Proper 27 Year A 2026

Of the theological speculations that have been in the church's collective conversations over the centuries, I have come up with three categories: Theism, liberation, and process. I say I have coined these three categories, but I may have stolen them from somewhere; but they represent three different ways, among an infinite number of ways to speak of God. "The three great theologies" has become a unit in the Rector's forum… so apologies to you recent graduates.

All three of these categories have scriptural warrant… that is, you can go to scripture, both New and Old testaments and make a case for all three: The first, and far and away the most dominant is Theism; it's what we've all been taught. It is the orthodox theology of the church. Theism holds that there is one powerful, all knowing, male God, who made the heavens and the earth. This god lives over and above the created order, far off in the heavens, outside of the natural order. This God is unchanging and…. Unknowable… "immortal, invisible" we sing. In Christian Theistic doctrine the person of Jesus is the link, if you will, between a fallen creation removed from God and God's favor, and those of us who languish here on earth. We say that Jesus is the way to know God, but Jesus too has been assigned to the climes of supernature, aloof in the heavens, a super-human,

unlike us in every way… ascended from earth into the immovable, unknowable godhead. We proclaim that this God loves us, but this god also judges. Chastens. Reproves. This god answers prayers… sometimes… this god has a divine plan for those who believe… and behave… I could go on, but you get the picture… This is all so familiar to us.

This monotheistic-ish theology was given to us principally by the Greeks… passed down to us via Christianity. This theology has all the marks of empire… a powerful god ruling from the top, prescribing order… all powerful, all knowing, benevolent, but harsh… Toe the line with this God… and this theology of top down power has endured throughout the church's history, through Augustine, and Aquinas, and Calvin, and Barth.

But there are two other Christian theologies that have evolved alongside the monolith of theism, hardly noticed for centuries, but now are making their way into Post-modern Christian theological discourse. The first is Liberation Theology that made itself known in our day and age during the fifties and sixties of the twentieth century, in South and Latin America. This theology holds that God's chief aim is liberation from the structures of sin that oppress God's people. That God's chief aim for the people God loves is freedom… freedom and dignity

and well-being. The story of Israel's exodus from slavery in Egypt is the bedrock of this theology… and all four gospel writers and the apostle Paul refer to the Jesus movement as a 'new exodus'… a new freedom up and against the powers that shame and oppress. This theology is most prevalent, not surprisingly, in the developing world… the two-thirds world that still suffers under western colonialism, the structures of oppression. Sin, for liberation theology, is not so much a personal matter, as it is structural… institutionalized, as it were, within the systems of power.

And then the third category is Process. This is the theology that most characterizes the mystic tradition, not just in Christianity, but in other religions as well… Process theology blurs the lines between the world's religious systems. At its heart this theology holds that God is intimately present in the process of creation… that God can be experienced in the created order… in the natural world…. God is mystery, and mystery can be felt; The mystery is the mystery of process; that as the creation is evolving, God is evolving. This is a God who is not changeless… but changes,… experiences surprise, grief, joy… this is a God open to possibility… this God doesn't have a plan, per se, but is improvising creation into being… learning, growing along the way… This is a vulnerable God, the cross the

symbol, in intimate solidarity with God's people and God's world. This God is the very process of creation…. Dark and light.

The first theology, theism, has God apart from God's creation, the figure of Jesus notwithstanding; but the second two theologies, Liberation and process, both speak of God active in the world. In the latter two, Jesus is the embodiment of God's mission of freedom, and the embodiment of the process of Love in the world… and I'll go out on a limb and say that I believe that Theism is a construct of institutional power… empire, the church; it has been used as a means of control and coercion. I believe, at its heart, scripture is speaking principally of liberation and process when it comes to speaking of the nature of God, and the nature of the Christ, God's anointed, who testifies to the imago Dei; that humankind bears God's image in our very DNA. So that's the theology lesson for today… and that brings us to Matthew's gospel text… Matthew has used metaphors that all point to process… yeast, seeds, vines, wages, healing… all are emblems of process, all are emblems of transformation… so the kingdom of God is transformation… and that is what life is…an improbable, seemingly random configuration of transformational events… change in short…. And the kingdom of God according to Matthew is found in the very nexus of change… we want things to stay the same, alas, we want known quantities, predictability… but that is not what God's

kingdom is like… It has everything to do with the mystery of process, the mystery of becoming; the beauty and utter surprise of it.

