

## Excerpts from *Preaching the Uncontrolling Love of God*

### Deep Withness

Jonathan J. Foster

*Science and faith harmonize along the idea that the entire universe—micro into macro, immaterial into material, and humanity into divinity—is flowing back and forth in complex waves of relationship. This “deep withness” is reality. It has profound implications for both your life and the life of the entire world.*

Sermon preached at Mission Church, Lenexa, Kansas, 2019

Once, when our youngest was about three, he got into trouble. I know it’s hard to believe that the little guy would break a rule, and honestly, his transgressions were few and far between, but something happened, and as a result, he was sent to “time out.”

Later, after time out was over, and after Dad had forgotten about the incident, loaded him into the car to head down the road and run an errand, he quietly said, “But Dad, you still wuv me, right?”

It’s been almost 20 years, and my heart still aches thinking about his question.

I pulled over, jumped out of the car, opened his door, and gave him a big hug. With my body draped over him and the car seat, I said, “Hey, bud, there’s nothing you could ever do to make me stop loving you.”

I remember giving him a big kiss on the cheek. He just smiled and stared up through the moon roof, as if he knew it all along, as if he was cool, as if there had never been any doubt.

You and I are emerging out of a variety of different backstories, and though I doubt anyone walked in here asking the three-year-old’s question—“But, God, you still wuv me, right?”—the reality is, your backstory could be full of difficult, challenging, and even hurtful experiences. It’d be understandable to wonder about God’s love for you.

To begin to address that issue, I want you to know upfront that I’m committed to the idea that God is love. I don’t know anything for certain, but by faith, I suspect this is true. It’s a remarkable claim, really, and means more than just God doing nice things.

Put it this way: That God is love is a deeper statement than God is *loving*. *Loving* suggests something God may do (or the shadow side of this idea, something God may not do), but love suggests what simply is. And what simply is (as if any of this is simple) is that love is with us. Where else would love be?

If God is love and love is with us, this would mean that God is not a separate being, an entirely different entity that chooses from time to time to move into our world to do something *loving*, because, well, God is already *here*. Love is here. It’s something I call a deep withness.

I suspect deep withness is the reality.

Interestingly, while science has no interest in making claims about God’s presence, the idea of withness is present within what it reveals, as well. It turns out that our best science, both in biological, physiological, and even psychological ways, tells us that everything is connected to

everything else—plants and oxygen, soil and climate, gravity and physics, desire and imitation, viruses both virtual and biological, etc.

And, of course, the sacred text hums with this reality. The psalmist in Psalm 139 says, “Where could I go to flee your presence?” Jesus assures us in Matthew 28:20, “I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.” Paul reminds us in Acts 17:28 that “in him, we live and move and have our being.”

In light of this, one could say that both science and faith harmonize along the idea that nothing is entirely separate; that the entire universe, from the micro to the macro, immaterial into material, and humanity into divinity, is flowing back and forth in complex waves of relationship. It’s all one song (i.e., uni-verse).

Separateness is an ontological impossibility....

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## Is God a Superhero?

HyunHui Kim

*What kind of power lies behind the ability to speak in different languages on the day of Pentecost?*

Reading: Acts 2:1-13

Sermon preached at West Grove UMC, Neptune, NJ, June 9, 2019.

“Jesus is my Superhero!” This energetic song from the Hillsong kids in 2004 has been loved by many children in Sunday schools ever since. The lyrics children enjoy most goes like this:

Jesus, you’re my superhero. You’re my star, my best friend.  
Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, better than Spiderman  
Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, better than Superman  
Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, better than Batman  
Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, better than anyone  
  
Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, better than Yugioh  
Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, better than Barbie  
Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, better than Action Man  
Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, better than anyone  
Jesus, you’re my superhero.

When singing this song, the children shout out the name of each hero, along with a distinctive movement aimed at representing that individual. In the visual images for this song, Jesus appears in hero costumes. Can you imagine the vigor and energy that the children generate as they mimic the characters of these superheroes? A sense of excitement and enthusiasm always fills the space the moment the song’s intro is played.

What comes to your mind when you think about a “Superhero”? Perhaps you think of the useful and cool superpower that each heroic figure possesses: superhuman strength, speed, and senses; the ability to wall-crawl, bat sling, become invisible or fly. However, the sort of power represented by the capacities of each hero is the kind of power that dominates and controls others or circumstances. To be powerful seems to mean projecting one’s will over others.

