

Earth Day Sermon: April 22, 2018, Euclid United Methodist Church

Michael S. Hogue, Professor of Theology, Ethics and Philosophy of Religion (Meadville Lombard Theological School)

Responsive Reading: Selections from St. Francis' The Canticle of Creatures

Contemporary Word: Denise Levertov, "Credo," second stanza of "Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus": I believe the earth / exists, and / in each minim mote / of its dust the holy / glow of thy candle. / Thou / unknown I know, / thou spirit, / giver, / lover of making, of the / wrought letter, / wrought flower, / iron, deed, dream. / Dust of the earth, / help thou my / unbelief. Drift / gray become gold, in the beam of / vision. I believe with / doubt. I doubt and / interrupt my doubt with belief. Be, / beloved, threatened world. / Each minim / mote. / Not the poisonous luminescence forced / out of its privacy. / The sacred lock of its cell / broken. No, / the ordinary glow / of common dust in ancient sunlight. / Be, that I may believe. Amen.

I. Opening comments...

a. Theology as infinite game...

b. Let me start by saying what I'm gonna say: it's reflected in the poem's themes... play b/t belief in existence of earth, doubt regarding existence of God... *in this sermon I'd like for us to play with a paradox...the paradox that if we seek to love God [the fullness of God], liberate all [including God], and live green [by knowing God in and through the Earth and recognizing that each "minim mote" of things matters], then it might be time to free ourselves, and God, from the idea that God exists...*

c. This is because, as I see it, the idea of an existent God is theologically and spiritually diminishing, socially and ecologically divisive, and morally distracting... let me explain.

II. Theological Reasons for letting go of the idea that God exists...

a. The idea of an existent God diminishes the fullness of the reality of God because an existent God is a separatist God, an entity beyond and other from the world; and now, more than ever, given the state of the Earth System, and our addiction to an economic and energy system that literally fuels ecological destruction, we need to be attuned to the fullness of God's inhabitation of the world, and the world's inhabitation of God...

b. The idea that God exists is a reduction of the reality of God because the category/concept of existence shrinks God into something pocket-size, manageable for our meager brains...the concept of an existent God, a being among others but supreme, is simply a projection and enlargement of our experience of being human...to the extent this is the case, then an existent God is an idol, a figment of

human finitude, a concept of divinity diminished by the dimness of our theological imagination...

- c. But if God doesn't exist, and shouldn't be thought to exist (in this case, for theological and spiritual reasons), then how can/should God be thought?
 - i. Instead of thinking that God exists, we might find it more spiritually interesting, and even more reverent, to imagine that God MAY BE...a God of the perhaps rather than a God that is...
 - ii. Perhaps...rather than a being who is supreme among other beings, God may be the ground of being as such...pure possibility rather than pure actuality;
 - iii. Perhaps...rather than a subject, object or noun, God may be an event, verb, or adverb, a process rather than an entity;
 - iv. Perhaps...rather than being the causal Creator, God may be the creativity inextricably entangled with nature...
 - v. if so, then we may imagine nature, in whole and part, as the ecology of God, and everything from the Big Bang to birdsong to baby's breath as the incarnate shape and sound of God...
- d. If we imagine God in this way, not as an existent supreme being, but as an entangled and still unfolding sacred event, then, as one philosopher has said (ANWhitehead), it is as true to say that the world creates God as that God creates the world, that God is weak as that God is powerful, that God is ignorant as that God is knowing, that God is hidden as that God is revealed;
- e. Since to be hidden as well as revealed is to be more than merely revealed, to be ignorant as well as knowing is to be more than merely knowing, and to be weak as well as powerful is to be more than merely powerful...then, far from denying God, letting go of God's existence makes it possible for us to relate to the fuller reality of God...

III. Spiritual, social, and ecological reasons to affirm a non-existent God

- a. In addition to being theologically diminishing, the idea of an existent God is also socially and ecologically divisive...a God whose existence is based on separation from

the world not only divides us from God, but it divides us from one another and from the Earth itself...

