

Article

Preaching beyond Binary Categories: An Approach from Process Theology

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Abstract: Thinking in binary categories has often characterized both the Christian community and communities beyond the church. This pattern of mental operation typically sees binary categories as self-contained and often as mutually exclusive, e.g., male/female, judgment/salvation, and religious/secular. However, some interpreters call binary thinking into question and point to possibilities of more nuanced perspectives, perhaps most well-known with respect to more expansive views of gender: the categories of male and female are not mutually exclusive but are reference points among clusters of sexual and gender expression and preferences. Process theology offers preachers ways to transcend binary exclusivism. Several convictions of process thought come into play: the divine aim that all things work together for optimum becoming, the dipolar nature of God, the internal relationship of all things, and especially the perception that a binary is an invitation for creative transformation in thinking beyond the binary pattern about how the elements in the field of the binary might relate with one another so as to honor diversity as part of moving towards optimum becoming. The article begins with a statement of the problem, summarizes key elements of process thought that come into play, sketches how a preacher might seek the creative transformation of binary impasses, and brings forward three case studies of binaries that illustrate this approach in action.

Keywords: homiletics; preaching; binary; process theology



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1. Introduction

I take a more autobiographical approach in this article than is typical of my more formal and restrained style in other articles of this kind. I take this approach partly because it suits the nature of the topic but, more especially, because the subject matter is close to my heart.

1.1. One Person's Journey Out of Binary Thinking

Contemporary discussion of the adequacy of binary thinking initially caught my attention in relationship to gender and the categories of male and female. The world of my childhood and youth was the 1950s and 1960s in a small town on the edge of the Ozark Mountains in southern Missouri. In that setting, these categories seemed distinctly and exclusively defined. Masculinity was characterized by certain physical traits and was typically associated with certain social roles and with certain patterns of behavior. The same was true for women.

The binary classification, however, did not mean that men and women had the same social power or options for living. In that world not only did men regularly have more social power and freedom of determination than women, but men often had social power over women. Of course, there were nuances and exceptions. Women occasionally occupied roles customarily taken by men, and I knew from observation that women sometimes exercised considerably more informal social power than one would expect, given the place they were assigned in the social pyramid.

Only gradually did I perceive the inadequacy of the binary understanding of human beings in regard to gender and sexuality. My social context in my growing-up years did not

encourage nuanced thinking about the socially constructed nature of gender and sexual identities. The discovery of nuanced identities began with noticing that some men were attracted to other men. Some of these men seemed to think and act in ways traditionally associated with women. I admit that I did not initially comprehend this phenomenon. Something similar was true of my impression of women I knew who were attracted to women. Later, I would learn that homosexuality is an orientation in which some of the traditional binary associations with males and females are transvalued in regard not only to sexual preference but to identity and social roles writ more broadly. To be sure, I did not come to this way of thinking in a flash, as if someone had turned on the switch of insight. The awareness developed slowly in response to encounters with real people, reading, conversation, and reflection.

Encountering persons who more significantly crossed the boundaries between the traditional conceptions of male and female eventually caused me to recognize the inadequacy of the binary system with regard to sexuality and gender. Different people in this range of the human family want to be known in different ways, e.g., nonbinary, gender-fluid, transgender, transsexual, cross-dressing, or in transition. Someone I have known for a long time has recently claimed this identity and wants to be known simply as nonbinary; this person does not see themselves as simply a male in a female body who has now transitioned but as a complex integration and transcendence of male and female in a genuinely distinct identity.

1.2. Binary Thinking Is Often Inadequate and Can Be Hurtful

As many now think, the binary approach to sexuality and gender is inadequate. A more expansive understanding of these things is necessary to account for the diversity of lived experience. At the same time, as a process thinker, I need to be alert to the possibility that a particular binary may actually represent the becoming moment of a particular situation.

I have slowly discovered that the binary way of thinking is often inadequate in other arenas of life as the binary system of classification often oversimplifies and does not always honor the complexity of people, circumstances, and even ideas. Furthermore, groups that promote the binary system often assign superiority to one leg of a binary in a way that diminishes the other. Indeed, some groups create or subscribe to ideologies that support not only the binary concept itself but justify devaluing and exploiting those who are associated with the other side of the binary. As a result, many binaries, especially those involving human traits, eventuate in the diminishment of those who are assigned to the “lower” side of the binary. In the binary construction of man and woman within a patriarchal culture or androcentric framework, for instance, the man is afforded greater social power than the woman. In such social contexts, women have been—and often still are—viewed as second-class, possessing considerably less agency than men and suffering multiple forms of oppression.

Replacing the binary system with a way of thinking that honors distinct experiences in their diverse manifestations means liberation both for those who have suffered because of their exclusion by binary systems and for those people whose worldviews and experiences have been limited because they subscribe to a binary perspective and thereby, intentionally or unintentionally, cut themselves off from deeper and broader dimensions of relationship and experience. Both those who exclude and those who are excluded are sometimes less than they could be because of the artificial binary mode of thought.

Moreover, binary thinking contributes to one of the most troublesome aspects of social life in North America: partisanship that leaves little room for respecting other viewpoints or working with people who hold those viewpoints. For instance, the rabid political discourse at the national level in the United States in the early twenty-first century is a painful and dangerous indictment of where binary thinking—and binary rhetoric—can lead.