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We often project a similar understanding of what it means to be powerful onto God’s character. In our prayers, hymns, or praise songs, God’s power is often described as absolute, unlimited, or sovereign. But is divine power exclusively depicted in that way in Scripture? Is there any other way to understand divine power?

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Here, we find an interesting comparison. The power longed for and sought by human beings has to do with controlling, dominating, conquering, and ruling, but the power given with the coming of the Holy Spirit is the power to speak different languages, the power that fosters diversity and multiplicity.

This power does not manifest in one reflection, one knowledge, and one narrative. The power of the Holy Spirit is the kind of power that de-centers a single reflection, a single knowledge, and a single narrative, and instead inspires the multiple stories and testimonies that we experience in our own unique and different lives. The power that the Holy Spirit brings to us is the power that lures us to be open to diverse experiences, identities, and thoughts. This divine power encourages us to embrace flexibility and fluidity.

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[I]n the divine power manifested on the day of Pentecost, differences promote opportunities for new learnings, new experiences, new ways of thinking, and new creativities. Unity no longer means sameness. This divine power invites us to understand unity differently, and a clue to this new understanding is found in the scene of the people gathering on the day of Pentecost. For although all speak different languages, everyone nevertheless understands the message in their own tongues! If divine power works in this way, differences are not something to be erased in the interest of unity. Instead, unity is only truly experienced when we seek a harmony of differences in interrelated and interdependent relationships with God and each other.

Unity in harmony is what we experience when completing a jigsaw puzzle. Think of the thousands of pieces of different shapes, sizes, and colors in a jigsaw puzzle box. When all these different pieces are put together, they reveal a unified image.

The divine power revealed on the day of Pentecost empowers differences—different languages, different personalities, different gifts, and different abilities. Different cultures, different skin colors, different eye shapes, different hair textures, and different genders. These variations do not simply manifest mere differences. Instead, like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, each difference is a related difference.

Divine power is the power that lures us to explore God’s mysterious beauty in the entangled relations of the differences inherent in God’s creation. Divine power is the power that persuades us to be open to new possibilities to work together with these related differences to reveal God’s goodness, justice, love, and peace. Such divine power, poured out on the day of

Pentecost, has been flowing throughout history and to the present, empowering different stories and testimonies of God's love and grace....

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## **What's in a Name?**

Gabrie'l J. Atchison

*Here, I discuss the possibility of creating a Name Change Liturgy for transgender and nonbinary members of our congregations.*

In my mid-thirties, I moved back home to New York City to be near my family. At the time, my sister was attending Union Theological Seminary. Because I had a strong desire to reconnect with a church community, she told me about the Unity Fellowship Church Movement (UFCM), an LGBTQ+-affirming denomination with roots in the African American worship tradition. There were several UFCM congregations across the country, and the one closest to us was in Brooklyn, New York.

UFCM was founded in Los Angeles in 1979 by a charismatic, spiritual leader named Carl Bean. Bean actually started his career as a performer. He had a hit Disco song called, "I Was Born This Way!" Recognizing that African American gay men needed affirming spaces to heal from the devastation of HIV/AIDS and from the rejection of the church, Bean started his ministry. His simple message was, "God is love, and love is for everyone!" The message and the ministry spread to many predominately African American cities throughout the U.S. By the time I came on the scene in the early 2000s, UFCM was an established denomination and community, unique in its ability to raise up LGBTQ+ clergy.

UFCM services include the affirmation from 1 John 4:20, which says, "Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen" (NIV). Participating in UFCM created within me a desire to help mainstream, Protestant congregations become more inclusive of LGBTQ+ Christians. Decades later, I found Open and Relational Theology to be a helpful methodology for my work.

## **Open And Relational Theology as a Path to Transgender and Nonbinary Inclusion**

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Queer Theology is burgeoning collection of theories or "ways of thinking about God" that fit well under the umbrella of Open and Relational Theology. Queer Theology deemphasizes the divisions between humankind based on gender binaries and other forms of separation as well as the division between humankind and God while making central the interdependence of God, all living things, and the earth. Queer Theology, like Relational Theology, emphasizes our equal value to God and that who we are as creative beings matters to God. God is the energy that is created when we choose to show love to each other. We create God-energy by restoring dignity, meeting people's basic needs, and listening without judgment. The "open" part of Open and

Relational Theology emphasizes that we work in co-creation with God to produce better future possibilities. Open and Relational Theology provides the flexibility to look beyond traditionally held beliefs about sexuality and gender and creates a space for Transgender, Nonbinary, and Queer Christian inclusion.