Ten bridesmaids bearing oil with great anticipation of light… Matthew says that is what the kingdom of God is like …. Every listener to this gospel would know well the process of producing olive oil…the rigor of the work; the richness and value of the produce. Everyone would know well the duty to keep lamps lighted during the night… and of course at the heart of the matter is the oil itself… and the process of creating light… the oil slowly oxidizing, making light, miraculously it would seem; Our life and labor transformed into light… the imagery is rich here, poetic really…. Oil and light, rudiments of the common life of a people, the life blood of the economy; the stuff of which parables are made… We are those bridesmaids, brothers and sisters… we are the ones who prepare for God's coming among us, indeed, through our life and labor, we bear God's coming here and now… In our bearing light, God's kingdom comes… In other words, the kingdom of God is not about the future, but comes in the midst of our labors of love… Love, the light of God in this world…. And this light doesn't come from above, but from the world around us and our participation in it…. by our choices to sacrifice for the good of our neighbor… by our labor,….God's love and light are found in the mundane rudiments of daily life… like oil, like water, like bread, like

wine… like our choices for sacrifice for the good of the other; like our choices to stand for a principle, like our choices to stand for a cause in which the well-being and dignity of our neighbor are at issue…. That is what the kingdom of God is like. God's realm is present in the process of our preparing, our rapt attention. And God's kingdom surprises us in the dark. This story is not about waiting; it is about utter surprise.

The kingdom of God looks like change… And my goodness… change is upon us, which means we are always in the very presence of God… the kingdom of God looks like a good day's work… the kingdom of God looks like sacrifice….Don't try to quantify it because The kingdom of God is on the move; it is process….The kingdom of God looks like freedom, and dignity, and justice… and the kingdom depends upon our being prepared, awake to the process, and giving ourselves wholeheartedly to it. Matthew is saying in the words of Jesus… stay woke, good people.

So many a preacher has taught this passage as about our waiting for Jesus to come to us, and that we better be all prepared to meet him, but this is about our being prepared and doing the work of the kingdom in its arriving… this is about our being the change, being participants in the transformation of our world

in that sacred space between now and not yet… so that the world around us may know the saving embrace of a generous God who loves wastefully; who is drawing all things to Godself; who opts for justice; who invites all manner of folk to the table of plenty; who exults in the improvisational enterprise we call creation… and we dear friends are invited into that process for the world's sake. That is what the kingdom is like, and it is here embodied in our very lives and labor for the good…. and the unctuous beauty of the produce. Bearing produce; bearing fruit is at the moral heart of Matthew's Gospel.

I have to say something about the mid-term election. Voters, citizens, the community of the faithful, no less, challenged the corruption and cruelty of the failing state, and prevailed. Some would say it was a miracle; but I say it was the Spirit of truth embodied by the people of God, bearing light against the forces of darkness; their lamps burning with the light of compassion, mercy and justice. The life of God is not magic. It is not supernatural. It rises amid the flesh and blood of God's people; people who pay attention to, and care for our world. In spite of corporate money, and the power of the state, the voice of the faithful was heard loud and clear; and our beloved democracy will live for another day.

Keep the faith, dear friends. Our faith can change the world for the good. Our land has languished in the dark; but the light will always overcome it. We have to put aside foolishness… fears, resentments, self-interest… and give ourselves over to love, because there is no light as powerful as the light of love… Our vocation is a noble honor and privilege… an honor and a privilege for which it is worth burning the midnight oil…. The gladdening oil of Love.