I have gradually become aware of many more binary classifications in areas beyond sexuality and gender. I think now particularly of binaries that often vex Chris-

tian theology and practice, such as God/world, human/nonhuman, head/heart, sacred/secular, individual/community, body/soul, gospel/law, faith/doubt, grace/works, obedience/disobedience, blessed/cursed, forgiven/sinful, good/evil, oppression/liberation, evangelical/progressive, and justice/injustice. Many people today experience repression from the binary construction of Eurocentric culture/other cultures. Casey Sigmon, a scholar of preaching in the process family, notes binaries in the world of preaching: pulpit/pew, preacher/listener, clergy/laity, preaching in a liturgical situation/preaching beyond a formal liturgical situation (Sigmon 2017).

2. The Purpose and Direction of This Essay

Many Christian preachers in the past and present have not only assumed basic binary perspectives on many aspects of faith and life but have actively promoted these divisions. Ironically, preaching that is supposed to promote well-being in all dimensions of life sometimes frustrates well-being by reinforcing binary perceptions and behaviors that limit perception and can result in repression, violence, and suffering. However, process theology provides a significant theological and experiential perspective for moving away from inadequate binary paradigms and for moving towards ways of thinking that not only respect more diverse ways of becoming as important for inclusive well-being. (For accessible introductions to Process Theology, see Cobb and Griffin 1976; Cobb 2011, 2020; Epperly 2011; McDaniel 2021; Mesle 1993, 2008).

This article first summarizes the roots of the binary system from a traditional modernist point of view, then turns to process philosophy and theology as an approach that not only undercuts binary thinking but offers a positive and powerful alternative that seeks to honor the rich and multi-varied diversity of experience while showing the inherent relationships of all elements of particular situations and the world as a whole. The article then shows how the process approach can be a practical help to preaching by exposing the inadequacy of many binary classifications and, more particularly, in coming to more adequate ways of theological thinking and preaching.

The goal of the essay is modest. I attempt a liberative “reading” of the binary phenomenon through the lens of process theology. I do not have space to engage fully with other theological families and their particular approaches to binarism in light of their notions of authority, doctrinal formulation, and theological method.

The reference to the binary classifications of sexuality and gender with which this essay began is not only an introduction to the article but a case study to which we will return again and again. Indeed, the opening story is a model of a narrative approach to preaching on a binary with an eye toward helping the congregation move beyond binary reductionism.

I am a Eurocentric, heterosexual, cisgender, upper-middle-class male process theologian oriented towards progressive politics and well-educated, according to current Western norms. I am aware of (or know that I should be aware of) the many privileges that come with those qualities. I cannot undo who I am. But, in the language of process theology, I can seek opportunities for becoming that work with other becomings in ways that promote inclusive well-being. I have the power to reshape what I do with my social location. I can re-think and re-socialize aspects of my social location in inclusive ways that honor diversity, share social power, and seek equity for all. Such efforts are not pure altruism. By advocating a world that enhances the well-being of all, I help create a world that enhances my own well-being.

While I hope this article will be of interest to preachers in a rich variety of cultural, theological, and ecclesial settings, I write particularly with Eurocentric communities in mind. Not only are these communities the ones with which I am most familiar, but they have been, and many continue to be, centers of binary predispositions that benefit Eurocentric preachers and ministers to the disbenefit of other peoples. Moreover, binaries thrive within Eurocentrism itself—e.g., gender and sexuality, class, political affiliation, and religious commitment. I hope this article encourages those who preach in such communities to live

beyond the restrictive living imposed by many binaries and towards a world in which diversity is honored as a means to more inclusive well-being.

At the outset, I note an irony. Objection to the binary system has a certain binary quality in that it views the world, in part, as divided between those who perceive the world in terms of binaries and those who do not.

3. The Process Notion of Becoming Goes beyond Binary Thinking

Process theology came to expression against the background of traditional Western philosophy and theology and certain tendencies in the worldview. The perspectives of the process movement were quite distinct in the season of its origin (the early to mid-twentieth century). As the modernist perspective loses its foothold in culture, emphasizes previously distinctive fin process thought begin to become more commonplace in philosophy and theology. It is important, however, to obtain an angle of vision on the resources of the process for reinterpreting binary ideologies.

3.1. Backdrop against Which Process Thought Emerged

To understand the distinctive perspective of process thought, we need to understand a major philosophical concern in the West that has lasted from Aristotle (384–322 BCE) to the present time: the nature of being. By oversimplifying, we can say that while Western philosophers have taken different nuances of perspective on what constitutes existence, they have generally held that reality is made up of distinct substances. A substance is an essence, something that exists on its own, is often unchanging, and has its own properties (Epperly 2011, pp. 8–11). A primitive analogy illustrates. In this view, reality is similar to a garage built of concrete block walls in which each concrete block represents a substance. Reality is the arrangement of distinct substances so that they make a world (e.g., a garage). The pieces of this world relate externally to one another. From this perspective, binary thinking makes sense as it sees the two sides of a binary as distinct substances that exist alongside one another, such as men/women.

