

**God For Us**  
**Self-Giving Love As God's Identity And Activity**

Dr. Carol Jacobson  
Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary

First Congregational Church of Berkeley  
November 25, 2001

I want to thank you for this opportunity to come and speak with you today about the Christian doctrine of God – about who God is and what God does. My name is Carol Jacobson, and I teach systematic theology and Christian education at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley. I was excited to hear about the seven-week theology series you are doing here at FCCB and was glad that Jen asked me to be a part of it.

So – how to think about God? As you can see from your handout, I want to touch on three topics that will hopefully open up this broad question for us. First, I want to talk a bit about the fact that how we think about, and how we speak about God really matters. Then I want to spend some time talking about God's identity and God's activity, which I will argue really are the same thing when you think about it. Lastly, I want to think with you about the complex theological problems that arise for thinking about God when we consider the reality of human suffering in our world.

### **Talk About God Matters**

As a way of beginning, then, let me suggest that how we think and how we speak about God really does matter. We all know that human beings do not all understand who God is and/or how God acts in the world in the same way. Those of us living in these profoundly disturbing political, economic, and religious times know this all too well. Certainly, ours is not the only generation to see conflict, hostility, and even bloodshed on a massive scale surrounding questions about who God is. But it is difficult to get our minds and hearts "around" the way in which it seems to be happening all over again since September 11<sup>th</sup>. Perhaps, then, I have already made my first point – how we understand God matters. But let's dig a little deeper into just *why* it matters how we speak of God and understand God.

Theologian Karl Rahner [1904-84] describes what Christians mean by the word "God" in this way:

God is not "something" beside other things that can be integrated into a common homogeneous system. If we say "God" we mean the whole, not indeed a sum of the phenomena to be examined, but the whole in its incomprehensible and ineffable origin and ground which transcends that whole to which we, and our knowledge, belong. ... God is the silent

mystery, absolute, unconditioned and incomprehensible. ... The true God is the absolute, sacred mystery to which one can only point in silent adoration. For God is the silent abyss and thus the ground of the world and of our knowledge of it.<sup>1</sup>

And yet, in another place, Rahner describes what Christians mean by God in this way:

There is no longer any abyss between God and the world. God is already in the midst of all the poor things of this earth, which we cannot leave because it is our mother. God is in the wordless expectation of all creatures ... God is in the history of the earth ... God is in the beggar to whom we give ... God is in our powerlessness ... God is with us like the light of day and the air which we do not notice. But God is there, the heart of this earthly world and the secret seal of its eternal validity.<sup>2</sup>

Well, you may be asking, "Which one is it? Is God remote and the ground of all reality, or is God as close to us as the air we breathe?" Is God beyond our comprehension or as close and familiar to us as sunlight? How we answer these questions matters. Rahner would say that we must resist the temptation to choose between the two. Rather, Christians can and must say both at the same time. God is greater than we can define and closer than we can imagine.

Indeed, the temptation to "choose sides" impoverishes and endangers talk about who God is throughout the history of the church. Some theologians and communities of faith tend to emphasize God's "otherness" and the real abyss and difference that exists between God and the world, sometimes to the near exclusion of God's being for us and with us. Theologian Marcus Borg's term for this theological understanding of God is "supernatural theism" by which he means "a notion of God as a supernatural being 'out there.'"<sup>3</sup> [Draw the picture of two circles – one above – God/one below – world].

On the other hand, other theologians and communities of faith have a tendency to emphasize God's presence in this world almost to the point of forgetting that the creator of the cosmos and our creator – is more than -- and prior to -- our own understandings of God. Such communities of faith I will say, advocate for a "natural theism" in thinking about God and God's relationship to the world. [Draw the picture of one circle – God and the world the same].

---

<sup>1</sup> Karl Rahner, "God is No Scientific Formula" in *Grace in Freedom*, trans. Hilda Graef (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 191-92. Inclusive language mine.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Rahner, "A Faith That Loves The Earth" in *Everyday Faith*, trans. by W. J. O'Hara (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 81-82. Inclusive language mine.

<sup>3</sup> Marcus Borg, *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 12.

In the last 25 years or so, theologians have rediscovered the benefits of speaking about God with both of these languages together. God, they say, is more than the sum of the universe's parts, yet the whole universe is in God. God is both beyond our intellectual grasp and closer to our world than we can imagine. This way of speaking about God is usually called "panen-theism" -- the cosmos is in God and God is greater than the cosmos. [Draw the picture – two circles – world inside God].

