

Saving Paradise

A Sermon offered by Rev. Wayne B. Arnason
Sunday, April 9, 2009
West Shore Unitarian Universalist Church
Rocky River, OH

Reading from a Modern Source

from *Saving Paradise* by Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker, Beacon Press, Boston (2008) P. 49 (all other quotes from this book in this sermon noted as “SP, *ibid.*”)

“ The scriptures must be read critically and carefully for religious and ethical guidance, using principles that the Bible itself provides.... The decisive question is whether humans align themselves with the Spirit of life, the power of God, or use their power to collaborate with destructive principalities and powers. Christians have used John’s Gospel to generate and justify violence against Jews. It has also been used to condemn ‘non-believing’ Muslims, pagans, humanists, and ‘heretical’ Christians. But the Gospels do not kill people, interpreters do. Interpreters have used the Bible to aid and abet the enemies of life, just as others have used it to advocate justice and peace. Sacred scriptures alone cannot protect the world from injustice and war. Those for whom the Bible is sacred text must exercise discernment and wisdom, accepting both power and responsibility. How believers imagine God’s power shapes and conceives how they imagine their own. Most early church teachers believed that God worked through the Spirit of wisdom, the flow of justice, the strength of truth, acts of love, and the lure of beauty.

Readings from an Ancient Source

Luke 23: 39-43

³⁹ One of the criminals hanging beside him scoffed, “So you’re the Messiah, are you? Prove it by saving yourself—and us, too, while you’re at it!”

⁴⁰ But the other criminal protested, “Don’t you fear God even when you have been sentenced to die? ⁴¹ We deserve to die for our crimes, but this man hasn’t done anything wrong.” ⁴² Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.”

⁴³ And Jesus replied, “I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

John 21: 1-17

¹ Later, Jesus appeared again to the disciples beside the Sea of Galilee.^[a] This is how it happened. ² Several of the disciples were there—Simon Peter, Thomas (nicknamed the Twin),^[b] Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples.

³ Simon Peter said, “I’m going fishing.”

“We’ll come, too,” they all said. So they went out in the boat, but they caught nothing all night.

⁴ At dawn Jesus was standing on the beach, but the disciples couldn’t see who he was. ⁵ He called out, “Fellows,^[c] have you caught any fish?”

“No,” they replied.

⁶ Then he said, “Throw out your net on the right-hand side of the boat, and you’ll get some!” So they did, and they couldn’t haul in the net because there were so many fish in it.

⁷ Then the disciple Jesus loved said to Peter, “It’s the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his tunic (for he had stripped for work), jumped into the water, and headed to shore. ⁸ The others stayed with the boat and pulled the loaded net to the shore, for they were only about a hundred yards^[d] from shore. ⁹ When they got there, they found breakfast waiting for them—fish cooking over a charcoal fire, and some bread.

¹⁰ “Bring some of the fish you’ve just caught,” Jesus said. ¹¹ So Simon Peter went aboard and dragged the net to the shore. There were 153 large fish, and yet the net hadn’t torn.

¹² “Now come and have some breakfast!” Jesus said. None of the disciples dared to ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord. ¹³ Then Jesus served them the bread and the fish. ¹⁴ This was the third time Jesus had appeared to his disciples since he had been raised from the dead.

¹⁵ After breakfast Jesus asked Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?^[e]”

“Yes, Lord,” Peter replied, “you know I love you.”

“Then feed my lambs,” Jesus told him.

¹⁶ Jesus repeated the question: “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

“Yes, Lord,” Peter said, “you know I love you.”

“Then take care of my sheep,” Jesus said.

¹⁷ A third time he asked him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

Peter was hurt that Jesus asked the question a third time. He said, “Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Then feed my sheep.”

Sermon

Growing up Unitarian Universalist meant that, as a child, Easter for me was much more about candy eggs and rabbits than crucifixion and resurrection. It's not that in a UU church school we weren't told the Easter story and given an understanding of why it was important to the Christian tradition. It's not that we didn't have a chance to understand the meanings of the Easter story in a de-mythologized way. Every effort was made by my dedicated volunteer church school teachers to connect the way that Jesus died to the suffering of people around the world who were oppressed by injustice. Every effort was made to see the resurrection story as a Christian overlay built on the foundations of pagan and Jewish spring celebrations that preceded the Christian church. Having made those connections, we could go on to the candy and the bunnies with a clear conscience feeling like we'd all done our religious education duty. We could leave behind these Easter images of violence and mysticism and enjoy our spring holiday, our Easter dinner, and may be if we were really lucky, the lifting of prohibitions on eating too much candy.