The modernist worldview (beginning in roughly the late 1500s and holding sway in many circles until the late 1900s with influences continuing to the present), promulgated to a significant degree by Eurocentric peoples, also plays a role in reinforcing binary perspective. A typical modernist impulse, as exemplified by science, is to classify bits and pieces of reality so that we know what belongs where and what to expect when we encounter different pieces of the universe. This impulse pays remarkable dividends in some areas. For example, contemporary medicine benefits from this tendency. To cite a personal example, one of our young adult children was recently at the point of death, but contemporary medicine, fueled in part by modernist practices, saved this child's life. The benefits of empiricist scientific thinking are many, to be sure. But, the rigid devotion to some branches of modernist thinking can be drastically limiting when it comes to interpreting human identity, ethical issues, or numinous experiences.

3.2. The Central Concept of Process Thought: Becoming

Process thought, as initiated by Alfred North Whitehead and as developed by process theologians, views reality neither as a collection of substances bumping into one another nor as a collection of bits and pieces of matter whose various parts can be classified but as the movement of pieces of energy. From a process point of view, the universe is made up of constantly moving atoms, which are themselves made up of ever-moving subatomic particles. A physical object is not a substance but an event: atoms come together in response to a lure, form a pattern that can persist from nanoseconds to many centuries, and then are released into history (Whitehead 1979, pp. 22–28). A person, for instance, is a collection of moving pieces of energy gathered into a particular pattern that holds together for a time and then disintegrates. From this point of view, I am the event known as Ron Allen.

The process of atoms coming together to form events is called becoming and is constantly happening. Entities do not have static being but are constantly becoming. Some

events, such as the table on which I am typing, have relatively stable becomings that persist over longer periods of time. Other events, especially people, are constantly alive, constantly changing, though they, too, persist in some ways even while changing. Every person becomes, in part, in response to the events around them. For reasons that are sometimes obvious but often not, each person becomes in their own way (On becoming: (Epperly 2011, pp. 18–23; McDaniel 2021, pp. 3–10)).

3.3. The Dipolar God Offers Both Stability of Purpose and Adaptation of Moving towards That Purpose

When turning to God and process thinking, I should set out two points at which process differs from many traditional theologies. First is the nature of God's relationship to the world. Some traditionalists envision God and the world in binary terms. Indeed, some Christian thinkers (by no means all) conceive of God as an unmoved mover. Others do not go that far but think of God as altogether other than the world. By contrast, process conceives of the world as being "in God." God and the world are interrelated and mutually affect one another. God feels the world in Godself, and God is omnipresent within the world. The relationship between God and the world is, thus, not a simple binary but God/world.

The other preliminary point has to do with God's power: In many conventional theologies, God is omnipotent. While omnipotence is sometimes nuanced in different ways, most theologians understand omnipotence to include God's capacity to intervene in history to bring about change. In a theological move that many people find disturbing but others find liberating, the process preacher believes that God does not have the brute power to intervene in history but that God's power is that of lure, or, as I like to say, invitation. As will become clearer as this part of the discussion unfolds, God invites participants in particular situations towards inclusive well-being. God cannot force such qualities of life, but God is omnipresent to offer. God invites those who are limited by binary perception to transcend that limitation and envision more possibilities for becoming.

For Whitehead, God is not an exception to the understanding of reality set out in Section 3.2. but its chief exemplification. As process thought conceives God, God is dipolar. In this view, the nature of God contains two poles of energy, rather like a single and unified ellipse with its two focal points. Given that both a binary and God have two parts, it is important to note that the relationship of the parts differs between God and a binary. In God, the parts are complementary, whereas in a binary, the parts are contrasting (Whitehead 1979, pp. 343–51).

1. In God, one pole is continuing and stable and offers the security of predictability. God's fundamental purpose endures from generation to generation: to invite a world of inclusive well-being (see below).
2. The other pole is adaptability: God adapts the specific expression of God's purposes to the particular character of each moment.

Process can, thus, speak of God's "becoming." This expression does not mean that everything about God is perpetually up in the air. God's constant pole ever seeks the same thing—inclusive well-being (see below). But God's adaptable pole modifies how God invites the world and its inhabitants towards modes of relationship that enhance the becoming of all. God's life is the pattern for the becoming of the world, and aspects of God's life—the options that God has available to offer the world—are ever in process. Moreover, God invites all elements of the created world towards optimum becoming.

The event that is a human being occurs similarly: parts of the human event persist in stable and predictable ways, but other parts lead in responding to the circumstances and possibilities that are in the context so that each person adapts in their own ways to those possibilities. In a sentence, this is why the binary system is an inadequate way to account for human experience: the process of becoming is distinct for every person (and every other element of creation) and, hence, eventuates in a vast number of possibilities.

True, many of these possibilities can be clustered into smaller groups that share certain traits. But, the number of clusters is theoretically infinite.