In a way, the icon I have brought with me today is a visual image of the way in which panentheists want to speak about God – as beyond the scope of our world and our imagination, and yet intimately connected to both our world and our imagination. We see God outside the world as the One holding the world, and we see that the world is cradled as the very heart of God.

### **Self-Giving Love as God's Identity and Activity**

Can this panentheistic way of understanding who God is – both forever beyond us and intimately connected with us – help us understand not only who God is for Christians, but also what it is that God is doing in our world? Of course, I want to say that it can. It's one thing to talk about who God is, after all – but quite another to have theological conversation about what God is doing in the world, if anything at all.

Let me begin by suggesting that a panentheistic way of thinking about who God is has deep within it the conviction that God and the world are closely connected with one another. Remember, as Rahner says – "there is no longer any abyss between God and the world [and he means not since the death and resurrection of Jesus]." God's activity and the world's activities affect one another on every level.

Also important is just what sort of activities we understand God to be about in our world and outside planet Earth. What do we, as Christians know about God's work in our world? If we consider all that the Scriptures and our traditions have to say about this, we'll be here a mighty long time! And yet, in one way, what Christians have to say is rather simple, and profound. Ours is a God who gives of God's own self for the sake of the life of the world. This divine self-giving is something we do not cause, or possess, or ever lose. It belongs to the very nature of God to be self-giving – and self-giving for a purpose – the ongoing life of the world.

So, God is beyond the scope of the world, and intimately present everywhere in the world. God gives God's very self to the world and is the heart of the world. Now we're ready to look at three ways the Christian tradition has of speaking about God's identity and God's activity – and notice how these ways give content

and meaning to both the person of God on the one hand; and the activity of God on the other. Indeed, identity and activity imply one another from the beginning.

### God as Creator

Christian faith has always embraced the conviction that it is the same God we worship who has created each of us, the earth, the cosmos, and indeed all that exists. God is fundamentally both creator and creative. Were it not so, the world and reality as we know and experience it would not exist. As Rahner expresses it, we say of God the creator

that the world is the event of God's self-giving communication, the ecstasy of God's love that would lavish itself outwardly on that which God is not. The tremendous outburst of this self-giving love, already sufficient to itself, creates from nothingness a world on which it can freely lavish itself. God's love, which in its eternal glory needs nothing, creates not so much to guide the world as an external force, ...but in order to entrust God's Self to the world, thus letting it become the fate of divine love.<sup>4</sup>

Here is the first way, then, that God's identity and God's activity coincide -- in the self-giving love that brings forth the cosmos and all reality as we know it.

### God as Redeemer

Also central to Christian faith is the conviction that God has entered into the life of our world in a definitive way in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. In the person of Jesus, God's self-giving love becomes a particular human being – God truly with us as one of us. In a world that has become increasingly deaf to God and broken in its life together -- God enters, and never leaves. God the creator is God the redeemer – God, the repairer of all brokenness. Once again, God's identity as self-giving love becomes creative, and in so doing saves the world from itself, from its self-destructive tendencies, and saves the world for its true future. Rahner writes,

God has entered into the world forever by his death and resurrection. ... God's life dwells in the world. If we seek the God of infinity ... *and* the familiar earth as it is to become, ... then one way leads to both. For in Jesus' resurrection God has shown that God has taken the earth to God's self forever.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Karl Rahner, "The World and History as the Event of God's Self-Communication" in *Servants of the Lord*, trans. R. Strachan (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 16. Inclusive language mine.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Rahner, "A Faith That Loves The Earth," in *Everyday Faith*, trans. W.J. O'Hara (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 82-83. Inclusive language mine.

God's identity – self-giving love – *is* God's activity -- in taking the earth to God's self forever. And vice versa, I would add. That is, God's redeeming *activity* reveals to us God's fundamental *identity* as self-giving love.

### God as Sustainer

Lastly, let's turn our attention to another of the traditional ways in which Christians understand the identity and activity of God – that of God as sustainer. Not only does God's self-giving love bring reality and our own lives into existence; not only does God's self-giving love come into our world as the promise and the power of its salvation; but Christian faith also affirms that God's self-giving love continues to act in our world and in our very own lives to sustain and keep us.

