

June 25, 2017

TEXT: Job 38:1–18; Genesis 1:1–2:3 (selected vss); John 1:1–5, 14

TITLE: R-Evolutionary Theology

By the Rev. Mary Lynn Callahan

I have often said that Thomas Merton is my spiritual guide and inspiration; but, if Thomas Merton is my guru, then Pierre Teilhard de Chardin is my savior—that is, he saved my faith.

It is a part of my nature to want to make meaning out of things, to have things fit together in a reasonable way. I can be very open to mystery, but the big picture has to be a cohesive whole. So, perhaps because for 18 years I was a pastor, preaching nearly every Sunday and loving God's people throughout the week, that I became uncomfortable with bits of the traditional western Protestant theology. It began to be harder and harder to make parts of the story believable, and it began to seem to offer so little hope in the present for these people whom I loved and served and who looked to me to make sense of it all and to offer hope to them. The god of my youth and even of seminary began to feel distant and, well frankly, schizophrenic... And, yet, my experiences convinced me beyond doubt that there is a God and that the old, old story held great truth—I knew that I knew that I knew.

About this time, I began to read, among other things, some works on evolutionary theology and discovered Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Not that I read much of him directly, but as he is updated and made accessible by authors like Judy Cannata, Louis Savory, Illia Delio—and Kathleen Duffy, who was here for the Teilhard's Mysticism retreat last weekend.

Born on the first of May, 1881, in France, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin had, from a very early age, a deep curiosity about and keen ability to observe the natural world. Traits encouraged by his naturalist father. He also grew up, however, with a devout Christian mother who was the great grand-niece of Voltaire. He became a Jesuit priest, served as a stretcher bearer on the front lines in World War I and, over time, became a world renowned geologist and paleontologist, being a part of the team which discovered Peking man. He fused his passion for rocks, the earth and a growing understanding of evolution with his passion for God and the Christian Story. But the Roman Catholic Church suppressed these growing ideas by not allowing him to publish, by removing him from teaching in the university and by sending him back to China for most of his life. He left his writings to his longtime secretary, however, and she was not under such restrictions.

He died on Easter Sunday, 1955, and his writings, published after his death, have made an enormous contribution to the theological discourse since.

Now, I am not a Teilhard de Chardin expert, and I am certainly not a scientist (and I am aware that some of you are) and it would be ridiculous to try to contain in a single sermon the vast extent of his thought; but, for those of us who have a question of a

doubt about faith and science, I want to share with you just the beginning of his retelling of the story by which we all live.

And it has to do with three things, all important elements of the Christian faith: Creation; our unity with one another; and our unity with God.

And, I am going to use a lot of quotes to try to let de Chardin speak, as much as possible, for himself.

So, here goes: In the beginning was POWER, intelligent, loving, energizing. In the beginning was the WORD, supremely capable of mastering and molding whatever might come into being in the world of matter. In the beginning there were not coldness and darkness: there was the FIRE. This is the truth.

With this, de Chardin is introducing us to the fact that he starts where our faith starts: at the beginning. But instead of the seven day story with which we are familiar he starts with God and the Big Bang, which is the point, in which for de Chardin, God begins the process of creation. For him, The Big Bang, the beginning of Creation, is the moment of Incarnation. In the infinitely tiny speck that was the big bang the raw material for everything that is and was and is to come exists. And IT IS the Body of Christ so that Teilhard can say:

“Through the incarnation God descended into nature in order to super-animate and take it back to him.”

Because, “Creation, incarnation and redemption are to be seen as no more than three complementary aspects of one and the same process.”

Meaning that Christ, not Jesus, but the Christ, what John might call The Word: “Christ has a cosmic body that extends throughout the universe.”

And IS that universe! The Body of the Universe IS the Body of the Christ. From one tiny spec, God began the process of unfurling the universe and, at the same time, unfurling the incarnation. So that, all that exists is of one whole that is Divine, the Christ.

He has famously said: “Matter is spirit moving slowly enough to be seen.”

That is matter, all matter, including human beings. So, you and I, then, in Teilhard’s words: “...are not a human being in search of a spiritual experience. You are a spiritual being immersed in a human (a material) experience.”

And not just you and I but all matter, everything that exists is blazing with the presence of Christ.

“The world, this palpable world, which we were wont to treat with the boredom and disrespect with which we habitually regard places is in truth a holy place, and we did not know it.”

Each and every thing is holy, the sparrow and the lilies of the field, every raindrop and snowflake, the mountains and the trees, rocks and fields and even the dust bunny in the corner of my living room, everything...

Of course, this flinging out, this unfurling this creating is a process; it is the beginning of the evolutionary process which the church long fought against. But Teilhard saw theology and the big bang and evolution as compatible

“The great cosmic attributes of Christ, those which (particularly in St John and St Paul) accord him a universal and final primacy over creation, these attributes...only assume their full dimension in the setting of an evolution...that is both spiritual and convergent.”

