) God calls people to ministry, God doesn't force them.
      - (a) God called Jonah to Nineveh, and Jonah ran in the other direction as fast as he could.
      - (b) God called Abram and Sarai to leave everything behind and go wherever God would lead them—they didn't just wake up one morning and find themselves in Canaan.
      - (c) God called Mary to bear Jesus—and Mary *could* have said No.
      - (d) In the Bible, God is constantly committing divine purposes to human agency—and God is taking the risk that the human agents won't see it through.
    - (2) Even in "nature" miracles, God is often depicted as working *through* natural agencies, working with the world as it is to call it to what it can be.
      - (a) In the Exodus, God parted the Red Sea with a strong east wind that blew all night.

- (b) God brought down the walls of Jericho, not just by divine fiat, but through the sound of the shofars being blown and the tremors of marching feet.
    - (c) God liberates the Jews from exile in Babylon through the military ambition of Cyrus of Persia.
  - f) God's power is a power of calling, wooing, luring, persuading creatures toward the enactment of divine ideals, not a power to impose divine will on hapless creatures.
- E. Those are just a few of the overt differences between a classical-theism picture of God and a process-theology picture of God. We'll look at more of the underpinnings of this process picture, and how a process approach deals with other doctrines, in future sessions.

#### IV. How this class will work

- A. First this introductory session.
- B. Next we'll take a look at the basics of process philosophy, the metaphysical framework of this theological approach.
- C. The rest of our sessions will look at particular Christian beliefs and issues for the Christian community in the light of process thinking.
  - 1. Eg, if we look at the universe as a system of interrelated processes, what does that allow us to say about how God interacts with the world?
  - 2. Eg, if we look at human being and personality as a system of interrelated processes, what does that allow us to say about how Jesus is fully human and fully divine?
  - 3. And so on.
- D. I won't ask you to read textbooks, or slog through Whitehead's writing for these sessions; but I will recommend some resources if you'd like to dig deeper on your own.

#### V. Some resources

- A. Mesle, C. Robert. *Process Theology: A Basic Introduction*. St Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1993.
- B. Cobb, John B., Jr. and David Ray Griffin. *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976.
- C. Cobb, John B., Jr. *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975.
- D. Suchocki, Marjorie Hewitt. *God-Christ-Church*. New York: Crossroad, 1982.
- E. *Creative Transformation* issues.
- F. Process and Faith website: [www.processandfaith.org](http://www.processandfaith.org)

#### VI. Questions, comments?

- A. Next time we'll do a primer on Process Metaphysics 101.

# God Whispers, "You Could Be *This*": An Introduction to Process Theology

## Session II: A Process-Relational View of the World

### I. Intro

- A. Bible reading: (Psalm 139:12-17) For you yourself created my inmost parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I will thank you because I am marvelously made; your works are wonderful, and I know it well. My body was not hidden from you, while I was being made in secret and woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my limbs, yet unfinished in the womb; all of them were written in your book; they were fashioned day by day, when as yet there was none of them. How deep I find your thoughts, O God! how great is the sum of them! If I were to count them, they would be more in number than the sand; to count them all, my life span would need to be like yours.
- B. Preparatory remarks
  - 1. Last time we took an overview look at some contrasts between classical theism and process theism.
  - 2. Tonight we're going to dig in to the basic ideas of process philosophy, the metaphysical scheme worked out by Alfred North Whitehead.
  - 3. In subsequent sessions we'll put that scheme to use in explicating basic Christian doctrines. So the *faith* part comes later; but I think it's important to have this conceptual base before we begin to look at particular theological teaching.

### II. A word about metaphysics

- A. A word of warning: many people find the metaphysics of process very difficult to grasp at first.
  - 1. Don't get put off by the word *metaphysics* here.
  - 2. It doesn't mean esotericism or la-la-land.
  - 3. In this context, it means the most basic set of notions about how the world works, the set of general working assumptions you make about the world that allow you to make other sorts of statements and observations about particular things in the world.
- B. Thinking about metaphysics requires us to look carefully at things that we take so much for granted that they disappear from view.
  - 1. It's like trying to see your own glasses.
  - 2. Or paying attention to your breathing.
- C. So this session will be an intellectual challenge; but I think it will be very much worth it, even if *at first* it feels confusing.
  - 1. Looking at the world as a system of interrelated processes, rather than a collection of unrelated material things spread out in space, makes a deep inherent sense.
  - 2. Once you get it, it seems to click all over the place.

3. But getting over the hurdle of ingrained mental habits to *get* process thought in the first place can be the trick.
4. I'm not saying this to scare you off, but so that you don't feel overwhelmed when things seem tricky at first.

### III. The basic metaphysical scheme: Process Philosophy 101

- A. The world is made out of events, happenings, moments of feeling, which are internally related to each other in patterns and patterns of patterns.
- B. Actual entities
  1. The basic unit of reality, the *really real* thing, what the universe is made of, is the "moment of experience" or "moment of feeling."
    - a) Contrast modern science, which says the basic unit of reality is the material particle, which is devoid of feelings.
    - b) Contrast Cartesian philosophy, which divides the world into *two* basic realities, matter and mind, objects (which do not feel) and subjects (who do).
    - c) But consider: which picture is more like our real experience?
      - (1) We experience life as a succession of moments of feeling.
      - (2) We speak of atoms, electrons, nucleons, being "attracted" by like electrical charges, or being "pulled" by gravity—and isn't that a language of *feeling*?
  2. Reality is like a strip of movie film: individual frames which, taken together, make movement and change.
  3. How it works:
    - a) Every actual occasion begins with two things:
      - (1) The *second* is an inflowing of data from the past. The environment—ultimately the entire universe—contributes its influence as the raw material for a new experience.
      - (2) The *first* is an initial aim—but I'll talk about that in a moment.
    - b) The occasion assembles all these diverse influences into one single, determinate feeling of the world-as-it-is-from-this-perspective. Think of putting together a mosaic. It is becoming itself as it becomes a unified feeling of the world.
    - c) When the occasion has finished itself—when it has become one single unified feeling of all the diverse influences of the world—then it *stops* (Whitehead says "perishes"). No new feelings are added. It is one single pulse of feeling, one accomplished *fact* in the world.
    - d) The completed occasion then becomes one bit of data, one new influence, pouring itself into the inflowing of raw

material for a new occasion of experience. The process is begun all over again.

e) Think of a strip of movie film in which each new frame in the strip coalesces together out of the influence of all the previous frames.

4. So every actual entity receives the entire past, feels itself as a present moment, and projects itself toward a possible future.

5. The really real things of the world are made out of relationships—or, you could say, *are* relationships. Contrast this with materialism, substantialism.

#### C. God

1. God provides the initial aim that begins every actual occasion on its process of becoming.

a) God knows all the possibilities for everything that could happen in the universe.

b) From this range of possibilities, God selects the *best* possibility that is open to the occasion in its real circumstances.

(1) God then gives the emerging moment a feeling of its own best possibility; God whispers, in effect, "You could become *this*."

(2) Like a seed crystal.

c) God *calls* all occasions into becoming. God does not *force* anything into being or *dictate* what anything becomes.

d) Creatures co-create themselves with God.

2. God also receives all becoming: when an occasion completes itself, assembles all its data into one unified feeling, God also feels that moment *as it feels itself*.

3. God receives each completed occasion into himself, and on the basis of that occasion, together with his eternal knowledge of all possibilities, offers to the next occasions the aim to be the best that is possible under the new circumstances. God is in continual dialogue with the world.

#### D. Societies

1. Actual occasions are microscopic. We never see them individually. The things we see—the real, actual things that endure—are groups of occasions, series of occasions, like the frames in the movie film.

a) The enduring things we see around us are not just static, inert bodies waiting for outside forces to act upon them; they are coordinated streams of influence flowing through successive occasions of actuality.

b) The lectern, the chair, the floor, your body, my mind, are all streams of activity, constantly re-creating themselves out of their own past moments, the influence of the universe, and initial aims given by God.

c) This is a radically different way of understanding the world and the things that make up the world.