3.4. *God's Ongoing Purpose: To Invite a World of Inclusive Well-Being*

God's fundamental purpose, as stated eloquently by theologian Marjorie Suchocki, is "inclusive well-being" (Suchocki 1994, pp. 13, 18–19, 42–44, esp. 66–80, 86, 101–11, 158; Suchocki 1988, pp. 122–30, 133). In more traditional language, Clark M. Williamson connects "inclusive well-being" with the biblical notion of blessing. "Blessing is well-being, *shalom* (peace) with oneself and because we are related to all else that is, with God and with our many neighbors, with all the living things in the environment that are also be fruitful and multiply" (Williamson 1999, p. 16). Williamson further specifies that peace and justice are interdependent upon "each other; without one, the other is never stable" (Williamson 1999, p. 17). In more explicit process language, God aims for every particle in the universe to live in situations in which it is free for optimum becoming, that is, to be fully what it can be in concert with other events also becoming all that they can be. That is what God continuously hopes for every situation. But, the specific possibilities and expressions of well-being differ from individual element of creation to individual element and from context to context. God always adapts to the specific situation.

The dipolar nature of God is also the pattern for God's activity in the world and for the process towards optimum becoming. In God's pole of continuity, God is ever present, offering the possibility of enhancing the quality of life for every entity. In the divine pole of adaptability, God is doing so with invitations that are appropriate to the context in which the becoming is taking place. The people and other elements of creation in the moment of becoming can accept God's invitations and, hence, move toward the level of well-being consistent with their response, or they can turn away from God's invitations and, thereby, settle for a less inclusive level of well-being (Epperly 2011, pp. 45–52). As we know well in the early twenty-first century, human beings can also make choices that significantly undercut the possibilities for well-being.

Binary ways of thinking often disrupt God's intention for processes of becoming by artificially limiting the number of possibilities for inclusive well-being that come to the awareness of those in a given situation. Binary thinking imposes an artificially limited number of possibilities.

3.5. *In Process Thought, All Things Are in Relationship with One Another*

From a process point of view, all things are related to one another. Some of these relationships are external and visible. But many relationships are internal and often escape conscious perception. The less obvious modes of relationship usually take place at the level of intuition and feeling. We are affected by these relationships in the process of becoming, even if we cannot name these feelings and their effects in clear and unambiguous statements. While its perpetrators may think the elements of a binary exist in isolation, they, in fact, exist in relation to one another, and they affect one another (on interrelationship, Williamson 1999).

Even if we do not notice such relationships consciously, we feel them intuitively (Epperly 2011, pp. 23–24). In fact, from a process perspective, only a small proportion of our awareness is conscious and articulate. Furthermore, not only are we affected by all things, but we affect everything in the universe by our own becomings. To be sure, the consequences of the latter may not be obvious, but our rivulets of experience feed into the great river of becomings where our experience touches the experience of others.

Because all things are internally related, the two constituent parts of a binary are connected in ways that may not meet the eye so that their relationship may be (1) more promising than one might imagine for helping people move beyond the binary or (2) constitute a bigger barrier than one had anticipated to moving beyond the binary.

A key point from the process universe is that binary thinking supposes that becoming can result in one of only two possibilities in the binary. For example, in a binary modality,

the process of gendered becoming can result only in “man” or “woman.” From a process perspective, the possibilities for becoming are seldom limited only to the two prongs of a binary classification. The moment of becoming is typically multidimensional and offers multiple possibilities for becoming.

3.6. From Spectrum to Clusters

For a long time, I thought a spectrum was a good image for indicating the outcome of a process of becoming. A spectrum has two poles, each of which would define becoming in what we might think of as a pure, undiluted, or complete expression, e.g., “man” at one end and “woman” at the other. We could then plot where the becomings of individuals have landed them on the spectrum. A spectrum perspective is better than a binary perspective. However, the individual categories at each pole are themselves complex and multidimensional. A spectrum is only two-dimensional and, thus, may not account for the network of factors and their various nuances that go into the becoming of a particular person.

A form of clustering is a better way of describing the outcome of a process of becoming, as it does not presuppose a simple linear continuity between two poles but takes account of a range of factors while allowing us to see how the clusters exist in relationship with one another in a three-dimensional way. Each person is an event in which particular factors cluster together.

Process thought, then, disrupts binary thinking. There are too many things becoming in their own ways with their own distinctive characteristics to be contained in or adequately described by binaries. Yet, a qualification does come to mind. My limited experience in working with binaries is that many have thus far proven to be more complicated than the simple binary terms might suggest. However, I have to keep open the possibility that a particular binary formulation might adequately bespeak occasional particular becomings.

4. A Method for Thinking beyond Binary Captivity for Preachers

The fundamental work of the preacher from a process point of view is to help the congregation interpret and respond to invitations from God that promise to enrich the quality of life in the particular context of the congregation as well as in the larger world. The preacher often moves towards this purpose in conversation with a biblical text, a biblical theme, or a formulation of Christian doctrine. However, a sermon may be prompted by anything in life that calls for theological interpretation, such as some binary conceptualizations. (For further discussion of process approaches for preaching, see [Williamson and Allen 1991](#); [Suchocki 1999](#); [Allen 2006, 2022](#); [Sigmon 2017](#); [Sigmon 2022](#)).

In many theological systems, the preacher is formally or informally required to obtain what Edward Farley calls a “preachable X” from a biblical text or Christian doctrine ([Farley 2003](#), p. 76). That is, the congregation (and/or theological system) assumes that the preacher must find something in a biblical text or theme or some other element of Christian expression to commend to the congregation. The movement in the preacher’s thinking is from a teaching of value *then* to a teaching *now* (hermeneutics). The biblical passage, theme, or statement of Christian doctrine constitutes the primary authority of the sermon. If biblical or theological material or an issue from experience presupposes a binary, then many theological traditions assume that the preacher must figure out a way to endorse that binary and apply it to life today.

