

Introduction to *Preaching the Uncontrolling Love of God*

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This book presents a collection of sermons, essays, and worship elements that portray and highlight the experience of preaching and practicing open, relational, and process theologies—primarily in Christian and Unitarian Universalist congregations.

While there is plenty of deeply meaningful and transformative theology contained in these pages, this is not a book of theology. It is a book about how to put specific theological perspectives into practice. You might call it a “how-to” manual. This book is intended as a resource for those who are already bringing process, relational, and open theologies into local church worship, preaching, and teaching. It is also for those who are new to open, relational, and process theologies and want to learn how others have introduced them to their congregations. The book’s audience in local congregations will be clergy, ministers of worship arts, worship planning teams, music leaders, and lay persons with a passion for theological study and understanding. Importantly, this book will be a valuable resource in preaching, worship, and practical theology classes at seminaries and theological schools.

When I found my way back to the church after a 20-year sojourn in atheism and left-wing political activism, I immediately gravitated to those who called themselves “progressive Christians.” In the United Methodist Church in New York, I became active in anti-racism work, the struggle for LGBTQ+ inclusion, activism around immigration, and more. My progressive faith was focused on social justice work and Martin Luther King Jr.’s vision of beloved community. But my Christian faith and practice had a very weak and amorphous theological foundation – a pot-pourri of social gospel, feminist, liberation, and Wesleyan perspectives lacking an overarching framework.

I had heard about process-relational theology since the early 2000s, when I first entered seminary, aspiring to become a second-career ordained minister. But I had not given it a serious study. By 2016, the worship planning team at the Church of the Village—where the regional bishop had recently appointed me—considered process theology as a live option in our discernment. However, it was not yet a dominant theological framework for us. In addition to an assistant pastor and me, that team included the Minister of Worship Arts and the Chair of Worship, who had both studied process theology. I began to take it seriously in early 2017, when I ordered C. Robert Mesle’s book, *Process Theology: A Basic Introduction* (1993). Then, in the spring of 2020, I embarked on an intensive and ongoing study. Through the late summer and fall of 2020, Church of the Village worship featured many sermons from a process-relational perspective preached by me and others.

When I began to grasp the breadth and deep significance of process-relational and open and relational theology, it was a revelation to me. Process theology gave me a systematic theological framework with a sound metaphysical and philosophical grounding. I realized that I had been preaching process-aligned theological concepts for years before I knew what that was. I have discovered that many clergy unconsciously preach open, relational, and process ideas. Also, it is clear to me that process, open, and relational concepts have been incorporated into the thinking and practice of many Christian denominations and congregations, even though they are not recognized explicitly as such.

Moreover, many clergy preach from process, open, relational perspectives but do so without using the theological language of process-relational or open and relational theologies. Some do that intentionally to avoid alienating church members. You will find examples of such sermons in this book. In each case, we asked the authors to include an introductory paragraph showing how process-relational or open and relational theological ideas are incorporated in the sermon.

In August and September of 2021, the Worship Vision Team (worship planning) at the Church of the Village created its first worship series focused explicitly on teaching process theology to the congregation. Our guest preachers were Ignacio Castuera, Catherine Keller, and John Thatamanil (all of their sermons are included in this book). Immediately after that, we planned a five-week series on discipleship titled, “In the Way of Jesus: An Adventure of Imagination and Commitment.” We had the audacity to invite renowned theologian, John B. Cobb Jr., and ask him to preach on three consecutive Sundays—and he readily agreed! As he said in one of the sermons, he had never preached on discipleship before, so this was an opportunity for him to grow (at 97 years old!). Two of those three sermons are included in this book.

At around that time, the kernel of what became this book began to germinate in me. In November 2021, I visited John Cobb for a week in southern California to get better acquainted with his work and the process community there. During that visit, I mentioned my idea for a small book of process-oriented sermons from Church of the Village, augmented by a selection from the small number of process-influenced clergy or congregations I knew were similarly engaging process theology. By then, I was telling colleagues I was an evangelist for process theology.

Being a full-time pastor in a significant ministry setting (and dealing with the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic), the book project simmered on a back burner for more than a year. Then, I attended the 50th Anniversary Conference of the Center for Process Studies in February 2023. There, I described my vision for the book to Mary Elizabeth Moore, dean of the Boston University School of Theology (emeritus) and a long-time process proponent. She immediately replied, “Don’t wait. Do it now. We need that book!”

So, in the spring of 2023, I asked the Church of the Village to grant me a 9-week paid leave of absence over the summer to get the book underway. Thanks to God’s leading and my listening, early on, I met on Zoom with Thomas Jay Oord to get his recommendations for possible contributors to the book. I knew Tom because he had been a guest preacher with the Church of the Village, too. After I shared my vision of the book with him, he said, “I would like to co-edit this book with you.” That led to Tom recruiting two other excellent editors, Vikki Randall and Nichole Torbitzky (who are also contributors to the book). I am so grateful for the skills, dedication, and the generous collaborative spirit of our editorial team. I am convinced God inspired me to work on this book and then helped me co-create (with God and my co-editors) the conditions to be able to complete it.