- d) A thing is what it does. A thing is what it is because what it is doing is constantly recreating itself as that thing.
  - 2. A society is a series of occasions each of which inherit their defining characteristic from their predecessors. Looked at from the other direction, a society is an environment which influences its members to become in a certain way.
  - 3. Societies can also be nested in each other. A molecule is a society of molecular occasions; but it can also be a component in the society of a cell. A person is a society of personal occasions, but also a member of a society of persons. The higher-level society is then an environment which contributes its character to the becoming of the lower-level society.
    - a) Think of a person in a family. A person's behavior, habits, even their selfhood, is conditioned by the family environment in which they live and grow.
    - b) Think of a neurotransmitter molecule in a brain. The molecule's behavior is conditioned by the activity of nearby brain cells, up to the level of the activity of the brain as a whole. The molecule will be emitted and absorbed in different patterns depending on whether I'm anxious or relaxed. And since it *is* what it *does*, this difference of behavior makes it in some important senses a different molecule. And very much different from that same molecule if extracted from my head and kept in a test tube.
  - 4. And remember that God is constantly involved with societies on all levels. God receives the feelings of all occasions and gives adjusted aims to new occasions. The world's society with God is the most fundamental society of all.
- E. Peace
  - 1. I've said that God's aim for every occasion is that it be the best it can; such aims are specific for the particular circumstances; but Whitehead gives the general formula, "maximum intensity with maximum harmony" or Beauty.
  - 2. But each occasion also aims beyond itself, to be part of a society and part of the society of societies; this means that each occasion also aims at the harmony of harmonies—and this is what Whitehead calls Peace.
  - 3. Peace is the integrated well-being of *all* entities in one social environment.
  - 4. This is how God experiences the world in the Consequent Nature. This is also what God wants for the world. Ultimately, God's aim in all aims is the lure to Peace.
- F. So: reality is made up of moments of experience, flashes of becoming, which come into existence as God gives them initial aims, which relate to each other in societies and societies of societies, and which are ultimately called to a Harmony of harmonies or Peace.

- IV. Why this metaphysic works well for a Christian theology.
- A. God is involved in the world in the most intimate way, but is not simply reduced to the world. Other philosophies tend to emphasize the transcendence of God over the world, and hence the distance of God. Yet the Bible speaks of God as intimately involved with the world.
  - B. The emphasis on change and relationship, rather than isolated unchanging substances, fits well with the Bible's picture of a dynamic creation that is moving toward a historical destination.
  - C. As we said last time, and will explore in even more depth next time, this metaphysical account of God's ongoing exchange with the world fits with the Bible's picture of God as a God of love.
  - D. The account of nested societies gives us a dynamic way to talk about things like the relationship between divine and human in Jesus, the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the individual human spirit, the relationship between the individual and the community in the church, the relationship between the Body and Blood of Christ and the bread and wine in the Eucharist—in general, things that are operating on more than one level of reality—as we will see in subsequent sessions.
  - E. Emphasis on Peace as an all-encompassing aim in the Universe picks up on the Christian theme of Jesus as the "Prince of Peace" through whom all things were made and in whom all things hold together.
- V. Questions, comments, confusion?

# God Whispers, "You Could Be *This*": An Introduction to Process Theology

## Session II: A Process-Relational View of the World

### Process Philosophy 101

The world is made out of "moments of experience" or "moments of feeling." Classical physics tells us that the world is made out of atomic particles of matter; classical philosophy tells us that the world is made out of individual substances (Descartes defined "substance" as "that which needs only itself to exist"). But process philosophy says the most basic unit of reality is the "actual occasion" or moment of feeling.

*Actual occasions* begin with an initial aim from God and an inrush of data from the world. Each occasion groups these disparate data together according to their relationships to each other and to the occasion's aim, until all the many component feelings are felt together as one determinate experience. The occasion is then complete, and it becomes available to be felt as a new datum in the inrush into a new moment of feeling.

*God* is the source of all initial aims for all occasions. God is the source of all possibilities for the becoming of the world. God gives to every new occasion a feeling of the best possibility it could realize.

Actual occasions group themselves together into *societies*. A society is a series of occasions in which each new moment inherits its defining characteristic from its predecessors in the series. We could also say that a society is an environment that influences the occasions within it to become in a characteristic way. All the real, actual, enduring things we see around us are societies of occasions.

Societies can also be *nested* in each other: a molecule is a society of occasions of "moleculing"; that molecule can also be a member of the society of a cell, which can also be a member of the society of a brain, which can also be a member of a society of a human being, which can also be a member of the society of St George's Church, and so on. Each larger-scale society influences the becoming of the smaller-scale societies nested within it.

God's aim in the universe is Beauty and Peace. What God wants for every occasion is that it attain the maximum intensity of feeling with the maximum harmony of feeling, what Whitehead calls *Beauty*. But every occasion also aims to be relevant to its successor occasions, or to contribute its own harmony to a greater and more inclusive harmony. Whitehead calls this "Harmony of harmonies" *Peace*.

This metaphysical framework of process philosophy provides many points of contact with basic teachings of Christian faith.

# God Whispers, "You Could Be *This*": An Introduction to Process Theology

## Session III: God of Love

- I. Intro
  - A. Bible reading: (1 John 4:16-21) "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also."
  - B. Announcements
    - 1. Marjorie Suchocki lecture at UTS
    - 2. New issue of *Creative Transformation*, with feature article on St George's!
  - C. Recap: Process metaphysics
    - 1. Actual occasions: moments of feelings as the basic constituents of the universe, that assemble themselves out of data from the universe and an initial aim from God.
    - 2. Societies: moments of feeling that are related to each other through inheriting defining characteristics from their predecessors and passing them on to their successors.
      - a) The real enduring things we see around us are persisting patterns of relationships.
      - b) Societies can be nested within each other.
    - 3. God: as source of all initial aims and recipient of all finished feelings.
    - 4. Peace: the Harmony of harmonies that is God's ultimate intention for the world.
  - D. Tonight we will look more closely at some process ideas of God, with some special attention to taking the abstract philosophical statements about God and connecting them to biblical witness and Christian religious experience.
- II. God's love
  - A. We've already seen how classical theism values God's impassibility, and how that makes it strange to say that God is love.
    - 1. God is whatever it is better to be than not to be.
      - a) It is better to be powerful than powerless; it is better to act than to be acted upon.
      - b) Therefore God is not acted upon by anything.

2. But to love, to feel compassion, is to be acted upon by that which you love.
  3. Therefore God does not love—at least, not in the same sense we do.
    - a) Anselm: God “loves” in the sense that God acts toward us for our good, but God does not “love” in the sense that God feels anything for us.
    - b) But by human standards that is a very truncated or shallow sort of love.
  4. So we end up attributing to God a very shallow version of what we say is one of our highest values.
- B. Process theology gives us a better way to talk about God’s love.
1. God is (or includes) the best possible form of anything that can possibly be good.
    - a) In our experience, we know that it is good to act, and it can also be good to be acted upon.
      - (1) It is good for me to sing a beautiful song.
      - (2) It is also good for me to listen to someone else singing a beautiful song.
    - b) What can be bad about being acted upon is when the power over us can force us to be something other than our best selves; say, in an extreme case, when an abusive relationship keeps a person afraid and oppressed and unable to do the things she or he would be best doing.
    - c) If God is the best form of anything that can be good, then God is supremely acted upon *without* the threat of being overwhelmed or forced to be not-God.
  2. Therefore God is acted upon by the creatures of the universe—God *feels*—but God always holds those feelings together in a way appropriate to being God.
  3. God’s love is continual:
    - a) God gives every new moment its initial aim, a lure or call to the best possibility that is open to it.
      - (1) The aim is derived from God’s envisagement of all potentials,
      - (2) Tailored to the particular circumstances of that moment.
    - b) God also receives from each moment its completed feeling.
      - (1) God is not an outside observer of the universe,
      - (2) But feels every moment as it feels itself—pain, joy, fear, satisfaction, everything.
    - c) God weaves all these feelings of the creatures into one total and harmonious feeling of the universe.
    - d) Then, given what the moment has actually accomplished, and given all the potentials in God’s envisagement, and given what the rest of the universe can contribute, God

chooses *the best* possibility to offer as the initial aim for the next successor moment.

- e) So in the chain of moments that make up my experience, my self:
  - (1) God gives this moment an initial aim.
  - (2) I receive that aim as a feeling for what I could become *now*.
  - (3) I may accept that aim, or I may change it according to my own more immediate feelings.
  - (4) I do what I do, and feel what I feel.
  - (5) God receives that feeling from me, whether pain or joy, and God integrates it into God's feeling of the whole universe.
  - (6) Out of that feeling of me, and God's knowledge of all possibilities, God selects the possibility that would be best for me *now* and gives it to me as my next initial aim.
- f) So God's love is not just abstract or general, but is specifically tailored to the real needs and possibilities of every moment.
  - (1) God and I (and all of us) are in constant exchange, giving and receiving feelings.
  - (2) And this is the most intimate concept of love—not a shallow or truncated one.