- b. Thus, if we seek and need a God that is intimately concerned with us and with which we are intimately concerned, that is, a habitable God, we should consider letting go of the existence of God...
- c. This is because the idea of an existent supreme being that is all-powerful and all-knowing, and wholly other from us and the world, is intrinsic to the story that God created the world from nothing, ex nihilo (which, by the way, is not a story from the Bible...in the Bible, God creates out of chaos, tehom)...
- d. The (ex nihilo) story is socially, and ecologically divisive in the following ways...
 - i. For one, the idea that God created the world from nothing...all on His own and without any help...is about as patriarchal of an idea of God as it's possible to imagine...
 - ii. This ex nihilo God who creates from nothing, without any help, sounds a lot like someone else we know (DJT)...a self-sufficient solitary creator of all things, this God claims to know the system better than anyone else and that he alone can fix things...
 - iii. The idea of a God who makes the world out of nothing supports the idea of God as premier potentate or divine dominatrix...
- e. In other words, the concept of an existent God who created the world from nothing leads to the lauding of power as rule and domination...to have power is to have power over, and against...
 - i. The lauding of this idea about power has been used to legitimate all other relations of domination...whether of Kings over kingdoms, owners over slaves, whites over all others, blue lives over black lives, men over women, straight over queer, human over animal, and humanity over the Earth itself...
- f. But if we replace the idea of an existent Supreme Being God with the ecological idea of an entangled God, a God that is not a separate being but, as ground of being, intimately pervades all beings and relations among beings, a God of the Big Bang, birdsong, and baby's breath, then we can imagine God as the Most Moved rather than an Unmoved Mover [Hartshorne]....

- g. **A Most Moved Mover is a relational God, a God that, rather than being the first cause of all things may be the first companion of all things, rather than a solitary Creator God a God of creatural solidarity, a God who feels the world and all that is in it, from the inside...a God we can know and experience in our ignorance and unknowing, our weakness and vulnerability, and even in our own hiddenness from ourselves...**

IV. Ethical/Political Implications

- a. **To let go of an existent, separatist God is thus not to reject God, as such, but to reject the sufficiency of the concept of existence for God.**
 - i. **If God refers to that reality which most ultimately and intimately concerns us, then God is not a being. And if God is not a being, then the question of whether God exists is a distracting category mistake: God doesn't exist because God isn't a being...**
 - ii. **But...and here's the kicker...to deny the existence of God, on grounds that it's a theological mistake, is to open ourselves and the Earth to the fuller reality of God.**
 - iii. **I would say that denying the existence of God deepens and radicalizes Euclid's missional commitment to loving God, liberating all, and living green.**
- b. **First, loving God:**
 - i. **If we let go of the idea that God exists as a being among others, but supreme, then God is neither out there nor up there, neither separate from nor higher than the world.**
 - ii. **Instead, God is always here, in our hearts and minds, in our deepest down secrets, in the "dark woods" of our lives, in our known unknowns and our unknown unknowns.**
 - iii. **When God is not up there or out there, as a supreme existing Being, God becomes continuous presence with, among and between us, a God that feels us and loves us and knows us from the inside-out.. .**
 - iv. **If God is not, then God may be everywhere, and there is no possibility of getting outside the love of God—which brings us to...**
- c. **Liberating all. Two senses of liberation: spiritual and social.**
 - i. **Spiritual: To let go of an existent God can be spiritually liberating: it frees us from the historically interminable and the existentially intolerable debate about whether God exists.**

