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**Process theology sees the universe as creative interrelational dynamic and open to the future. In process theology, God is relational, present in every moment of our lives and in all entities and levels of being. The world is interconnected in effect a giant ecosystem where what harms or blesses one, harms or blesses all.**

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## Proper 9A

July 3, 2011

<b>Reading 1:</b> Song of Songs 2:8-13	<b>Reading 2:</b> Psalm 145:8-14	<b>Reading 3:</b> Romans 7:15-25a	<b>Reading 4:</b> Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30
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**By Jeanyne B Slettom**

### Song of Songs 2:8-13

Song of Songs is probably not at the top of a preacher's list for biblical books from which to preach—especially now that so many exegetes have dropped the pretense of this being an allegory for the love between God and Israel. But because of its context, it is not, by reverse logic, merely a secular love poem. By virtue of its being in the canon, we are required to give it theological consideration.

In her 1973 article, "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation" (*Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 41), Phyllis Trible does just this. She argues that the Song offers a positive view of human sexuality and egalitarian gender relations that, in part, refers back to the Garden of Eden.

Female and male are born to mutuality and love. They are naked without shame; they are equal without duplication. They live in gardens where nature joins in celebrating their oneness. Animals remind these couples of their shared superiority in creation as well as their affinity and responsibility for lesser creatures.

Fruits pleasing to the eye and tongue are theirs to enjoy. Living waters replenish their gardens. . . . Whatever else it may be, Canticles is a commentary on Gen.2-3. Paradise Lost is Paradise Regained. (47)

Wonderful stuff, but as important as it is for the church to affirm healthy sexuality, it is a difficult subject to address from the pulpit! So where does that leave us? As a process theologian, I zero in on the idea of enjoyment.

From a process perspective, God's love of all creation leads to God's desire for creaturely enjoyment. It is also frequently expressed as well-being, or flourishing, but Whitehead himself writes of the *mutuality of enjoyment*—that is, God enjoys our enjoyment. The goodness of human love, the organic beauty of the world, and the intrinsic value of creation—these are all things we experience, and since all our moments are received into God, it makes sense to cultivate experiences of beauty, of goodness, and love. (You can read more about this in Cobb and Griffin's *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition*.)

### Psalm 145:8-14

The crucial observation regarding this passage is how one understands the word translated as "dominion." According to biblical scholar [Jon Berquist](#), the word is derived from *mashal*, "a word often used in parallel to 'kingdom' or similar concepts." I see this as a precedent established in the King James Version--

understandable when a monarch commissions a translation and the equation of God and king is a legitimating strategy. But, again, according to Berquist, "the verb *masha* typically means 'to be like,'" which "suggests that God recognizes an enduring connection, and so maintains faithful responsibility/responsiveness to and with us."

Preachers who use this text and do not call attention to the word "dominion" will unconsciously reinforce old ideas about an omnipotent God. But in process terms, a God who is loving, compassionate, faithful, enduring, and gracious is a God both omnipresent and responsive—the "most moved mover," as Clark Pinnock and Marjorie Suchocki have written. These attributes are more helpful (and obviously more biblical) than the classic understanding of God as impassive.

With that hurdle cleared, what remains is a phrase that speaks powerfully to parishioners who are out of work or underemployed, struggling with mortgages or in foreclosure: "God upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down."

#### Romans 7:15-25a

"I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." How potent and poignant are those words! They resonate with anyone who has struggled with addiction, compulsions, or entrenched bad habits as clearly as if they were being spoken today. Substitute the unconscious for "the sin that dwells within me," or neural pathways, or the power of the past, and you have the "demons" named in so many of the healing stories of Jesus.

The take-away here is, first, that Paul puts us right in the thick of the problem, which reinforces the psychological need to acknowledge or own our situation without excuses or rationalization. Second, in naming Jesus Christ, he names the power of transformation—the creative, loving, and omnipresent power of God to take the wreckage of the world (or of our lives) and transform it into something better.

John Cobb calls Christ the principle of creative transformation. To name Jesus as the Christ is to acknowledge this transformative principle as determinative in his life. Another way to put it is to say that Jesus is the meta-narrative, and when we identify our stories with his, we absolutely can NOT stay on whatever our cross happens to be, because *that's not the way the story goes*. If we lose hope in our capacity to change, we are in effect identifying with the Roman soldiers—they knew exactly what would happen at a crucifixion. No other outcome, no other alternative, was possible. But to identify our stories with Jesus' is to open ourselves to the reality of God and the reality of transformation. It is to acknowledge that there is an alternative to whatever our situation happens to be, that God is actively guiding us to that alternative in every moment of our lives, which then calls for active "listening," on our part, in our "inmost selves."

#### Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

There are a number of directions that one could go with this text, but the one that calls out the loudest in these troubled times is to take vss. 28-30 and pair them with Psalm 145:14. ("God upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down.") The promise of rest speaks to all those who are overworked (the flip side of unemployment), and the invitation is so welcoming. ("Balm in Gilead" would be an appropriate hymn.)

All to the good—but then what is this "yoke"? The word itself refers to a wooden beam normally used between a pair of animals that enables them to work together in pulling a load. Etymologically, it derives from a verb meaning to unite or to join. The interesting question to ask, then, is who are the joined animals? "My yoke" might imply that Jesus is out there somewhere as the yoker, bringing people together. Perhaps a better understanding is that God is one doing the yoking, and Jesus offers himself as a partner to you and me, thus helping to pull the load.

This image is powerful, but it doesn't sidestep the fact that a yoke is still a yoke. It requires a commitment. It assumes there is a load to pull, and that it must be pulled. Well, what does it mean to be yoked to Jesus? Isn't it to be committed to the Jesus way? The way of compassion and equality, of inclusion and justice? And isn't it to be open to an alternative way of being in the world—not the way of Caesar and empire but of God and God's commonwealth? And isn't this the path of hope in God's transforming power?

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