- C. Consider what the Bible has to say about love, then, in this light.
  - 1. Read (1 Corinthians 13:1-7) If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.
  - 2. Notice how Paul balances the active, outgoing side of love (speaking, prophesying, giving) with the receptive, ingoing side of love (patient, kind, not arrogant, not boastful).
  - 3. Remember too that Paul offers this description of love in a discussion of gifts of the Spirit—that is, this love is not just a human accomplishment, but is God's love loving in us. So this is also by implication a description of God's love.
  - 4. And this fits much better with a process picture than with classical theism.

- D. And this is also the sort of love we strive to experience with each other—not just in marriages (where this passage is most often read), but in the community.
  - 1. Consider also, as reflective of Christian experience, the passage from 1 John with which we started.

### III. God and the World

- A. God's power as persuasive
  - 1. We've already seen how classical theism posits God as the Lawgiver or Monarch who *controls* the world.
    - a) And we've noted the relevant theodicy problem.
  - 2. We've contrasted that with the process idea that God's power in the world is persuasive rather than coercive, God lures and calls rather than imposing or forcing.
  - 3. We can add to that the idea of the series of aims: God calls the world forward by:
    - a) Giving each moment an initial aim.
    - b) If that moment fulfills God's aim (or something like it), then God can build on that to give the next moment an even better aim, and so on, so that through the whole *sequence* of events the society grows in the direction God calls it.
    - c) If that moment rejects God's aim (or falls short of it), then God can choose a new possibility, relevant to the now-changed situation, that can work by degrees to open up potentials for good even in the non-good of the situation.
  - 4. John B. Cobb calls this extended process of being lured in God's direction, *creative transformation*.
    - a) God doesn't create "out of nothing," but God creates by transforming what is already in the world by giving it new possibilities for Beauty and Peace.
    - b) Marjorie Suchocki says the same thing in a different way: God works with the world as it is to call it to what it can become.
- B. God and prayer
  - 1. Classical theism makes prayer difficult to understand: if God already knows, from all eternity, what God will do; and if God is unmoved by anything outside of God; then what is the purpose of praying?
  - 2. In process thought, God "hears" and "answers" our prayers:
    - a) God feels our feelings as we feel them.
    - b) So when we feel adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication, *God feels it too*.
      - (1) Which is a more intimate feeling than "hearing" a message.
    - c) God integrates our feelings into God's envisagement of the possibilities.

- d) And thus gives to us—*and those for whom we pray*—new aims that are influenced by our prayer-feelings.
          - (1) Which is also a more intimate response than just “answering” a message or “granting” a favor.
  - 3. Personal application: walking by the lakeshore, enjoying the beauty, praying “thank you, God” seemed pale; the thought occurred that, in this process view of prayer, God was enjoying my enjoyment of the beauty, and from that enjoyment God could fashion new potentials for greater beauty.
  - 4. Personal application: praying for healing; not just reminding God that so-and-so is sick and needs help; but feeling an intensity of compassion for the other person, and trusting that God was feeling my feeling, and that was taken up into God’s own compassion, and out of that could come new possibilities of healing for the other.
- C. God and miracles
- 1. Classical theism view miracles as divine interruptions or suspensions of natural laws. God does something *directly* that cannot be explained by normal science.
    - a) Rooted in the view that God’s power works by impinging on independent existents from without.
    - b) This raises a question of consistency: why would a law-giving God break God’s own laws?
  - 2. Process theology can provide a view of miracles as special sorts of relationships between God and people or objects.
    - a) Process thought understands the things of the world to be societies of occasions, which are in ongoing processive relationship with God as God gives new aims and possibilities.
    - b) Remember that societies can be nested within each other, and lower-order societies are influenced by the higher-level societies that harbor them.
      - (1) So a person, let us say, who is a member of the society of a church is different from what that same person would be apart from the church: the church-society provides aims and possibilities that open new routes of becoming, new possible futures, that actually change who the person becomes.
    - c) We could say that in a miracle, God provides the higher-order relationship that lures ordinary objects or people into actualizing extraordinary possibilities.
      - (1) Say in a healing miracle: God gives to the sick person’s bodily systems aims that the be more well; as those aims are actualized, even more wellness is possible, and so on; so that God has provided for the sick person a special social

environment that opens up new routes of becoming toward wholeness.

3. In this view, God does not just act outside of natural law on a passive object, but God co-creates with the object a process of creative transformation that does what natural processes, alone, would not do.
  - a) And consider how often Jesus, after healing someone, says "Your faith has made you well."
  - b) And consider, negatively, Mark 6:5-6, where Jesus visits his hometown, "And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief."
4. Of course, this doesn't *prove* the existence of miracles; but it does make them less "repugnant to reason" than in the classical mold.

IV. Questions, discussion

V. Next time: Process Christology, especially Incarnation and Redemption

# God Whispers, "You Could Be *This*": An Introduction to Process Theology

## Session III: God of Love

### Bible passages

(1 John 4:16-21) God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

(1 Corinthians 13:1-7) If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

(2 Corinthians 13:13) The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

(Mark 6:5-6) And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.

### Summary

Because process theology emphasizes that God is not only *active* toward the world, but also *responsive* to the world, it can give us an intellectual framework for understanding what faith means when it says God *loves* the world.

God gives every emerging moment of feeling an initial aim, a feeling for the *best* possibility that moment could actualize. When the moment is completed, God receives its fullness of feeling. From that accomplished feeling, and from God's own knowledge of all the possibilities, God chooses the *best* possibility for the next emerging moment, and gives that moment its initial aim. In this way God works through series of moments to call things and people to their fullest realization and highest good. This is *creative transformation*.

This working with the other, feeling its feelings and giving it new possibilities and enjoying its fulfillment, is the highest definition of *love*.

Understanding God as creative-responsive love gives us new ways of thinking about God's *persuasion* in the world, *prayer*, and *miracles*.

# God Whispers, "You Could Be *This*": An Introduction to Process Theology

## Session IV: Jesus Christ: The Word Made Flesh

- I. Intro
  - A. Bible reading: (John 5:19-21) Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing; and he will show him greater works than these, so that you will be astonished. Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes."
  - B. Last time we talked about a process doctrine of God, and I said I had some neat stuff about the Trinity but we didn't have time to fit it all in.
  - C. Tonight I want to talk about a process account of Jesus as the Word of God Incarnate—but in order to do that we really have to talk about what "Word of God" means, and that means going back to the Trinity.
  - D. So that's the program for tonight:
    - 1. First Trinity.
    - 2. Then Incarnation.
  - E. Note, by way of introduction, that these two central dogmas of Christian faith center on the notion of *person*:
    - 1. The Trinity is "three persons in one being."
    - 2. The Incarnation is "one person in two natures."
- II. God the Holy Trinity
  - A. The "official" formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity, is that God is one *substance* in three *persons*.
    - 1. Traditionally called "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."
    - 2. Or as I've been saying lately, "Holy One, Holy Word, Holy Spirit."
    - 3. Often described as "Lover, Beloved, and Love."
  - B. Classical theism has a hard time making this faith claim intelligible.
    - 1. Put simply, this is because the philosophy behind classical theism says that the universe is made out of individual *things*, substances that need only themselves to exist—and getting three person-things into one divine-being-thing doesn't make sense.
    - 2. At its best, it leads us to think of one *real* God who appears in three distinct modes.
    - 3. At its worst, it leads us to think of God as having a sort of divine multiple personality disorder.
  - C. Process theism gives us a better approach to Trinity.
    - 1. Note that I owe the basics of this to Joseph Bracken, S.J.
    - 2. The universe is made out of moments of feeling that form in patterns of relationship, or societies.