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## **Speaking of God, Death & Dying**

Tracy L. Tucker

*Open and Relational language gives voice to a healthier understanding and more clinically satisfying encounter with people who are grieving.*

Half of a decade into my tenure as a hospice chaplain, I discovered what I should have observed already: a necessary tool for the work of supporting the patients I serve was missing. All of the required units of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) were behind me now. The requisite clinical hours were completed, and the paperwork was submitted in impressive fashion (at least that is how I remember it). The result was that I then passed the boards and was granted my Board Certification as a Chaplain (BCC). Impressed? I hope not. I still found myself reaching out for something that eluded my clinical grasp.

Leaping forward: I remember sitting in a swing under a tree in the front yard of the house where my wife had grown up. We were visiting her mother. The weather was nice in Tennessee with lots of sun and the wind wisping slightly, the fear of COVID-19 abated for the moment. It was a great place to read the book I had brought from home. As I read, the book began to grab my soul. Sitting in that moment with tears beginning to roll down my cheeks, I remember whispering the words “That’s it. That’s what I’ve been looking for.” In my hands sat Thomas Jay Oord’s, *The Uncontrolling Love of God: An Open and Relational Account of Providence*.

Before returning to the house to rejoin my extended family, I surfed Facebook and quickly located Professor Tom’s email address. Trying not to sound as excited as I was, I fired off an email and hoped that sometime in the future I might receive a reply. It didn’t take long, and we were in an ongoing dialogue that continues to this day. In my note to Tom, who has become a friend and mentor, I explained that reading through his work I had found something that I have been searching for: language. I had a lot of thinking and learning to do, but inadvertently had bumped into the one key tool I did not already possess: language for communicating what I believe about God, and concepts like death, dying, fate, and love. Open and Relational Theology (ORT) opens for me a channel of expression to say what I’m feeling in my inclinations about God and God’s activity in the universe and in the human spirit and experience....

### **God is First and Essentially Loving**

John, the epistle writer, states it clearly this way “God is love” (1 John 4:8). The entire cadence of the New Testament moves to the heartbeat of God expressing love for all: in the life, teachings, and passion of Jesus; and in the development of the church. Even the final sermon

where John the revelator imagines God through Jesus as the ultimate portrayal of divine, limitless compassion always reaching out, optimistically inviting all who will to embrace his love. God is love, and for those who lean toward ORT, love is necessarily the starting point of any understanding of God.

I recall at one point in my development I tended to start with God as sovereign, as large and in charge of all things. I felt safe with that point of view. Who wouldn't? If the right person is in charge, calling the shots and possessing the power to control, then the right things will certainly happen, and justice will prevail.

However, that doesn't, and didn't, work for very long. Even as I write this essay, a deadly war is raging between the Palestinians and their Israeli neighbors where families are being brutally destroyed and lives are being snuffed out. In response, Israel, instead of living into the grace of the God of their ancestry, is choosing to retaliate at an accelerated rate to prove they cannot be taken advantage of. Somehow, this simply doesn't sound like a world controlled by a sovereign God of love.

God, as imagined in ORT, is identified by love that is pure—not enabling, but empowering. The God of uncontrolling love is not free to impose a divine will or “plan” upon any part of creation. God values diversity and engages it in the good work of moving all of life toward a sense of well-being and universal peace. This is the essential love of God at work. In the world of hospice where I spend the bulk of my time, people are looking for peace and well-being, although some have interesting ways of talking about such. The language one employs in the face of loss conveys a great deal about that person's view of God and the relationship God has with the world. I hear it frequently in the whispers of grief and the quietness of unresolved pain. “Where is the God who is supposed to be taking care of things?” “Why is God putting me through this?” “Is God really trying to teach me something in this?”

Sometimes a family member trying to find meaning in the meaninglessness of loss and death gives expression to that loss in thunderous ways, “Why would God let my brother die like this?” or “I don't get how this could be part of some divine plan!” or “I don't want anything to do with a god who would let someone suffer so much.” Surely God is in control and has the power to act on that control and surely God could somehow stop the suffering. Couldn't he?

For ORT thinkers, the response is “no,” God's love is never controlling and although God is always working toward influencing and prompting creation toward well-being, God's essential, uncontrolling love simply can't unilaterally stop evil, intentional or natural....