God's self-giving love is neither exhausted by or limited to either the activity of creating or the activity of redeeming – indeed, God's self-giving love continuously expresses itself anew each day in the giving of both a cosmic and a personal future. As Rahner explains,

In the midst of all this world, at a thousand different times and places, in a thousand forms, the one thing occurs which produces and sustains it all: the silent coming of God. ... It can occur anywhere, in forms ever new, and does in fact occur, though we can never point with certitude to any particular evidence. ... This mystery may occur anywhere, because everything originates in the self-giving love of God. ... It is the beginning of both God's victory and ours.<sup>6</sup>

Only when God is understood as continuously creating, redeeming, and sustaining the life of the Earth and of the cosmos, can we come to know who God really is, and who God really is for us. One final word about this that should be said. I have been speaking about God as the creator, redeemer, and sustainer of all that exists. This is most certainly the case. But God, Christians believe, is also the creator, redeemer and sustainer of our lives of faith as well. It is God who is the creator, redeemer, and sustainer of what St. Paul calls "the hope that is in us." As the panentheists would say – God is beyond our ability to comprehend, but also closer to each of us than we can imagine.

### God and Suffering

Our conversation so far this morning has been focused around what the Christian tradition understands about who God is and what God does in the world. We

---

<sup>6</sup> Karl Rahner, "The World and History as the Event of God's Self-Communication" in *Servants of the Lord*, trans. R. Strachan (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 20. Inclusive language mine.

have spoken about God's fundamental and irrevocable connection to our world – a connection that is creative, redemptive, and sustaining. I would suspect that the particular way I have chosen to present a "doctrine" of God appeals to us for a variety of reasons. It focuses on God's identity, not as static characteristics, but as activities undertaken for the sake of the world. It affirms God as being much more than a "spectator" either to world events or to our personal lives. And it professes that self-giving love is the very heart of who God is and the very life-blood of God's activities in the world.

Any understanding of who God is and what God does in the world, however, faces a serious challenge to itself when it faces the question of ongoing suffering in the world and in our own lives. How can Christians believe and proclaim a doctrine of God as self-giving Lover of the world and not wonder – why is there suffering? why does it continue? where is this loving, self-giving God when we suffer? These are serious questions – questions without easy answers. I hope you are not thinking I have the answers to questions like these!

Perhaps, however, the understanding of God I have been articulating this morning, does provide a way to begin thinking about the reality of ongoing suffering. Theologian Dorothee Soelle tries to address the reality of suffering by posing two important questions we must ask when we ask about suffering and its so-called "meaning." These are, "what are the causes of suffering, and how can these conditions be eliminated? ... and "what is the meaning of suffering and under what conditions can it make us more human?"<sup>7</sup> In other words, Soelle is asking, is God the cause of suffering? Is God trying to teach us something when we suffer? To these two questions, I would add a third. If God is truly present everywhere in our world, where is God present in suffering?

Let me try to offer a way of thinking about this third question –is God present in suffering and if so, how? This question is especially poignant for us today as we grieve the intense sufferings of our world – famine, flood, war, poverty, racial violence, disease, homelessness – sadly, the list seems endless. How can our understanding of God as self-giving love poured out for the sake of the world give an account of the pervasive nature of suffering in the world?

I suggest that we look again at the icon I have brought this morning. Here we have the visual image of a God who cares deeply for the world and holds it close. Where is God when the world suffers? Suffering with it and holding it close? Where is God when senseless violence destroys the lives of countless people? Grieving with them, and holding them close. Where is God when our own lives have become too much to bear? Keeping watch with us and holding us close.

---

<sup>7</sup> Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering*, trans. E. Kalin (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 5.

More than this we cannot, in good conscience, say, I think. We cannot say that God is the cause of suffering, for example. We don't have to look to *God* as suffering's cause. We know ourselves to be this. Our greed, our short-sightedness, our love of being powerful – these are the causes of suffering, both personal and global. Nor can we say that God is one who uses suffering to punish us “for our own good.”

What we can say, however, seems like a lot nevertheless. The God we worship and commit our lives to is a God of never-ending self-giving love. This God rejoices with us, loves us, suffers with us, and will go the distance with us and with our world. God is close to all those who suffer, whether in body, mind, or spirit. And God is active in the world – continuously at work to put an end to all suffering; to give new life in the midst of death; and to comfort those who suffer. God holds us close, and wipes away every tear.

I want to thank you again for the opportunity to be here this morning. I want to end my remarks now, and offer the last 10 minutes or so for your questions and thoughts.

#### Some Suggested Reading

Borg, Marcus. *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997.

Hall, Douglas John. *God and Human Suffering: An Exercise in Theology of the Cross*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing, 1986.

Johnson, Elizabeth. *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*. New York: Crossroads, 1993.

Rahner, Karl. *Everyday Faith*. New York: Herder and Herder, 1968.

Soelle, Dorothee. *Suffering*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975.