- a) I am what I am because I am a society of occasions in which each new me-occasion repeats the defining pattern shared by all the previous me-occasions.
- 3. God is also a society of occasions: in each moment of God's experience, God feels all the feelings of the universe, and integrates those feelings according to God's own knowledge of the possibilities and God's own enduring character of goodness and love—also called Peace.
- 4. In this formulation, the doctrine of the Trinity is then the claim that in God's experience there are three distinct but not divided identity-patterns, and each one integrates all the feelings of the universe *and* the feeling of the other two.
  - a) Illustrate with five points in three patterns. This represents one shared *reality* which is organized into three distinct *patterns of relationship*.
    - (1) All three patterns/persons feel together the possibilities and the actualities of the world and of each other.
    - (2) But they organize those feelings according to their own defining characteristic.
  - b) Note that this is just the *opposite* of human multiple-personality disorder.
    - (1) In MPD a part of the psyche shears off into a sub-personality in order to compartmentalize some trauma.
    - (2) In Trinity, the three persons feel each other most intimately, knowing as they are known.
- 5. Those three identity patterns are related to each other as:
  - a) The First Person, the Father, the Lover, exemplifies the defining characteristic of being the Source, of giving everything its potential to become.
  - b) The Second Person, the Son, the Beloved, the Word, exemplifies the defining characteristic of receiving all potential from the First and lovingly actualizing it, giving it back in act to the First.
  - c) The Third Person, the Spirit, the Love, exemplifies the defining characteristic of feeling everything together in communion.
  - d) Together, the interpenetrating life of the Three is a constant giving and receiving in love, in which each becomes who it is precisely by being in relation to the others.
- D. The process approach can make Trinity relevant to personal devotion.
  - 1. The perichoresis of the Trinity is the highest, deepest, most creative and most responsive love—and it is that very love into which we are invited by the grace of Christ and the communion of the Holy Spirit.

2. The *social* dimension of Trinity brought out by process thinking allows us to think of Trinity as more than just an abstract speculation about the inner nature of God, but invites us to contemplate the Trinitarian love as something we can begin to experience now and can grow into in the future.

### III. Incarnation: Jesus as the Word Made Flesh

- A. The most basic form of the doctrine was defined at Chalcedon in 451: Jesus is "one person in two natures."
- B. The phrase is easy; but it immediately generates the question "How?"
  1. *How* can Jesus be both human and divine?
  2. *How* can human creatureliness and divine creativity be together in such a way as to make one human life with one human identity?
  3. Taken in a substantialist way, the phrase "the Word became flesh" seems to indicate one kind of "thing" becoming another kind of "thing."
    - a) It gives us a picture of Jesus being made out of some human "stuff" and some divine "stuff," and then we have to ask how these two kinds of "stuff" are related to each other
    - b) At its extreme, the whole exercise seems to make Jesus some kind of "third thing," neither really divine *nor* really human, and this doesn't seem to say much of saving significance to us.
- C. But there's a way out of the dilemma: The classic formula is that the unity of human and divine in Jesus is accomplished in his *person*, and in process thinking a person is not a kind of *thing*, but a society of occasions whose defining characteristic is a continuity of personal *activity*.
  1. I am a person not because I'm made out of some sort of personal "stuff," some personhood substance, but because I act in personal ways: I love, I think, I use language, I make decisions, I have imagination and creativity, and so on.
    - a) I am what I am because I am a society of occasions in which each new me-occasion repeats the defining pattern shared by all the previous me-occasions.
  2. This is true not only on the micro-level of moments of feeling in my own selfhood, but on the levels of interpersonal relationships and community relationships and political relationships, and so on. I am the person I am because of the patterns of relationships I enact—or, we could say, which I embody.
    - a) My individual personhood is shaped by the facts that I am a son, a father, a priest, a student, a teacher, and so on.
      - (1) And not just in bare abstract terms, either; but that I am the priest of St George's, and father of Maggie and Aidan, and son of Paul and Debbie, and student of John Cobb, and teacher of this class, and so on.

- (2) These relationships are concrete and embodied, not just abstract and conceptual.
    - b) If I were in different relationships—say if I had been raised as a foster child by a different family or called to be rector of a different parish—I would in some significant respects be a different *person* today.
  - 3. So being a person isn't being a certain kind of *thing*, but being a certain kind of pattern of relationships that draws together many different elements and coordinates them into personal modes of behavior through successive moments of feeling in a society of occasions.
- D. If we think of *person* in this way, then saying that Jesus *in his person* unites human and divine means that Jesus, precisely in his humanity, acts in divine ways: Jesus does what God does, in a human way and on a human scale and in human relationships enacting and embodying God's purposes and God's grace and God's love. God creates a special social environment, a special relationship, with Jesus that makes Jesus a special person.
  - 1. John Cobb looks with more detail at the *personal* union of human and divine in Jesus.
    - a) I've noted that in human life are large part of our sense of who we are is developed in our relationships.
    - b) Cobb suggests that Jesus' consciousness was uniquely determined by his awareness of his relationship with God.
      - (1) You and I may be aware of God's call to us as something that comes from outside ourselves (think of Moses and the bush, Paul on the Damascus road), and that is intermittent, now stronger, now weaker.
      - (2) But Jesus was always aware, in every moment, in every decision, of God's presence, not as something outside himself, but as the source of *his own* deepest ideals and yearnings for life.
      - (3) Cobb: "The 'I' of Jesus was constituted by his prehension of God." ("A Whiteheadian Christology")
    - c) So Jesus' human decisions and actions were united with divine decisions and actions in a way that uniquely overcame the existential separation between humans and God.
      - (1) In Jesus, human action and divine action co-act in a distinct but undivided way.
  - 2. More specifically: the divine pattern of action that is acted out in the human action of Jesus is precisely the activity of the Second Person of the Trinity.
    - a) Jesus' experience in every moment is constituted by his awareness of relationship with God: Jesus' awareness centers on receiving everything from the Father and giving everything back to the Father in thanksgiving and love.

- b) But this is precisely the *hypostasis* of the Word (Son) in the immanent Trinity.
          - (1) Remember the description of Trinity as Lover, Beloved, and Loving:
          - (2) The Second Person is the one who receives all from the First and utters all back to the First in total self-giving.
        - c) So Jesus, in his human devotion to God, is doing precisely what the Second Person of the Trinity does in everlasting divine activity
          - (1) And in process thought a thing *is* what it *does*.
          - (2) So Jesus is the fully divine Word of God in fully human action.
  - 3. The idea that Jesus does what God does extends beyond just the analysis of his personhood, but sheds light on his social relations as well. This is developed particularly in liberation theology.
    - a) Liberation theologies say that Jesus does what God does by proclaiming liberation for the oppressed and by acting out that proclamation in his concrete acts for the poor and the marginalized.
    - b) They tend to take their cue from Jesus' programmatic sermon in Luke 4:16-21, followed almost immediately by the healing in Capernaum in 4:31-37.
      - (1) In these stories Jesus proclaims liberation, then actualizes that very proclamation.
    - c) Jon Sobrino: Jesus' "basic positive gesture is to draw near to people and situations where there is no reconciliation, to break down the hard and fast barriers that society, religion, and politics had erected, and thus to show in a concrete historical way that God does indeed draw nigh to those whom nobody else will approach." (*Christology at the Crossroads* 358.)
    - d) Thus Jesus does what only God can do, in historical and political ways as well as personal ways.
- IV. Conclusion: the process notion of *person*, not as a kind of thing but as a way of being, allows us to rethink both "three persons in one substance" and "one person in two natures":
- A. "Three persons in one substance" as three distinct patterns of relationship within one divine reality of giving initial aims and receiving completed feelings.
  - B. "One person in two natures" as the one personal experience and reality of Jesus in which human acting and divine acting act together, without confusion, change, division, or separation, in a way that begins a new kind of relationship between God and humanity.
- V. For next time: how we enter into divine relationship: the Church as the continuing Body of Christ, and our role as members of that society.

## **God Whispers, "You Could Be *This*": An Introduction to Process Theology**

### **Session IV: Jesus Christ: The Word Made Flesh**

(John 5:19-21) Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing; and he will show him greater works than these, so that you will be astonished. Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes."

**The two central doctrines** that are unique to Christianity—the Trinity and the Incarnation—both center around the notion of the *person*. The doctrine of the Trinity says that God is three persons in one being; the doctrine of the incarnation says that Jesus is one person in two natures.

Classical theism, which views the *person* as an individual, self-existing substance (a substance is "that which needs nothing but itself to exist"), has a very hard time making these person-centered doctrines of the faith understandable.

Process theology, which views the *person* as a society of occasions, a series of moments of feeling in which a pattern of personal characteristics is re-enacted and expanded in each new moment, can make these person-centered doctrines more accessible to understanding *and* to devotion.

A process account of the **Trinity** says that God is one Reality, and in this one Reality is included all the possibilities for all moments that could become, as well as the feelings of all completed moments. Within this one Reality, all the feelings are organized together according to *three* patterns of relationship, so that there are three series of personal moments, or three Persons, who together characterize the one Reality.

A process account of the **Incarnation** says that the series of personal moments, the society of occasions, that makes up the life and person of Jesus is constituted by a unique awareness of the presence and aim of God in each moment, so that Jesus is who he is precisely because of his relationship with God. Jesus does what God does; and since in process thinking a thing *is* what it *does*, that means Jesus *is* God in human life.

