

God the Problem

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The readings shared during this worship service can be found at the end of this sermon transcript.

Beloved friends, my dear companions, makers of meaning, breakers of bread *“I want to know if you are willing to live, day by day, with the consequence of love and the bitter unwanted passion of your sure defeat. I have heard, in that fierce embrace, even the Gods speak of God.”* My purpose this morning/afternoon is to invite you into a conversation and not into an argument. I am not a theologian but I do spend time thinking theologically. I do spend time thinking about the nature of God. Like many of you I once dismissed the question as irrelevant. But age and experience have caused me to return to the question of God and to encounter it in a new and different way.

I no longer look for proof. I no longer need to nail God down. But I do find that the more deeply I consider the nature of God the better acquainted I become with myself. Today I want to explore two movements in contemporary theology. I'll begin with a very elementary survey of what has become known as “process theology” and then move on to “personalism.” Let me apologize in advance to any scholars in the field who may be present. I make no claim beyond that of an interested amateur fascinated by efforts others have made to describe the experience of the holy in the hope that the attempt might just help others find their way to depth and transformation.

The early cyberneticist Warren McCullough wrote a pair of couplets, which might serve well as a starting place. *“Nature and nature’s laws lay hid by night.*

God said, ‘Let Newton be,’ and there was light.

It did not last, the devil howling ‘Ho,

Let Einstein be,’ restored the status quo.”

The 16th century brought stunning advances in the physical science. The work of Isaac Newton exemplified a shift in the dominant intellectual paradigm. It seemed as though the veils of mystery were being stripped away. The world was starting to make sense. Following in the footsteps of Copernicus and Galileo, Newton laid down laws, laws that he and his colleagues believed to be God-given and immutable. A sense of confidence and unending progress took hold in the Enlightenment and reached full-flower in 19th century England. Human possibilities seemed unlimited.

For 19th century religious liberals God was a distant figure, the Deists would say “a clockmaker” who, having created the world and set it in motion sat back in stern amusement to see what we might do with it.

The First World War brought that charming image crashing down as tens of millions died in Europe’s dismal trenches. And for what? In the wake of World War One it seemed, to many thoughtful people, that old images of God could no longer serve. The doctrine of progress, the gospel of onward and upward forever was lost in the horror. That God began to die.

But what didn’t die, what never dies is the human need not just to apprehend the mystery but to be embraced and held by something larger than ourselves.

The seminal figure in the history of process theology is Cambridge mathematician and Harvard philosophy professor, Alfred North Whitehead. Taking Darwin seriously Whitehead moved beyond the notion of God as “Being” to posit a new view of God as “Becoming” or, if you will, God as process.

Informed first by evolutionary science and then by the revolutionary work of Albert Einstein, process theology is a theology of change and freedom. God is a process not a person, a verb and not a noun. God is becoming, growing, changing, never static, not a thing but, in 60’s parlance, a happening. This new world view helped move theological thought beyond the ancient authoritarian image of God the King or God the Ultimate Judge. If God is a Being actively directing the affairs of humanity then the First World War must be a proof text of God’s failure to love those whom God created and what good is God without love.

Progressive intellectuals concerned with the nature of God fell into two camps in the early 20th century. On one side were the seminal process theologians. On the other were the Humanists. The first Humanist manifesto, published in 1933, sets aside the question of the nature of God and insists instead in the primacy of human consciousness as the essential guiding force for world community. The question of creation is left to science to unravel. The preamble to the Manifesto begins:

The time has come for widespread recognition of the radical changes in religious beliefs throughout the modern world. The time is past for mere revision of traditional attitudes. Science and economic change have disrupted the old beliefs. Religions the world over are under the necessity of coming to terms with new conditions created by a vastly increased knowledge and experience. In every field of human activity, the vital movement is now in the direction of candid and explicit humanism.

In the midst of the depression, reeling from the horrors of the “war to end all wars” a few brave souls, among them 9 Unitarian and Universalist ministers saw fit to declare that God was not only dead but irrelevant. Grappling with the same set of

issues Whitehead and his colleagues took a quite different approach. Rather than deciding the word God was outmoded and useless they found the word itself too powerful to be relinquished to the forces of literalism.