This book is the first of its kind (and hopefully not the last). There are numerous books available on process-relational theology, open and relational theology, and open theism. Several valuable books have been written about interpreting and understanding biblical texts with an open, relational, or process lens. A few excellent books have been produced on preaching from a

process-relational perspective.¹ A handful of important books are available on aspects of worship other than preaching.² However, what *Preaching the Uncontrolling Love of God* offers is largely novel. Our book is the first to provide a broad compilation of sermons, essays, and worship elements meant to show in practice and in specific contexts, how to present open, relational, and process theological perspectives to and for leaders and members of local churches.

The majority of contributors to the book are clergy who serve or have served in churches. The book also includes contributions from a few clergy who are now scholars, bloggers, podcasters, or teachers. Ten contributors are current or retired professors of preaching, worship, theology, or religious studies who also preach regularly. Five are lay persons with strong theological backgrounds. Two authors write about their experience of incorporating open, relational, or process perspectives in their work as hospice care chaplains.

We have attracted 67 contributors and a total of 74 submissions. The clergy and lay authors belong to small, medium, and large congregations. Among the clergy contributors, some are relatively new to open, relational, process thinking, while others have been preaching and practicing these perspectives for decades. The largest percentage of contributors are from across the U.S. and Canada. In addition, we have clergy, theologians, and scholars from India, South Africa, the Czech Republic, Switzerland, Denmark, and Great Britain. They belong to or emerged from a wide range of denominational and non-denominational backgrounds, including the Church of South India, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, Brazilian Presbyterian Church, United Church of Christ, United Church of Canada, Unitarian Universalist Association of Canada, Anglican Church of Canada, Presbyterian Church in Canada, Church of England, various Baptist communities, non-denominational evangelicals, exvangelicals, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Church of the Nazarene, Vineyard movement, United Methodist Church, Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, and the Roman Catholic Church (U.S.).

Open, relational, and process theologians, clergy, scholars, advocates, and practitioners hold diverse and nuanced views on many theological questions. So, you will not find complete uniformity, consensus, or “orthodoxy” in this book. In fact, for most of us, the idea of strict orthodoxy or settled doctrine runs contrary to the view that the future is open and everything, always and everywhere is in process—*is becoming*. That includes God, who is relational, affected by the creation, and changes in relation to changes in the created, evolving order.

Pastors are local theologians for their congregations. Their parishioners look to them for love, care, and affirmation. They also look to them for biblical interpretation and *theology that makes sense* and aligns with their lived experience as well as what they read in the Bible. They

¹ See Norman Pittenger, *Proclaiming Christ Today* (1962) and *Preaching the Gospel* (1984); William A. Beardslee, John B. Cobb Jr., et al., *Biblical Preaching on the Death of Jesus* (1989); Clark M. Williamson and Ronald J. Allen, *A Credible and Timely Word: Process Theology and Preaching* (1991); Marjorie Suchocki, *The Whispered Word: A Theology of Preaching* (1999); Casey Sigmon, Ronald J. Allen, *You Never Step into the Same River Twice: Preaching from a Perspective of Process Theology* (2022). See also, Casey T. Sigmon, “Engaging the Gadfly: A Process Homilecclesiology for a Digital Age.” Ph.D. Dissertation: Vanderbilt University, 2017 and “Preaching in the Family of Process Theology,” in *Preaching the Manifold Grace of God*, vol. 2, ed. Ronald J. Allen (2022).

² See Norman Pittenger, *Life As Eucharist* (1973); Clark M. Williamson and Ronald J. Allen, *Adventures of the Spirit: A Guide to Worship from the Perspective of Process Theology* (1997); John B. Cobb, Jr., Bruce Epperly, and Paul S. Nancarrow, *The Call of the Spirit: Process Spirituality in a Relational World* (2005, reissued 2022).

hunger to grasp who God is and how God relates to them and to the world, even if they may not articulate it that clearly.

Christianity has been in a steep nosedive for decades in North America. This freefall was accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic. People have left church for many reasons, but often rising to the top tier in polls and survey are: the exclusion of LGBTQ+ persons, the hypocritical behavior of many church folks, and intellectual integrity—especially the anti-science attitude of so much of Christianity and the inability to believe in an all-powerful (omnipotent) God who apparently refuses to intervene to end evil and unnecessary suffering. Often, this God is presented as coercive, controlling, all-knowing, and unchanging. Several sermons and essays in this book address these problematic theological concerns. I believe that open and relational theology and process-relational theology provide coherent, deeply spiritual, and biblically attested understandings of the character of God, how God relates to the world, and how the world actually functions.

I know from personal experience there is an audience hungry for these perspectives. In the Church of the Village where I serve, process theology has found a deep resonance. At a regional United Methodist clergy gathering in October 2023, I was happily surprised to get 20 clergy to sign up for a discussion/study group titled, “Learn to Preach and Practice Process-Relational Theology.” While success is never assured, I am convinced that these perspectives have the depth and power to contribute to saving a remnant of Christianity.

We, the members of the editorial team, hope this book will help you think deeply, learn, grow, laugh, question, and experience joy in the process. Life is an adventure. So is theology. And so is what we call “church.” Enjoy the adventure.