## **God Whispers, "You Could Be *This*": An Introduction to Process Theology**

### **Session V: The Church: The Body of Christ in the Present World**

#### I. Intro

A. Bible reading: Ephesians 4:11-16: The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

#### B. Recap

##### 1. Societies

- a) The world is made out of moments of feeling.
- b) These moments arise in patterns of relationship, or societies, such that
  - (1) new moments happen by re-enacting the finished feeling or defining characteristic of their immediate predecessors,
  - (2) and aim at passing on their feelings to their successor moments.
- c) God is at work in these societies.
  - (1) God gives each new moment its initial aim, its "you could be *this*."
  - (2) And God builds on the sequence of moments: God bases each aim partly on what was accomplished in the moment before and partly on what new possibilities for the future will be opened up by the current moment's accomplishment.
- d) So while God gives direct aims to the individual moments, God is also at sustained work through the whole social series.

##### 2. Trinity as divine society

- a) God can also be looked at as a society, in which each moment of feeling inherits from its predecessor moments all their feelings, *plus* feels all the feelings of the universe, *plus* knows all the possibilities for everything that could ever happen anywhere or anywhen.
- b) The doctrine of the Trinity suggests further that in God there are actually *three* such societies, or three defining

characteristics according to which all inheritance, all feelings, and all knowledge of possibilities are organized.

- (1) One society organizes around the characteristic of giving in utter love: the Father, the Creator.
  - (2) One society organizes around the characteristic of receiving all from the First and actualizing it in love: the Son, the Word.
  - (3) One society organizes around the characteristic of harmonizing distinctities in unity: the Spirit.
- c) Each of these societies, these Persons, shares all that pertains to the divine, and knows itself, and knows the other two, such that the divine life is a *perichoresis* of new moments of feeling each other in love.
3. Incarnation as divine-human society
- a) Our becoming as persons is a society of occasions in which each new moment of personal experience re-enacts-with-novelty the inheritance of the moments before, and passes on to the moments to come.
  - b) Our very being is shaped by the relationships we have, as these condition the experiences and feelings each moment passes on to the society.
  - c) In Jesus, each of his moments was constituted by his awareness of being in relationship with God, as well as God's giving Jesus special aims to be in intimate divine relationship.
    - (1) God whispers "You could be *this*" to all creatures
    - (2) To Jesus, God whispered specifically, "You could be Messiah, you could be the one who shows forth my Peace like *this*."
    - (3) In the whole society of his life, Jesus' actions are determined by receiving all from God, actualizing all the God gives to him, and giving it back to God in utter love.
  - d) So Jesus' pattern of life is a re-enactment in human life of the defining characteristic of the Second Person of the Trinity.
  - e) Therefore Jesus is the Word of God incarnate, the Word of God embodied.
- C. It is the Christian faith that this process did not *stop* with Jesus.
1. Quite the contrary, because of what God did in Jesus, because of the way Jesus actualized God's aims in human life, God is now able to give the world, and the world is now able to receive from God, *new* aims that continue God's work in the world for Peace, for Harmony of harmonies and well-being of feeling for all creatures.
  2. That is reflected in the doctrine of the Church.

## II. The Church as the prolongation of the Incarnation of the Word

- A. Jesus is divine because he does what God does. More specifically:
1. He forgives sins: Story of paralytic: (Mark 2:5-12) When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, "Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk'? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the paralytic— "I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home." And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"
  2. He breaks down barriers between people and creates the conditions for harmonizing harmonies, Peace; as when he has table fellowship with tax collectors and prostitutes and sinners—and Pharisees.
    - a) Eg Mark 2:15-17: And as he sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples—for there were many who followed him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" When Jesus heard this, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."
    - b) Eg Luke 7:36-38: One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. And how often do you suppose female sinners ever came to *that* table when Jesus wasn't there?
  3. He heals people—and especially casts out demons—as a sign of God's reign.
    - a) Eg, Luke 11:20: But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you.
  4. And he gathered a community of disciples around himself in order to carry on his work.

- B. So after Jesus' death and resurrection, the community of disciples did again, in their own ways, what Jesus had been doing.
1. The main difference now is that they do it *in Jesus' name*, and not simply on the basis of their *own* relationship with God.
  2. So Paul teaches Christians to forgive each other: Colossians 3:13: Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.
  3. So Peter heals the beggar: Acts 3:1-8: One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o'clock in the afternoon. And a man lame from birth was being carried in. People would lay him daily at the gate of the temple called the Beautiful Gate so that he could ask for alms from those entering the temple. When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for alms. Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, "Look at us." And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. But Peter said, "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God.
  4. So Paul opens table fellowship to all: Galatians 2:11-14: But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?"
- C. The community of disciples, the Church, by carrying on the ministry of Jesus, continues to re-enact the defining characteristics of Jesus' own life, Jesus' own person.
1. Bernard Lee puts it: During the historical life of Jesus, community was already touched off in the response of men [*sic*] to him—by positive prehensions [feelings] of him. There had to be things about Jesus that made sense to the community that formed around him. Those "things about him" that made sense were "how" Jesus was objectified for [felt by] his community of followers ... "the things about him" that made sense were introduced into the patterns of living of a community of men; the "things about him" also became "things about *them*."

- a) In other words, what was true about Jesus in his life and ministry became true also of the shared life of the disciples as they carried on Jesus' ministry.
  - b) The defining characteristics of Jesus' life became defining characteristics for the community's life as well.
2. Marjorie Suchocki puts it: In his life, Jesus created a community of equals, drawn from various walks of life, but united in their relation to him. Resurrection radicalized the community still further, turning it into an extension of the incarnation, now modeling within itself and in its proclamation a new way of being together. Just as Jesus touched and transformed others with healing love, even so the community that bears his name is called to do likewise in the world. The church is called to witness by its life and words to a social mode of communal wellbeing.
3. And if Jesus is divine because he does what God does, then when we do what Jesus does, we are Christly, *we become Christ*.
- a) As Jesus is the incarnation of the Word because he embodies God's aims in his life, so the community that follows Jesus continues to embody those aims, the community continues to be the incarnation of the Word.
    - (1) In process terms, the church is a society of persons, who are each societies of moments of feeling.
    - (2) Each moment of feeling inherits the accomplished facts of past moments.
    - (3) The moments of Jesus' life are accomplished facts of the past, and they offer themselves to be felt anew in moments that form in the social environment of the Church.
    - (4) Practices within the church—such as reading the Gospels and celebrating the sacraments—take up those past facts of Jesus' life and re-present them, make them present again, to intensify the feelings they contribute to new moments.
    - (5) So moments of our feeling within the society of the Church allow the characteristics of Jesus to enter into our self-constitution, so that we literally become more like Jesus as we re-enact his actions.
  - b) And this is not simply a matter of human effort, of our trying to be like Jesus. God also works within us, to conform us to the image of Jesus.
    - (1) Each of our moments of feeling begins with an initial aim from God.
    - (2) Usually that aim does not enter into consciousness in the finished feeling of the moment, just as the

seed crystal is not usually visible at the heart of the crystal fully grown.

- (3) But God sometimes gives us special aims, aims that include being specially aware of God with us in the moment.
    - (a) As God gave Jesus aims that whispered "You could be Messiah like *this*";
    - (b) So God (sometimes) gives us aims that whisper "You could be like Jesus like *this*."
  - (4) When we respond to such an aim and consciously and intentionally re-enact what Jesus acts, then we are a little bit more conformed to Jesus, a little bit more Christly.
  - (5) God receives that moment of Christliness into God's own feelings, and from that fashions an aim for the *next* moment that opens up even more Christly possibilities.
    - (a) God works with the world as it is to lure the world to what it can become.
    - (b) When we act in a Christly way, we give God more material to work with to offer us even more Christly aims.
    - (c) Our growth in Christliness means that we can handle more potential, so that God can give us even greater aims.
  - (6) So that over the succession of moments, in the ongoing society of occasions that make up our lives and our selves, we are in constant dialogue and exchange with God, as God draws us into being more and more like Jesus, in the community of the Church.
- D. So when we as the Church do something like pass the Peace, or celebrate the Eucharist, or work at Loaves and Fishes, or become informed about the political situation and work for Peace—when we do these things we are acting out again, in our own concrete situations, the values, the defining characteristics, embodied in Jesus as Word of God.
1. Aims from God lure us toward those values.
  2. The historical facts about Jesus are part of our inheritance from the past and show us concrete ways of living out those values.
  3. The traditions and communities of the church carry on those values (more or less) in new concrete ways of living (eg, the church doesn't multiply loaves and fishes in the wilderness, but does create feeding programs among the urban poor), building up a cumulative power in the values.
  4. All these things come into our own experiences, our own moments of feeling, as we live within the society of the Church.