In that same year, 1933, Whitehead published, Adventures of Ideas. He started out as a mathematician He was thesis advisor to Bertrand Russell and co-author of Principia Mathematica. He then moved toward philosophy he eventually found his way to the metaphysics of religion. Now listen carefully though Whitehead's language is extremely dense I also find it useful and inspiring. He uses the word "peace" in reference to what I call the experience of the Holy.

The Peace that is here meant is not the negative conception of anaesthesia. It is a positive feeling which crowns the "life and motion" of the soul. It is hard to define and difficult to speak of. It is not a hope for the future, nor is it an interest in present details. It is a broadening of feeling due to the emergence of some deep metaphysical insight, unverballed and yet momentous in its coordination of values. Its first effect is the removal of the stress of acquisitive feeling arising from the soul's preoccupation with itself. Thus peace carries with it a surpassing of personality. There is an inversion of relative values. It is primarily a trust in the efficacy of Beauty. It is a sense that fineness of achievement is as it were a key unlocking treasures that the narrow nature of things would keep remote. There is thus involved a grasp of infinitude, an appeal beyond boundaries. Its emotional effect is the subsidence of turbulence which inhibits. More accurately, it preserves the springs of energy, and at the same time masters them for the avoidance of paralyzing distractions. The trust in the self-justification of Beauty introduces faith, where reason fails to reveal the details.

Here Whitehead is struggling to express the inexpressible. He's attempting to point to that same peace, which the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians acknowledges as being beyond our understanding, the "peace which passeth all understanding." I admit to having had to read Whitehead's words repeatedly in order to have them ring true. But they do.

By the late 1930's, inspired by their master's words, the Whiteheadeans, soon to be known, as the process theologians became the dominant voices on the faculty of the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. The "Chicago School" worked to maintain a hold on the concept of God while attempting to make God acceptable to modern intellectual thought. In this same period the neo-orthodox Christian theologians growing out of 19th century German Protestantism and led by such figures as Paul Tillich,

Reinhold Niebur and Karl Barth were advocating the restoration of a Christ-centered perspective rooted in an understanding the personhood of God.

Process theology may well appeal to the educated intellectual but there is little if any relationship to be found there. Those who look to God for comfort and companionship tend to be drawn to God as Being, to a personal God, to a God who walks with them, a God into whose arms they can surrender. Bread, after all, is God to the poor. I find that I live in the tension between these two views. Though I appreciate the intellectual honesty of the process theologians my heart leaps up in response to the poetry of those who would posit a personal God.

This is taken from an interview Unitarian Universalist minister, The Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt, conducted with Coretta Scott King, "Oh, I went to Unitarian churches for years, even before I met Martin," she told me, explaining that she had been, since college, a member of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, which was popular among Unitarians and Universalists. "And Martin and I went to Unitarian churches when we were in Boston."

"What surprised and saddened me most was what she said next. Though I am paraphrasing, the gist of it was this:" "We gave a lot of thought to becoming Unitarian at one time, but Martin and I realized we could never build a mass movement of black people if we were Unitarian."

Though drawn to process theology and to the liberal religious perspective, Martin and Coretta King, realized that the embrace of a personal God was key to a liberating faith. Those who walk the stoney road to freedom often long for a God who will walk at their side.

These are the words of Martin Luther King Jr. written in the year 1963. *"The agonizing moments through which I have passed during the last few years have also drawn me closer to God. More than ever before I am convinced of the reality of a personal God. True, I have always believed in the personality of God. But in the past the idea of a personal God was little more than a metaphysical category that I found theologically and philosophically satisfying. Now it is a living reality that has been validated in the experiences of everyday life. God has been profoundly real to me in recent years. In the midst of outer dangers I have felt an inner calm. In the midst of lonely days and dreary nights I have heard an inner voice saying, "Lo, I will be with you." When the chains of fear and the manacles of frustration have all but stymied my efforts, I have felt the power of God transforming the fatigue of despair into the buoyancy of hope. I am convinced that the universe is under the control of a loving purpose, and that in the struggle for righteousness man has cosmic companionship. Behind the harsh*