4.1. A Process Model for Evaluating a Binary Theologically

Process theology operates with a different conception of authority in the sermon (and in all theological reflection). In process thinking, two main elements interact in determining authority in the sermon. The first, of course, is the core intent of the Bible and Christian tradition, which process theologians can summarize, per Marjorie Suchocki (above), as pointing to optimum becoming that intensifies life-giving experience. For something to be

authoritative in the process house, it must call for optimum well-being for each and every entity in the world (On authority, see further [Allen 2022](#), pp. 138–42).

The second criterion for authority in the process house is that something must be credible; that is, it must be something that we can truly believe can happen in our world. This criterion involves three levels. (a) It must be consistent with the scientific way in which the world operates. To be sure, this criterion cannot be imperial since it comes with the caveat that science sometimes modifies its own interpretations of what happens. (b) It must be consistent with our own deep experience of ourselves, of others, and of life itself. (c) It must be logically consistent with other things that the preacher has determined move toward inclusive being.

These criteria ask the preacher to gauge the degree to which the formulation of the binary honors the complexity of the actual becoming that takes place in the world and the actual movement towards optimum well-being.

By way of a practical summary, then, the preacher can ask these questions of any binary formulation.

- (1) Is the binary consistent with what we most deeply believe to be God's purposes in the world? Does this binary support the inclusive well-being of everyone affected by the binary?
- (2) Is this binary credible, that is, does it portray aspects of the world in a way that we think is accurate or can truly happen? Does the binary formulation honor the complexity of the lived becoming of those involved in the world of the binary?
 - (a) Is the binary consistent with the way in which we think the world really operates, at least according to our best scientific understanding?
 - (b) Is the binary consistent with the deep experience of ourselves, of others, and of the world?
 - (c) Is the binary consistent with other perceptions the preacher has established to be consistent with God's purposes of inclusive well-being for all?

To respond wisely to these questions, the preacher should engage in responsible exegeses of traditional material (the Bible, Christian doctrine, other sources) and of the pertinent aspects of contemporary perceptions of the world, of the experience of people, and other matters (e.g., ideas) involved in the binary. (For criteria and theological method in the process family, see [Williamson and Allen 1991](#), pp. 71–130; [Allen 2022](#)).

On the one hand, the two criteria above seem clear and easy to use. The preacher and community can embrace a faith in which they can have real-life confidence. On the other hand, each of these criteria and sub-criteria involve *interpretations*, and where interpretation is involved, the possibility of misunderstanding, misrepresenting, or misinterpreting is also present. This is especially true when it comes to human beings speaking about our own deep experience, our own interior intuitions about who we are and what we are. Yes, we can know such things, even if we sometimes know them through feeling that is beyond rational articulation. But much of the time, our awareness and interpretation are, at best, partial and, at worst, misguided. These cautions are why it is important for interpretive efforts to take place in community.

4.2. A Preacher's Responsibilities Include Criticizing the Binary and Offering Creative Alternatives That Promise Inclusive Well-Being

One of the preacher's responsibilities is to help the congregation identify the points at which binary thinking is inadequate. Some binaries subvert well-being—especially those in which one arm of the binary formulation has power over the other arm. Furthermore, as we noticed in the previous section, the experience of becoming for some people in the subject range of the binary may be more complex than is expressed in the binary. This case is exactly that of my earlier experience of man, woman, homosexual, and transsexual identities. The binary man/woman is simply inadequate, as are all simplistic understandings of human sexuality.

The preacher, in the process theological family, is called to do more than criticize a binary. The vocation of the preacher is to help the congregation identify paths toward love, peace, justice, and abundance for individuals, the congregation, and the wider community involved in the subject area of the binary. To say “No” to the binary limitation is important but is not enough. The preacher needs to help the congregation say “Yes.” When faced with problematic issues, such as an inappropriate binary, Whitehead offers a way forward. Whitehead famously said, “It is more important that a proposition be interesting than that it be true” (Whitehead 1979, p. 259). Why? Because something that arrests attention has the capacity to inspire further thought that may be directly productive. Even if further consideration leads to a dead end, the consideration itself has been important because it rules out a particular possibility and frees the investigators to put their energies elsewhere.

For the preacher committed to the process way, the content of the binary itself may not point toward comprehensive well-being. But the preacher can consider the presence of the binary as an invitation to consider more adequate formulations that may themselves be invitations to be inclusive. The binary can inspire fruitful conversation. The presence of the binary becomes a springboard for naming what is wrong with the binary and for creative advance, that is, creatively reformulating better ways of interpreting the subject matter of the binary. This model draws on David Tracy’s “method of critical correlation”, in which the preacher does not simply correlate ideas, experiences, or practices from the past (the tradition) with comparable ideas, experiences, or practices but evaluates the adequacy of the tradition as to its adequacy for today. The preacher criticizes the present in light of the past and also criticizes the past in the light of the present. Here, “criticize” means to evaluate its adequacy (Tracy 1975, pp. 45–47; 1981, pp. 371–72, 421–23).