5. So that we individually and collectively embody again, continue to incarnate, the Word of God as incarnated in Jesus.
6. So the Church is the Body of Christ, continuing Christ's presence in the world.

### III. Outro

- A. Questions, comments?
- B. Next time: we'll look more closely at how our own lives grow in society with God's life, and think some about earthly life and everlasting life.

## **God Whispers, "You Could Be *This*": An Introduction to Process Theology**

### **Session V: The Church: The Body of Christ in the Present World**

#### **Bible Reading**

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love. *Ephesians 4:11-16*

#### **Learning Points**

- Jesus is fully human and fully divine because, in the real concrete situations of his human life, he accepted God's aims for him and lived them out completely, thus embodying God's perfect will for him. Jesus does in human life what the Second Person of the Trinity (the Word) does in God's own inner life, so Jesus *is* the Second Person embodied in a human life.
- The defining characteristics of Jesus' life are part of the past inherited by every new moment of our existence. The values that Jesus enacted are "there" for us to re-enact in our own action.
- God gives us, as Christians, initial aims that we should re-embody the values that Jesus embodies. God whispers to us, "You could be like Jesus; you could embody Peace like *this*."
- The Church is the society where the influence of the historical past of Jesus, *and* the influence of the community's ongoing recollection of Jesus, *and* the influence of God's initial aims for new moments of feeling to be like Jesus, all come together to empower us to be conformed to Christ and to continue the ministry of Christ in the world.

# God Whispers, "You Could Be *This*": An Introduction to Process Theology

## Session VI: Spiritual Life and Eternal Life

### I. Intro

A. Bible reading: 1 Corinthians 15:35-44: But someone will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. Not all flesh is alike, but there is one flesh for human beings, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one thing, and that of the earthly is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; indeed, star differs from star in glory. So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body.

### B. Recap

1. Occasions and societies
  - a) The universe is made of moments of feeling arising in succession.
  - b) Moments form societies, in which each new moment repeats the defining characteristic of the moments that came before, and passes on that characteristic to the moments yet to come.
  - c) Societies can be considered as series of moments, *or* as the continuing environment in which new moments arise, the "field" which gives rise to new moments of feeling.
    - (1) The social field is the ongoing reality, of which the individual moments are the concrete instantiations.
    - (2) Think of the field of force of a magnet:
      - (a) You put a piece of paper over a magnet, and shake iron filings onto it, and the filings line up along the lines of force in the magnetic field.
  - d) So a society is a "field of force" in which new feelings line up in patterns that recapitulate the defining characteristic(s).
2. Looked at in that way, we could say
  - a) The Godhead is the society, the field, in which the three Persons of the Trinity are sustained.

- b) The relation of "Sonship" is the society, the field, in which the human and divine characteristics of the life of Jesus are sustained.
    - c) The Church is the society, the field, in which the moments of experience of believers—you and me—are sustained.
- C. Tonight we will take that basic idea of the society as the field of force in which new moments arise, and use that to speak of our ongoing relationship with God, our life in the Spirit.
  - 1. In traditional Christian theology, we say that our growth in faith and devotion and Christlikeness is specifically the work of the Holy Spirit.
  - 2. In the process view we've been developing here, we've said that the Spirit is that personal society in the Trinity whose defining characteristic is to hold different feelings together in communion—whose defining characteristic is unity-in-diversity.
  - 3. So in speaking of life in the Spirit, we are speaking of the way God takes up our feelings, relates them to everything else in the universe, and to God's own knowledge of all the possibilities, while also feeling all their distinctiveness and uniqueness—and out of that mix of feelings, the Spirit proposes the next best possibility for realization.
  - 4. The Holy Spirit thus provides the "field of force," the holy society, that takes up our life experiences and integrates them toward growth in communion with God, each other, and all creation.

## II. Life in the Spirit

- A. The basic idea is this:
  - 1. For each moment of our experience, God whispers, "You could be *this*."
  - 2. When we accept God's aim and live it out (to the best of our abilities), we add something new to the universe, a new realization of value in God.
  - 3. That gives God more to work with—since God always works with the world *as it is* to call it to what it can become.
  - 4. So that God can propose a new aim for the next moment that realizes a little bit *more* of God's ideals and values.
  - 5. In this way, over time, over many many many such moments, God moves us toward greater communion, greater Christlikeness.
  - 6. The whole series of moments is a society, a field of relationship, in which the Holy Spirit and our human spirits cooperate, work together, to form in us a defining characteristic of giving and receiving in love.
- B. This is looking at it on the micro-level succession of individual moments. We can also look at the mid-level of the trends that form in the ongoing society, like the patterns in the weave, not just the individual threads in the weave. On that level, we can say that God the

Holy Spirit works to open up new possibilities for us, works to creatively transform what we are into what we can be.

1. This is true for the trends in our lives that reflect God's aims, as when what is good gets better.
2. But this is also true for the trends in our lives that reject God's aims, or fall short of God's aims.
  - a) When we turn away from the value God wants for us, God does not abandon us, but the Holy Spirit takes that up, holds it in communion with whatever good may yet be possible, and proposes new aims that can lead us from hurt to healing.
  - b) Say, for example, God aims for me that I be generous toward a friend, but in a moment of selfishness I snap at my friend instead, and damage the relationship; the Holy Spirit takes up that painful moment also, holds it in communion with what good is yet possible, and gives me an aim to feel how much I miss the friendship, and therefore how much I really value it, and therefore want to restore it; and then the Spirit can give me an aim to go and reconcile with my friend—and in the end the friendship is even stronger because we've discovered that we are able to share pain and sorrow along with joy and companionship.
  - c) This is the basis of a process idea of *redemption*.

C. How do we experience this? If God's aims for us are often below the threshold of consciousness in the completed feeling—like the seed crystal that "disappears" at the heart of the grown crystal—then how do we experience the Spirit leading us into these patterns of greater communion?

1. Not all of the aims God gives us are the same; some aims include the possibility of becoming more aware of God's presence and "field of force."
2. For instance, in moments of prayer or meditation or worship, we pay more attention to the movements of God's Spirit in and around us, and open ourselves to have God's aims for us lifted out of the unconscious and into consciousness.
3. The Christian tradition has always maintained that we pray because God gives us grace to pray—ie, God acts *first*, and our prayer to God is a *response*. Even if we are not consciously aware of the Spirit prompting us when we pray, all our prayers to God begin with God's grace in us.
  - a) As Paul says in Romans 8:26, "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words."
4. Process theology would say that God gives us an aim to pray; when we actualize that aim and do in fact pray, then God can give us a new aim for a new moment in which we are more

aware of and responsive to God—and our prayer develops as that sort of dialogue.

5. An example: the prayer of the empty chair: talking with Jesus in imagination.

a) I've had imaginary conversations with Jesus in which I can tell pretty well that I'm supplying things for my imaginary Jesus to say; but on other occasions, the Jesus of my imagination has said things to me that are wiser and more compassionate than I am normally aware of myself being—ie, it seems clear to me that the communication is coming from something more than just my own desires and projections.

b) A process account might say:

(1) God gives me an aim to feel God's Word addressed to me in a certain way.

(2) I actualize that aim by imagining Jesus.

(3) That gives God more to work with, so that God can give my next moment an aim to feel God's Word to me more deeply or in more detail.

(4) I actualize that aim by imagining Jesus speaking to me.

(5) And so on, and so on, as each moment builds on what's gone before to create the whole stream of experience in which I imagine Jesus speaking to me.

c) Now of course it isn't a "real" conversation with the heavenly Christ, not like a vision or an audition; but it is the Holy Spirit working with my spirit, moment by moment, to form in me the mind of Christ.

(1) It is a way that the thread of experience of my life is taken up into the Spirit.

(2) It is a way that the Spirit provides a social environment in which new moments of my experience can form with a special awareness of God.

6. Another example: Eucharist

a) God gives each of us aims that call us together to worship.

b) In the worship service, as we work together in the ritual forms to break the bread and share the wine, we experience a quality of communion that raises the feeling of Christ's presence with us into greater consciousness.

c) This gives God more to work with, so that God can give us as a community (and as individuals within that community) new aims to actualize communion in Christ in practical ways in the world.

d) So our sense of communion in Eucharist energizes us to do Loaves and Fishes, or to pray for peace or attend an

anti-war protest, or to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep in a way that shows forth the compassion of Christ.