appearances of the world there is a benign power. To say that this God is personal is not to make him a finite object besides other objects or attribute to him the limits of human personality; it is to take what is finest and noblest in our consciousness and affirm its perfect existence in him. It is certainly true that human personality is limited, but personality as such involves no necessary limitations. It means simply self-consciousness and self-direction. So in the truest sense of the word, God is a living God. In him there is feeling and will, responsive to the deepest yearnings of the human heart: this God both evokes and answers prayer.

Though their understandings of the Nature of God are radically different both King and Whitehead speak of “feeling and will” and of “the deepest yearnings of the human heart.” At a certain point one asks the pragmatic question, What works? Each perspective has its pitfalls. Each perspective has its strengths. Each perspective is a brave attempt to find a framework to inform and cultivate the experience of the holy, what Whitehead calls “Peace” what King calls “self-consciousness and self-direction.”

My hope in offering this exploration has been to spark and inspire your own. Over the thirty years or so that I’ve taken theology seriously I’ve spent useful time with all three perspectives I’ve referred to here. My heart is far too restless to anchor long in one safe harbor. The one thing I’m now sure of is that disbelief is not the answer. It will not do the job. Authenticity and depth, spiritual peace, self-consciousness and self-direction cannot be won by disbelief. It may be true but it will never be enough. And so I end with another brief poem by Warren McCullough. McCullough began his academic career as a neuro-anatomist and eventually worked in Eccles and Von Neuman in building the first binary computers. A hard scientist if ever there was one McCullough wrote these words:

*Yesterday, Christ thought for me in the morning,
Nietzsche in the afternoon.
Today I shall think for myself all day long.
That is why I am rubbing my hands.*

May it be so and amen.

You Who Are Literal

You who are literal even in love,
who treat each word
as journeyman to a fact,
consider the ambiguity of birds:
the owl's pentameter, for instance
the jay who names
his territories aloud—
you label those martial cries
song. And the weather:
the operatic fall of snow
buries alive with its grace notes
the roots of trees.
We are only translators, uneasy
unequipped.
in the hungry dawn
strange syllables stain our mouths
like berries picked deep
in the woods. Bitter or healing
poisonous or sweet
how are we to say?

Linda Pastan

From Adventures of Ideas

The Peace that is here meant is not the negative conception of anaesthesia. It is a positive feeling which crowns the "life and motion" of the soul. It is hard to define and difficult to speak of. It is not a hope for the future, nor is it an interest in present details. It is a broadening of feeling due to the emergence of some deep metaphysical insight, un verbalized and yet momentous in its coordination of values. Its first effect is the removal of the stress of acquisitive feeling arising from the soul's preoccupation with itself. Thus peace carries with it a surpassing of personality. There is an inversion of relative values. It is primarily a trust in the efficacy of Beauty. It is a sense that fineness of achievement is as it were a key unlocking treasures that the narrow nature of things would keep remote. There is thus involved a grasp of infinitude, an appeal beyond boundaries. Its emotional effect is the subsidence of turbulence which inhibits. More accurately, it preserves the springs of energy, and at the same time masters them for the avoidance of paralyzing distractions. The trust in the self-justification of Beauty introduces faith, where reason fails to reveal the details.

Alfred North Whitehead

Self Portrait

It doesn't interest me if there is one God
or many gods.
I want to know if you belong or feel
abandoned.
If you know despair or can see it in others.
I want to know
if you are prepared to live in the world
with its harsh need
to change you. If you can look back
with firm eyes
saying this is where I stand. I want to know
if you know
how to melt into that fierce heat of living
falling toward
the center of your longing. I want to know
if you are willing
to live, day by day, with the consequence of love
and the bitter
unwanted passion of your sure defeat.

I have heard, in that fierce embrace, even
the gods speak of God.

-- David Whyte