The account of sexuality and gender at the outset of this essay points to two levels of good news. First, human identity needs no longer be limited by a one-dimensional understanding of sexuality and gender. Second, the expanded understanding of sexuality and gender points to truly inclusive well-being. For one thing, it affirms the full and free becoming of those whose gender and sexuality awareness and expression transcends the limited understandings of man and woman. It frees such folk to make their full, unfettered contributions to the common good. It releases those who fear such multi-dimensional orientations from being preoccupied with their hesitation so that they can live in mutual support with those in all clusters of sexual and gender inclination.

5. Some Things Preachers Might Do to Encourage Congregations to Go beyond Binaries

The basic notion of process theology—that all things are ever becoming—means that the process of sermon preparation is itself ever becoming. There is no single formula for developing the sermon. While I now suggest some basic things a preacher might consider while preparing a sermon on a particular binary, the becoming of a particular sermon may evolve in its own distinct way. By way of overview, I take a conversational approach to sermon preparation, to the sermon itself, and to responses to the sermon (Allen and Allen 2015 for additional angles of vision on process approaches to preaching, see Sigmon 2017, 2022; Beardslee et al. 1989; Suchocki 1999; Pittenger 1962, 1984).

5.1. Basic Issues to Address in the Sermon

When preaching on a binary, certain issues are often important. While I present the following issues as steps in the analysis, a preacher may find that they could also function as a structure or form for the sermon: introduce the binary concept, name the binary, describe the binary, evaluate the binary theologically, indicate the invitation for further becoming presented by the binary, and draw out the consequences for more inclusive becoming among individuals and in the community by going beyond the binary.

- a. The preacher may need to introduce the congregation to the notion of binary thinking and the complications it can raise for inclusive well-being. While the cry “binary” may trigger a lightning strike of critical thought in many circles right now—especially those influenced by liberation perspectives—a good many people in conventional

- Eurocentric communities uncritically assume the validity of the conventional understanding of binary classifications.
- b. The preacher should name the particular binary at the center of the sermon. The binary may be present in a biblical text or assertion of Christian doctrine. The church may have constructed a binary from a biblical text or Christian doctrine when a binary is not actually present, or the tradition is more multifarious than some may realize. A binary in the wider culture may be of such existential importance that the preacher can begin with the binary itself and develop a topical sermon.
 - c. As a correlate of 4.1, a preacher might help the congregation bring its own experience of the binary to awareness. How does the binary play into the everyday thinking and acting in the congregation and in its larger world? What does the congregation assume with respect to the validity of the binary? Theologian Helene Tallon Russell refers here to the “embedded assumptions” of the congregation, that is, assumptions they hold and continue without critical awareness. These assumptions can be powerful (personal conversation).
 - d. The preacher should describe the binary and its dynamics. In particular, the preacher should call attention to whether the binary privileges some elements of creation at the expense of others. The preacher wants to describe the binary and the people who subscribe to the binary in ways that they will recognize as true. There is no place—even in the case of hurtful binaries—for such things as caricature, name-calling, demonizing, and misrepresentation. In instances in which the congregation is initially predisposed against a binary formulation, the preacher may need to help the congregation understand why those who hold to the binary do so.
 - e. The preacher should analyze the binary theologically in the sermon. The criteria set out in 4.1 provide the preacher with a practical framework for theological analysis. An important task here is to help the congregation listen to the experiences of becoming from the range of people in the scope of the binary and to note how those testimonies are in accord with (or are discordant with) God’s desire for all to live towards optimum becoming.
 - f. The preacher can help the community recognize invitations for further becoming presented by the consideration of the binary. In light of the becomings of people involved in the many clusters of experience related to the binary, what might the congregation believe and act in ways that transcend the binary and enrich well-being? Here, the words of Casey Sigmon point to a transformation of perspective: “Diversity then becomes not a problem to solve, but a means to growth” (Sigmon 2017, p. 61).
 - g. The preacher can help listeners draw out the consequences of more inclusive becoming among individuals and in the community by responding positively to the invitation to think beyond the binary. How does moving beyond the binary invite a person into a more holistic understanding of self and others?
 - h. A preacher should reflect critically on the degree to which the sermon develops adequately with respect to both theological content and the likelihood that the form of the sermon gives the congregation a good chance of engaging the sermon in a meaningful way. The sermon needs to say what needs to be said, but the more invitingly it can be said, the more likely the congregation is to enter the world of the sermon and then consider how the world as interpreted in the sermon might help shape the congregation’s participation in its individual and social worlds. For sermon forms that are congenial to preaching from a process perspective, see (Allen and Allen 2015, pp. 89–114; Allen 2022, pp. 161–87).

5.2. *Bringing Logos, Pathos, and Ethos into the Sermon*

Aristotle taught that a speaker needs to make three kinds of appeals in a public address in order to move listeners: logos (ideas), pathos (feeling), and ethos (respect for the speaker). An empirical study of listeners working with Aristotle’s categories found that these phenomena function as channels through which listeners process sermons. People

change their minds and behavior in response to three things that echo Aristotle: ideas, feelings, and the character of the preacher (Allen 2004).

To oversimplify, we might speak of the “logos listener” as the one for whom ideas are pivotal and who changes in response to ideas. This person needs information about the binary and its consequences, as well as a clear and compelling theological rationale for transcending the binary.