- e) The explicit awareness of God-Christ-Spirit in the Eucharistic action lifts God's aims for us into prominence so that we as a community can be formed in the likeness of Christ.
- D. Our life in the Spirit is the way the threads of our experience are taken up into the social environment of the Spirit, as the Spirit holds our human feelings and God's own divine aims for us in a relational field of deepening communion.

### III. Life Everlasting

- A. A major part of the Christian witness is that our life in the Spirit does not end when the life of the body ends.
- 1. Jesus' resurrection is the main example.
  - 2. But the earliest Christian witness is also filled with the hope that we also will be raised with Christ and will live a new intensity and vitality of unending life with Christ.
    - a) As in the quote from Paul with which we began.
- B. Contemporary science has challenged that belief because everything we know today points to the fact that the human mind (or soul) is intimately involved with the life of the body—if certain hormone chemicals are out of balance, one feels depressed or anxious; if certain parts of the brain are injured, one loses memories or the ability to speak—and we do not find it scientifically conceivable that anything like human life as we know it can be lived without a body.
- 1. So what many people take as the "traditional Christian" view of disembodied souls living with God in a non-corporeal heaven doesn't seem very compelling to a lot of people today.
- C. A process theology approach to the question of personal life after the death of the body might go like this:
- 1. What makes us who we are, our *souls*, are not some kind of mysterious non-corporeal "stuff," but are the patterns of relationships, the patterns of memories and defining characteristics that are repeated with novelty in the moments of experience of our lives.
  - 2. The survival of the soul is thus the continuation of new moments of experience that inherit and repeat and add novelty to those defining characteristics.
  - 3. The Holy Spirit receives into itself all the finished moments of our lives, and holds all those feelings in everlasting awareness; thus the Spirit knows and feels the patterns that make us who we are, *even after* the body that sustains those moments is no more.
  - 4. So the Spirit can offer that pattern as an aim for a new moment of experience—in fact, for a continuing society of new moments—apart from the earthly body.

5. Here's the catch: most process thinkers agree that human experience requires *some* sort of embodiment in order to be recognizably human.
  - a) Remember that every moment of experience starts with an aim from God *and* from an inrush of feeling-data from the universe.
  - b) In human experience as we know it, almost all of our feeling-data from the universe comes through the mediation of the body.
  - c) Without the body, no new feelings; without new feelings, no new moments of experience.
  - d) So if the soul is to continue in any way that is recognizably connected with our humanity as we now know it, there must be some sort of embodiment.
6. Three kinds of ideas about embodiment:
  - a) Our souls are re-embodied in new bodies in a general resurrection at the end of this world and the beginning of the new one.
    - (1) John Polkinghorne: "I believe it is a perfectly coherent hope that the pattern that is me will be remembered by God and its instantiation will be recreated by [God] when [God] reconstitutes me in a new environment of [God 's] choosing."
    - (2) Analogy of software running on different hardware.
  - b) God provides in Godself a new environment that does what the body used to—gathers feelings from the universe and funnels them into new moments of experience—although without anything explicitly like embodiment as we think of it.
    - (1) This was proposed by David Ray Griffin.
    - (2) It strikes me as a bit too rarified—if we are "embodied" in God but it's not at all like "embodiment" as we know it, then is there much point in using the same word?
    - (3) Besides, it does little to address the core Christian hope of the resurrection *of the body*.
  - c) Being a good Anglican, I propose a middle way: God does instantiate the patterns-that-are-us in new bodies, but they are bodies that are significantly different from the bodies we now have—spiritual bodies, to use Paul's phrase.
    - (1) Remember that the body also is a pattern of relationships.
    - (2) A pattern can be instantiated in various media: I could create a picture with pigment on paper, or stained glass, or pure light pixels on a computer screen. It would be the same patterns of color, but embodied in different ways.

- (3) The soul-pattern could be harbored in a body-pattern that is to this body what pure light is to paint on a page.
  - (4) New moments of experience could continue to receive feelings from the universe through the mediation of the spiritual body, and organize them according to aims from God, so that the personal series goes on in life in the Spirit.
  - (5) One could think of these spiritual bodies as existing now, not needing to wait for the transformation of the whole world; but existing in a way that they do not relate (much) to the physical conditions of this world—which is why the dead are “gone” from us and we can no longer interact with them.
7. This is all speculation, of course, and would not be *required* of anyone to believe as the mode of everlasting life. But I find it helps my faith to think on such things, and I find the process approach useful because it gives me a way to think about it that does not strain credibility with what I know of the world and human life here and now.

#### IV. Outro

- A. Questions, discussion?
- B. For next time: we'll wrap up the series by looking at how process theology addresses some contemporary issues in religion and religious ethics.

## **God Whispers, "You Could Be *This*": An Introduction to Process Theology**

### **Session VI: Spiritual Life and Eternal Life**

#### **Bible reading**

But someone will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. Not all flesh is alike, but there is one flesh for human beings, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one thing, and that of the earthly is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; indeed, star differs from star in glory. So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. *1 Corinthians 15:35-44*

#### **A process account of the spiritual life might include these points:**

- For each moment of our experience, God whispers, "You could be *this*."
- When we accept God's aim and live it out (to the best of our abilities), we add something new to the universe, a new realization of value in God.
- That gives God more to work with—since God always works with the world *as it is* to call it to what it can become.
- So that God can propose a new aim for the next moment that realizes a little bit *more* of God's ideals and values.
- In this way, over time, over many many such moments, God moves us toward greater communion, greater Christlikeness.
- The whole series of moments is a society, a field of relationship, in which the Holy Spirit and our human spirits cooperate, work together, to form in us a defining characteristic of giving and receiving in love.

#### **A process account of life after death might include these points:**

- What makes us who we are, our *souls*, are not some kind of mysterious non-corporeal "stuff," but are the patterns of relationships, the patterns of memories and defining characteristics that are repeated with novelty in the moments of experience of our lives.
- The survival of the soul is thus the continuation of new moments of experience that inherit and repeat and add novelty to those defining characteristics.
- The Holy Spirit receives into itself all the finished moments of our lives, and holds all those feelings in everlasting awareness; thus the Spirit knows and feels the patterns that make us who we are, *even after* the body that sustains those moments is no more.
- So the Spirit can offer that pattern as an aim for a new moment of experience—in fact, for a continuing society of new moments—apart from the earthly body.

## **God Whispers, "You Could Be *This*": An Introduction to Process Theology**

### **Session VII: Process Theology and Contemporary Issues**

- I. Intro
  - A. Bible reading: (Isaiah 43:16-21) Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.
  - B. Tonight's session is billed as "process theology and contemporary issues." We've had some good discussions in these sessions, but not enough time for all of them; so I think what I will do tonight is to spend some of the time on issues, and some of the time on questions and discussions.
  
- II. Process theology and liberation theology.
  - A. One of the biggest developments in Christian theology in the 20th century was the emergence of various liberation movements.
    - 1. Eg, Latin American liberation theology, Black theology, feminist theology, womanist theology, mujerista theology, Korean minjung theology.
    - 2. These movements all had different provenances and different issues and different approaches, but all agreed that:
      - a) The basic message of the Gospel is liberation from oppression.
      - b) The work of the Church is to be active in the world:
        - (1) Not just to save individual souls,
        - (2) But to change social structures and political systems, so as to bring about liberation for the poor and new societies of justice and peace.
  - B. These liberation movements have made changes in the Church and church practices, as well influencing academic and theoretical theology.
  - C. Process theology took shape during the same time as these liberation theologies.
    - 1. Some people criticized process for being too metaphysical, too absorbed in new philosophical interpretations of traditional doctrines, rather than engaging the new perspectives and hands-on praxis of liberation.