But even then, and more so as I grew older, and started to get interested in religion and to study theology, I carried with me a nagging feeling that there was more of a connection between the life and ministry of Jesus and the ordinary joyful experience of a family holiday, a shared meal with special treats, and the glorious enjoyment of a spring time day. But what was that connection and why was it so hard for me to see?

I think that one reason was the crucifix! I remember vividly the first time I went to my Lutheran relatives church and saw Jesus on the cross hanging over their altar. I was horrified by it! How could people come to this church and

look at this awful image of torture and suffering week after week and come away feeling more spiritually nourished than when they went in? As I encountered more Christian churches and experienced more crucifixes, the repulsion and the confusion I felt that very first time I encountered a crucifix never left me. Today, I find great meaning in the rite of passage that is Good Friday as I experience it in my life today. I appreciate all of the profound human experience that our Tenebrae service here at West Shore reveals to me as we explore the common human experiences of suffering and despair and the hope that sustains us at such times. But these understandings I came to in later years around the meaning of the crucifix in Christian theology and art have never relieved my first gut feeling that there was something profoundly wrong about the Christian tradition's adoption this symbol as the central image of their faith.

Imagine then the relief that I felt when Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker published their first joint book, *Proverbs of Ashes*, a theological challenge to the fact that redemptive violence has become central to the Christian message. Rita Nakashima Brock is a lay member of the Disciples of Christ and has had a career as a theologian and an academic administrator. Rebecca Parker is ordained in both the Unitarian Universalist Association and the United Methodist Church, and is the foremost UU theologian writing today. She is the President of our UU seminary, Starr King School for the Ministry and thus has been a significant teacher to two Starr King Graduates familiar to us, Jeremy Elliott and Neal Anderson.

I've preached on Brock and Parker's work before, including once before on Easter, because I think that Easter is an important time to confront and critique the theology still honored by many Christians at this season, the theology that suggests that the violent sacrifice of anyone's one's life and particularly the life of one's child is a redemptive act that is the gateway to the truth and to life eternal. This a theology that can sanction war and intimate violence. In the first reading offered today from Brock and Parker's new book, "Saving Paradise" we heard these words which tells us

why confronting the theology of redemptive violence is so important. They write:

“How believers imagine God’s power shapes and conceives how they imagine their own.”

In “Saving Paradise” Brock and Parker take the work they did in *Proverbs of Ashes* one step farther in an exhaustive tour of Christian theological and artistic history that tries to answer this question: If the real Christian message is not that “God sacrificed his son Jesus for you so that you could have eternal life by believing in him and in his church” then what is that message? What was Jesus really trying to teach? Moreover, how did the earliest Christians understand themselves and what Jesus taught, before the Roman Empire adopted Christianity as its official religion? *Saving Paradise* is subtitled “How Christianity Traded Love of this World for Crucifixion and Empire.” In brief, Brock and Parker tell us that Jesus’ life was dedicated to showing us how God so loves the world in which we live, that we can be encouraged and emboldened to call it and make it Paradise. The paradise that Jesus pointed to did “not spring simply from imagination of a better world but from a profound embrace of this one.” (SP, *ibid.* P 409).

So how would you respond if I was to ask you to show me paradise? Do you go to that place in your mind that is full of words and images of what heaven is supposed to be like? What if I was to ask you to answer that question in the way that Zen students are often asked by their teachers to respond to a koan, to make a presentation about paradise without resorting to words? What would you do? How could you **show** paradise to someone else?

Paradise is not really a Biblical word although it has deep roots in the cultures that surrounded the Hebrew people. The Sumerians spoke of paradise as a place *in this world*, not a place in a world hereafter. This is the image that led to the story in the book of Genesis, the story of Paradise as a place where humanity began, a garden that was given to us as our home. In Sumeria and in the Hebrew culture, paradise was a place of fertility, beauty, and enjoyment that had been lost through humanity foolishness. The Hebrew Scriptures nowhere refer to paradise as a place of future reward.