The “pathos listener” is one for whom feelings generated by the sermon are pivotal and who changes in response to feeling. This person needs to feel what it is like to be caught in a binary situation and then what it can feel like to be released from the binary into an experiential world with more freedom to become. Listeners report that one of the best ways a preacher can touch feeling is by telling stories with which listeners can identify.

The “ethos listener” is one for whom the character of the preacher is pivotal and who changes in response to the example set by the speaker. Trustworthiness and integrity are key here. The congregation must trust the preacher. The most important factor in trustworthiness is integrity: continuity between what the preacher says and how the preacher lives. The congregation needs to see the preacher going beyond the binary in the way that the preacher suggests for the congregation.

Of course, a listener is seldom purely of one type. Ideas, feeling, and perceptions of character exist in different proportions in each congregant. Consequently, the sermon intended to help a congregation recognize and reconsider a particular binary typically needs to contain analysis, important theological ideas, and stories that inspire feeling-level identification, and the congregation needs to be able to see that the preacher’s commitments and actions are consistent with those advocated in the sermon.

5.3. A Personal Report from This Listener

The sermonic material that has proven most influential in my own transformations in regard to moving from a binary way of thinking to patterns of perception that honor a greater radius of becoming is material in which preachers trace their own encounters with the binary and the factors that helped them move from narrower to wider ways of thinking and acting. The material in Section 1 of this article illustrates a narrative approach to unfolding how my own change of perspective on a binary of sexuality and gender came about.

5.4. The Preacher and the Reluctant Listener

The preacher needs to recognize that some listeners may be so committed to particular binaries that they are unwilling to consider alternatives. Such listeners are either unwilling or unable to enter into a conversation that might lead to creative advances. Indeed, their attitudes and behavior can work against inclusive well-being. In this case, the preacher needs to consider what the preacher might say and do that (a) does not further disrupt the community and (b) does what is possible in the way of pointing to the possibilities for optimum quality of life for all. At a minimum, a preacher can speak to and about resistance with respect. No matter how hardened the resistance of a person or community may be to moving beyond a self-serving and community-undermining binary, the continuous process of becoming means that a person or community has the possibility of responding positively to a lure towards inclusive well-being. The preacher should never dismiss people and their possibilities out of hand.

In the end, the preacher cannot take responsibility for the degree to which the listening community accepts the invitation to become by leaving the world of the binary and living in the wider world of diversity. Each individual and community makes its own response to the invitation. The preacher is responsible for doing as much as the preacher can to frame the invitation in a way that listeners might find promising. Preachers can take confidence that even if people disregard possibilities for optimum becoming, God continues to offer opportunities for becoming in light of the changed circumstances.

6. Three Abbreviated Case Studies in Preaching beyond Binaries

I conclude with three abbreviated case studies of binaries for which process theology, with its emphasis on continuous possibilities for becoming, opens a way towards recognizing much greater diversity towards the end of more inclusive well-being for all.

The first case is a theological binary, the relationship: law/gospel. The second is an ecclesial binary expressed in several ways: pulpit/pew, preacher/listener, clergy/laity. The third is a binary that is a permanent binary: death penalty/no death penalty.

6.1. Case Study: *The Binary Law and Gospel*

A fair number of preachers, influenced by a stream of traditional interpretation, assume that law and gospel exist in a binary relationship. Preachers who share this view typically regard the law as a set of biblical rules that God commands. Human beings must obey the law in order for God to accept them. They must do what the law says or face punishment. Yet, members of the human community cannot keep the law. This awareness drives Christian believers to their knees in search of grace.

Preachers who view law and gospel as a binary typically think of the gospel as the good news that God, as an act of grace (undeserved favor), forgives disobedience and declares people to be acceptable. God's grace is always available but becomes operative only when people renounce their attempts to earn salvation by keeping the law and trust instead in God's grace. On this side of the binary, people are supposed to experience life as free from disobedience and secure in grace. Disobedience should be a thing of the past, and obedience should be a hallmark of transformed Christian living.

From a process perspective, I must critique aspects of this formulation of the binary and affirm others, though in an adapted form. As noted often in this essay, God's purpose, always and ever, is to invite people toward inclusive well-being. God graciously offers the possibility of optimum becoming to every person in every situation. God does not wait for a person to do something—such as give up obedience to the law—to offer the gracious possibility of becoming in a way that resonates with the notion of gospel.

From a process perspective, in conjunction with contemporary biblical scholarship, biblical law is not a set of requirements that one must obey in order to receive God's grace but provides ethical and theological guidance on how to live so as to encourage qualities that enhance one's own life and the life of the community. The law is an interconnected series of invitations (in the form of guidelines) designed to set the community on a path to inclusive well-being. In this case, as Charles Hartshorne would say, the two elements in the contrast are not in a relationship of "or" (law or gospel), but the larger element in the contrast, gospel, includes the other element in the contrast, law (Hartshorne 1970, pp. 99–129).