This means that we are all one with all that is, not in some Kum bay yah moment of sentimentality; but materially, physically, the very basic substance of our existence, even more basic than our DNA, is one fluid unity which is God, incarnate as the Christ:

We are one, after all, you and I. Together we suffer, together exist, and forever will recreate each other

And that unity is not just with one another but first and foremost we are one with the divine:

“By means of all created things, without exception, the divine assails us, penetrates us, and molds us. We imagined (God) as distant and inaccessible when in fact we live steeped in God’s burning layers.”

Like it or not, realize it or not, we are in union with God as the Christ—it is our reality.

So, how do we live in such a reality? Teilhard said, “The whole life lies in the verb seeing.”

Seeing beyond the surface, beyond the material. Seeing the world for what it really is, the body of Christ; seeing others for who they are, vessels of the divine; seeing ourselves for what we are, one with God in Christ. Seeing beneath the surface. And when we can see in this way, it re-defines the things that we do. Teilhard:

“Do not forget that the value and interest of life is not so much to do conspicuous things...as to do ordinary things with the perception of their enormous value.”

It is all about the seeing...awareness. And to remember that, as integral parts of the divine:

“Our duty, as men and women, is to proceed as if limits to our ability did not exist. (Because) We are collaborators in creation.”

So, there you have it: just a tease, a snippet, of the Theology of Teilhard de Chardin. If you are a wee bit curious, if you want to learn more, join us as we continue the conversation on July 27 at 6:30 in the evening and continuing on the last Thursday evening of each month. Together we will continue to explore this r-evolutionary theology.

I close with a prayer from Teilhard:

For me, my God, all joy and all achievement, the very purpose of my being and all my love of life, all depend on this one basic vision of the union between yourself and the universe. Let others, fulfilling a function more august than mine, proclaim your splendors as pure Spirit; as for me, dominated as I am by a vocation which springs from the inmost fibers of my being, I have no desire, I have no ability, to proclaim anything except the innumerable prolongations of your incarnate Being in the world of matter; I can preach only the mystery of your flesh, you the Soul shining forth through all that surrounds us.

Benediction

“Remain true to yourself, but move ever upward toward greater consciousness and greater love! At the summit you will find yourselves united with all those who, from every direction, have made the same ascent. For everything that rises must converge.”

“Joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God.”

As you leave this place, may you become aware of the joy within yourself.

I am again using the words of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin for our prayer this morning,

Prayer

One by one, Lord, I see and I love all those whom you have given me to sustain and charm my life. One by one, I also number those who make up that other beloved family which has gradually surrounded me, its unity fashioned out of the most disparate elements, with affinities of the heart, of (work), and of thought. And one by one—more vaguely, it is true, yet all-inclusively—I call before me the whole vast anonymous army of living humanity; those who surround me and support me though I do not know them; those who come and those who go; above all, those who in office, laboratory, and factory, through their vision of truth or despite their error, truly believe in the progress of earthly reality and who today will again take up their impassioned pursuit of the light.

This restless multitude, confused or orderly, the immensity of which terrifies us; this ocean of humanity whose slow, monotonous wave-flows trouble the hearts of even those whose faith is most firm; it is to this deep that I thus desire all the fibers of my being should respond. All the things in the world to which this day will bring increase; all

those that will diminish; all those, too, that will die: all of them, Lord, I try to gather into my arms so as to hold them out to you in offering. This is the material of my sacrifice, the only material you desire.

Radiant Word, blazing Power, you who mold the manifold so as to breathe your life into it; I pray you, lay on us those your hands—powerful, considerate, omnipresent, those hands which do not (like our human hands) touch now here, now there, but which plunge into the depths and the totality, present and past, of things so as to reach us simultaneously through all that is most immense and most inward within us and around us.

May the might of those invincible hands direct and transfigure for the great world you have in mind that earthly travail which I have gathered into my heart and now offer you in its entirety. Remold it, rectify it, recast it down to the depths from whence it springs. You know how your creatures can come into being only, like shoot from stem, as part of an endlessly renewed process of evolution.

Lord Jesus, now that beneath those world-forces you have become truly and physically everything for me, everything about me, everything within me, I shall gather into a single prayer both my delight in what I have and my thirst for what I lack; and following the lead of your great servant I shall repeat those enflamed words in which, I firmly believe, the Christianity of tomorrow will find its increasingly clear portrayal: Lord, lock me up in the deepest depths of your heart; and then, holding me there, burn me, purify me, set me on fire, sublimate me, till I become utterly what you would have me be.

AMEN (though the utter annihilation of my ego.)