2. Others saw that a process approach had a lot to offer a liberation program.
    - a) John Cobb wrote a book along this line called *Process Theology as Political Theology*.
    - b) Marjorie Suchocki, Catherine Keller, Rita Nakashima Brock, and others are avowed process-feminist theologians.
- D. Here's how I see it:
1. Process focuses on relationships and societies, not just the individual monad of modernist thought.
  2. In any society, God's aim is for richness of experience, maximum intensity with maximum harmony, Peace.
  3. So long as any members of a society are denied richness of experience or Peace, while other members of that society hoard richness or well-being for themselves, that society is less than it could be, less than what God aims for it.
    - a) That is true for the society of a single soul,
    - b) As much as it is for the society of a church or a city or a nation or a planet.
    - c) God's aim for *all* of us is well-being in right relationships, and so long as any are missing out on that, the world is not yet what God aims for it.
  4. So a process approach provides a criterion, a standard of judgment, by which to say whether a society is moving in God's way—process gives an ideal by which to criticize any actual society.
  5. Moreover, process thought describes a pattern for social change.
    - a) God works the world as it is to call it toward what it can become.
    - b) God gives societies (and their members) aims that they should embody more fully God's ideals of justice and peace.
    - c) When an occasion really does embody such ideals, it gives God, and the society, more to work with, so that God can give even greater aims, and so on and so on, until the society as a whole comes to embody justice and peace in a richer and deeper way.
    - d) A process approach considers that social change takes time, and real liberation must run deep, therefore even small steps toward Peace are worthwhile, since they are part of the cumulative process of becoming in God.
      - (1) All too often it is easy to become discouraged working for Gospel-based social change when it seems like change comes so slowly.
      - (2) Or to think that violent, sudden revolution is the only way to effect liberation.
      - (3) But process argues that even small steps have value, and so process helps encourage *hope*.

- E. So process theology can be a social theology, and can provide a framework for articulating *and applying* the biblical promise of liberation.

III. Process theology and the "religion and science" dialogue.

- A. Another big development in contemporary theology has been the emergence of a productive dialogue between religion and science.
  - 1. The reasons for the "war" between science and religion are many and complex, and we need not go into them all here.
    - a) Suffice it to say that it is rooted in:
      - (1) Descartes' distinction between material stuff and mental stuff *which have nothing to do with each other*.
      - (2) Newtonian science's presupposition that the material world obeys rigid and deterministic laws which can be fully described in mathematical terms.
    - b) In such an intellectual climate, it seems patently self-evident that science and religion are two different sorts of disciplines, that have nothing in common and no business speaking to each other.
  - 2. The reasons for the "thaw" in the war between science and religion are also complex, but they have to do with things like:
    - a) Scientists who speak of the awe and wonder they feel at the beauty and structure of the universe—scientists who sound religious, not just analytical, about what they study.
    - b) Society, and scientists themselves, who are uncomfortable with the moral vacuum in which science seems to operate—the fact that we can do things like build atomic bombs or engineer DNA, but we don't know if those things are really *good* or not.
      - (1) People want ethical guidance about scientific and technological matters, and one source of that ethical guidance is religion.
    - c) And some comes from the religious side as well, of course:
      - (1) Theologians who are eager to offer ethical commentary on technology.
      - (2) Believers who want to say "The heavens declare the glory of God" and include supernovas and quasars and stellar nurseries and distant galaxies in that declaration.
  - 3. So, today, science and religion are talking to each other in a way they haven't for nearly 400 years.
- B. Process thought provides a philosophical framework in which both science and religion can find some common ground, can describe

themselves in some common terms, and can find a productive way to talk.

1. Process thought does not split the world into “natural” and “supernatural,” with God functionally irrelevant to the “natural” sphere.
2. Remember the process principle of *panentheism*, in which all is in God.
  - a) In this view, natural processes are also indicative of the aims and purposes of God.
  - b) So religion has an active interest in the way science describes the world.
  - c) And science has an interest in the larger frame(s) of reference and value described by religion.
3. Moreover, process thought points out that *any* interpretive system abstracts from the full concrete reality of experience, and therefore *no* interpretive system has a claim to the “whole” truth.
  - a) Science and religion abstract from the same realm of world-experience, but they abstract in different ways, highlighting different aspects and relationships.
  - b) So science and religion can overlap and inform each other, but neither can claim to *exclude* the other as valid truth.
  - c) By not privileging or precluding either *a priori*, process thought allows religion and science to be in constructive dialogue with each other—and in our present cultural circumstances, *any* constructive dialogue is to be welcomed.

#### IV. Process theology and environmental stewardship.

- A. Most environmental ethics today revolves around the idea of *value*, and assessing the relative values of natural and human resources and needs.
  1. Such ethical reflection notes a distinction between *intrinsic* and *instrumental* values:
    - a) Intrinsic value is the value a thing has for itself, its own enjoyment of goods and avoidance of hurts.
    - b) Instrumental value is the value a thing might have to contribute to the enjoyment of an enjoyer.
    - c) Clearly, only sentient beings can have intrinsic value; non-sentient beings can only have instrumental value vis-a-vis sentients.
- B. In the kind of Cartesian dualism characteristic of modernism, we say:
  1. Only humans (and maybe some higher mammals) are sentient, able to feel pain and pleasure, and therefore have intrinsic value.

2. Other creatures (or societies of creatures)—trees, rocks, mountains, coral reefs—have only instrumental value, they are only valuable insofar as they do some good for *us*.
    - a) So, for instance, E.O. Wilson, a leading defender of biodiversity, argues that we should save the rainforest because, who knows, the cure for cancer may wait undiscovered in the bark of some tree we haven't catalogued yet.
    - b) The value worth protecting in the rainforest is that which may potentially be valuable to *us*.
- C. Process thinking extends the notion of value, both instrumental and intrinsic.
1. Process theology extends the notion of instrumental value by taking God into account.
    - a) God feels every moment of experience in the world.
    - b) Therefore every moment presents some instrumental value to God.
    - c) Whether or not a thing is useful to *humans* is not the only criterion of instrumental value.
      - (1) So a tree or a coral reef may present little instrumental value to human enjoyment;
      - (2) But it may present great value in God's enjoyment.
    - d) Environmental-ethical decisions, then, must take into account not only what good a piece of nature might do for us, but how it contributes to the overall richness of the system, and therefore how it contributes to God's enjoyment.
  2. Process theology extends the notion of intrinsic value by claiming that there is no such thing as a non-sentient creature.
    - a) The world is made of moments of *feeling*.
    - b) Every moment experiences *some* kind of joy or hurt; it may be very rudimentary, hardly recognizable as "feeling" by human standards; but it is *there*.
    - c) Every moment exists by feeling itself as itself, and so it has some value-for-itself, some intrinsic value.
      - (1) Certain kinds of societies of moments—trees and rocks—do not have feelings as we recognize feelings;
      - (2) But the moments that make them *do*, and those feelings must be recognized as having intrinsic value.
      - (3) Process environmental ethics recognizes a scale of value in moments and societies—the more complex, the more valuable—so that humans and clods of soil are not simply *equal*.
      - (4) But they are on a continuum of value, not consigned to different realms of value, and all

shades of value on the continuum must be respected.

d) Environmental-ethical decisions, then, must take into account the feeling of value that the moment has for itself. Nothing is *merely* instrumental to anything else.

D. A good source for this, if anyone wants to learn more, is John Cobb and Charles Birch, *The Liberation of Life*.

V. Discussion time: Any questions or issues or themes that have come up for you in our past sessions, that you would like to bring back and work over now?

## **God Whispers, "You Could Be *This*": An Introduction to Process Theology**

### **Session VII: Process Theology and Contemporary Issues**

#### **Bible reading (Isaiah 43:16-21)**

Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

#### **Process theology offers distinctive approaches to contemporary issues**

- Process theology and liberation theology.
  - Because process theology focuses on societies and God's aim toward Peace, it provides a way to talk about social issues and God's will for well-being in right relationships for all people.
  - Process thought describes a pattern for social change.
    - God works the world as it is to call it toward what it can become.
    - God gives societies (and their members) aims that they should embody more fully God's ideals of justice and peace.
    - When an occasion really does embody such ideals, it gives God, and the society, more to work with, so that God can give even greater aims, and so on and so on, until the society as a whole comes to embody justice and peace in a richer and deeper way.
    - A process approach considers that social change takes time, and real liberation must run deep, therefore even small steps toward Peace are worthwhile, since they are part of the cumulative process of becoming in God.
- Process theology and the "religion and science" dialogue.
  - Process thought provides a philosophical framework in which both science and religion can find some common ground, can describe themselves in some common terms, and can find a productive way to talk.
  - Remember the process principle of *panentheism*, in which all is in God.
    - In this view, natural processes are also indicative of the aims and purposes of God.
    - So religion has an active interest in the way science describes the world.
    - And science has an interest in the larger frame(s) of reference and value described by religion.
- Process theology and environmental stewardship.
  - Process thought sees value in *every* moment of feeling, the moments that make up a human life, or a tree, or a rainforest, or a coral reef, or *anything*.

- Process theology says that, since all moments have value, for themselves and for God, no natural reality exists *solely* to serve human needs or desires, and all natural forms have some claim to be preserved for their own sake.