When a person or community rejects a particular invitation toward optimum well-being or rejects particular guidelines towards optimum becoming, preachers informed by process theology can say at least two things. For one, God continues to freely offer opportunities for becoming (the continuing aspect of the nature of God) while refashioning those possibilities in light of the possibilities available in the new circumstance of a person or congregation. For the other, if people or communities turn away from God's guidance (that is, if they disobey), they can expect a diminished quality of becoming. However, God does not directly cause such degradations of experience. We bring it on ourselves.

From my process perspective, then, law and gospel are not two sides of a binary but are two interrelated modes of inviting and guiding listeners toward inclusive well-being.

6.2. Case Study: *The Binary of Pulpit and Pew*

Casey Sigmon points to a binary that is not obvious to many preachers: pulpit/pew, preacher/listener, and, more broadly, clergy/laity (Sigmon 2017). This binary is physically represented in many church buildings in which the pulpit is a special piece of furniture whose design and elevation highlight the importance of its use, especially when the pews are on a lower level and facing toward the pulpit so that the preacher is the center of

attention. The dynamic of the binary is clearly *from* preacher *to* listener. The preacher is the source of insight that the congregation receives and is to put into practice. One person speaks. Others listen.

At the simplest level, with respect to this binary, Sigmon points out that preaching cannot be limited to the physical setting of the pulpit and pew (or even the wider liturgical setting). Preaching—the invitation toward optimum becoming—can take place in many other settings. Sigmon highlights the possibility that the purpose of preaching can be fulfilled in digital media in our time.

Pushing deeper into the binary, while it is true that preachers who have been to Bible college and/or theological seminary are supposed to interact with a responsible interpretation of the Bible, Christian traditions, theology, and pastoral leadership, it is not true that the preacher is the only person in the room whose becoming opens into clues for inclusive well-being. Graduating from a school and being ordained by a church are not guarantees that the preacher can perceive God's invitations. Indeed, under the influence of certain kinds of biblical interpretation and theological perspectives, some preachers seek to deny inclusive well-being to some people and, in so doing, to deny well-being to themselves. Moreover, I have been in some congregations in which "lay people" have better theological instincts than their preachers. I have also encountered many laypeople whose theological perspectives can only be described as regrettable. Congregations need to find ways to bring congregational illumination into the circle of congregational conversation.

6.3. Case Study: *The Binary of Death Penalty/No Death Penalty*

As I mentioned earlier, once in a while, a preacher may discover that a binary is truly a binary, at least in the way in which it is practiced. While non-binary options may exist, they are not immediately available. The binary of death penalty/no death penalty is such a case. The governing forces in a community either have the power to practice judicial homicide (as the death penalty might be called) or they do not. Clusters of opinions regarding the death penalty may exist within a community, e.g., some people opposing judicial homicide, some supporting it, some undecided about it, some indifferent towards it, and some seeking alternatives to it. Options for capital punishment do exist but may not be immediately available to a community because of legal regulations. Examples of alternatives to the death penalty are life imprisonment (perhaps without parole) or the implementation of a program of restorative justice (the practice of bringing together perpetrator and victim with the aim of reconciliation between them and between the perpetrator and the larger community while holding the perpetrator accountable). But, when the governing authorities put a person to death, all other options are foreclosed, at least in this life.

To be honest, we do not know for certain what happens beyond death. As a Christian process theologian, I do believe there will be consciousness beyond death as well as opportunities for enlarged becoming. However, that is not certain. What does seem certain is that within the immediate world, as we are able to experience it in the present, death ends the possibility of becoming. Capital punishment ends the life process as we know it. Capital punishment, thus, denies the person who is executed the opportunity to become in ways that could lead to a better quality of life for that person and for others affected by that person. Moreover, capital punishment releases the possibility of violence into the flow of experience in which all things are related and through which the urge to violence is transmitted.

As a process theologian, I cannot accept the continuation of judicial homicide because it puts to death the possibility of optimum becoming for the deceased and for the contribution that person could make to the larger world if they embrace the possibility of enhancing the qualities of becoming. It, thus, seems to be that the binary of the death penalty/no death penalty is a binary that we should maintain. However, we should accord power to the no-death-penalty side of the binary and empower options with redemptive possibilities.

Preaching on behalf of preserving life in connection with the continuing presence of the death penalty has a particular urgency. As I write, according to a report on National

Public Radio, more than 2300 people await execution in the United States. If put to death, their opportunities for creative transformation come to an end, at least in this life.

7. The Essay Transitions to Further Conversation

I do not like the custom of many preachers of ending the sermon with the word “Amen.” Whether intended or not, that expression seems to me to close the door on the sermon when the preacher wants exactly the opposite to happen. The preacher wants the congregation to continue thinking and feeling in relationship to the sermon. In a certain sense, O. Wesley Allen Jr. and I hope that the sermon sets in motion considerations that never end, but that eventuate in ongoing conversation (Allen and Allen 2015).

I have a similar attitude towards the heading “Conclusion” as the final paragraphs of an essay, especially when the focus is process theology or philosophy. This paper is not a final word on preaching and binary thinking but is the precipitate of a particular process of becoming. I hope this piece will contribute to many subsequent considerations (processes of becoming) in regard to how Christian communities can relate to phenomena and subjects that revolve around binary thinking. I hope I will be open to the insights of others who see more clearly, more fully, and more deeply how to be part of the processes of becoming that enlarges the possibilities for inclusive well-being for all.

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