1. We begin to see that the debate about God's existence turns God into a finite game: there are certain rules we must play by, the rules of logic, evidence, and argument, and the object of the game is to win, either by demonstrating that God exists or doesn't.
 2. But by rejecting the relevance of existence to God, we discover God as an infinite game...the point of which is not to win, but to continue playing...through prayer and praise, through doubt and unbelief, through tears and laughter.
- ii. Social: to let go of an existent God is also, as previously mentioned, to be freed from ideas about power and hierarchy that have divided and degraded and deformed us for too long. If we live and move and have our being in the image of God, and if God is first companion rather than first cause, most moved rather than unmoved, if God is in creative solidarity with us and the Earth rather than being a solitary creator, then we are failing God, the Earth and ourselves whenever we are not companionship the least of these, whenever we are indifferent or unmoved in the face of suffering, whenever we are not in solidarity with those who are most vulnerable, whether human, animal, vegetable or mineral.

d. Third, living green.

- i. To let go of an existent God, to affirm that God is not (an existent Supreme Being), frees God to live more fully for us and with us, where "us" certainly includes all of us [queer or transgender, able-bodied and differently-abled, naughty or nice], but also where "us" includes all that is animal, vegetable, and mineral, earthly, galactic and cosmic, the magnificently still-unfolding creatural continuum of creation.
- ii. Freeing God from the limits of being liberates us to find the fullness of God in the wholeness and holiness of all things, quantum and cosmic, particle and wave...it is to meet God in each minium mote, in "the ordinary glow of common dust in ancient sunlight".
- iii. To let go of an existent God is to discover the unfolding Universe as God's unfathomable body and to see the Earth as sacred ecology...
- iv. When God doesn't exist because God is not a being, we find God enfleshed, emplaced, and ensouled everywhere; when there is no outside of God, everything becomes holy...
- v. When God is not, but is entangled, then God is vulnerable...when we harm the Earth and others we cause actual harm to God, not merely God's creation; when God is entangled, and the Earth is sacred ecology, then the endangering of environments and species becomes the endangering of the divine, ecocide becomes deicide.

- vi. **The flipside of all of this is that every little thing matters, not only every "minum mote" of matter, but also every little one of our acts and decisions...there is no act too small and no decision too minor not to make a difference...when we install solar panels and use biodegradable plates and forks, when we choose geothermal heating and cooling systems, and when we use reusable bags, we are loving God as well as living green.**

- e. **I close with a quote from the Brazilian ecofeminist theologian, Ivone Gebara:**
 - i. **Recognizing the role of theological symbols and language in the relationships between environmental degradation and gender, sexual and racial oppression, she wrote that: "[W]e need to begin again at all levels of our activity and reconstruct the unity that we really are.... [W]e will welcome our own mortality along with that of the birds and flowers, of our dreams and our gods. We will welcome the transformation of our individual bodies into the mystery of our Sacred Body. And we will do this precisely because life rushed into this universe and became vibrantly mortal. [T]he love of this instant must be intense, respect for all beings is a duty, the struggle for justice is a light for us all, and happiness is possible and is the right of all beings. / There is beauty in this indissoluble unity and in the intercommunion that invites us to develop life options that refuse to put off justice and tenderness until tomorrow, or happiness until some imagined eternity; life options that take a new look at what seems ephemeral and accidental--at the passing moment, a sunset, a flower...even at death itself" (Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 57).**

 - ii. **My invitation for us today has been to consider how the idea that God exists diminishes God, divides us from God and one another, and distracts us morally from what really matters.**
 - 1. **Now, more than ever, on an Earth Day as dire as this one, we need to know, love, and be loved by the fuller reality of God;**
 - 2. **we need to be united together, with the Earth, and with God;**
 - 3. **and we need to focus on what really matters, the vulnerability of all that is animal, vegetable, and mineral, the preciousness and precariousness of the planet, even the mattering of matter itself and of course the Earth System that sustains us.**
 - 4. **In other words, if we seek to love God, liberate all, and live green in a habitable world, then we should free ourselves, and God, from the idea that God exists. The paradox is that by letting go of our finite need for a God that exists we may find ourselves drawn more fully into the infinite life of God...**