Jesus only uses the word once in the Gospels when he is comforting the dying thief on the cross who says that Jesus has done nothing to deserve this, who asks to be remembered. To this person who reaches out to Jesus past his own suffering, the author of Luke has Jesus saying: “Today you will be with me in paradise”. Maybe he is referring to a place beyond the suffering of this world, but for me, the thief has created a moment of paradise that Jesus recognizes in his response. I found myself looking in the gospels and in the chapters of *Saving Paradise* for more evidence of how Jesus throughout his ministry recognized and acknowledged and pointed out how and where we experience the paradise that is already part of this earth and our lives.

The chapters of *Saving Paradise* initially unfold like a detective story, and that’s exactly how Brock and Parker approached their task. Their own belief was that so much of traditional Christian teaching has been a crime, an effort to murder the message of Jesus and his ministry. When they began their detective work they started by asking not “Whodunit?” But “where’s the Body? The question “where’s the body?” led them on a tour of the oldest Christian churches in Europe, where without exception, they couldn’t find the body! What I mean is, they couldn’t find any crucifix. The oldest crucifix image of Jesus that we find in Europe doesn’t appear until the 10th century. In the catacombs of Rome, in the oldest surviving Christian church, St. Giovanni’s in Rome, in the ancient churches of Ravenna, and in the monasteries of Turkey they couldn’t find a dead Jesus. Everywhere in these ancient works of art, Jesus is very much alive and usually in this world. The images that surround these ancient depictions of Jesus are similar to these found at St. Apollinaire in Ravenna - natural images of rivers and streams, mountains and trees, sheep and deer. They bring together the Easter experience of spring re-birth with the God who became human because he so loved the world. But no where do these early churches show him being tortured and killed. This realization and these images of Jesus in the world in ancient catacombs and churches and monasteries led Brock and Parker to re-read the Gospels, and

especially the Gospel of John, with different eyes.

Now John is usually not the Gospel most UUs would pick as their favorite, because it is commonly seen as the Gospel farthest from the historical Jesus, both in terms of years and in terms of the writer's intention. John was likely written about a century after Jesus died, and is more concerned with the meaning of his life and teachings, and how they should be understood and interpreted, than in telling the history accurately. As such, John is the Gospel that Brock and Parker turn to in order to reveal what the first generations of Christians who were only hearing *about* Jesus were being taught about what his life meant. I particularly find myself struck by the resurrection appearances in John, and when better to take a look at them than on Easter Sunday morning?

When I read these resurrection stories, what is most compelling about them to me is how "ordinary" they are. Jesus appears first to the person some scholars say he was closest to, Mary Magdalene, and she doesn't recognize him. She can't see Jesus in the person standing before her until he identifies himself. Then Jesus appears in the company of his disciples, but they don't recognize him at first either. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus even journeys with them for most of the day and they still don't recognize him until they break bread together over supper. When they finally do recognize him, it's the UU's favorite disciple Doubting Thomas, who in John's Gospel makes sure nobody jumps to any conclusions. Thomas wants to touch the wounds before he will believe that this person standing beside him is the Jesus that he knows is dead. What is especially interesting to me is that Jesus invites him to do just that, but in John's story, Thomas is not described as actually needing to touch them. The Gospel doesn't say "Thomas touched" but instead "Thomas answered" calling Jesus his Lord.

The final resurrection appearance in John is the one we've already heard about --- Jesus on a beach, calling out to the disciples who are out fishing, building a fire to cook the fish to go with bread that he brought along. These scenes are so ordinary. Jesus does not appear in glory, in a mystical revelation, in something so undeniable and powerful that nobody could

argue that this must be God incarnate. Instead he appears in the activities of everyday, in a body that didn't at first look like him, but then you recognize that it is him. He appears and doesn't say much -- "How's the fishing?" "Try the right side of the boat!" "Let's eat!" and then finally to Simon Peter -- "Do you love me??" and then for every time that Simon insists that he does, that *of course* he does, we hear Jesus response to that affirmation: "Feed my sheep".

When I was reading this story I remembered that one of the most common depictions of Jesus that Brock and Parker found in the art of the early Christian churches was Jesus as the Good Shepherd, like the one on the cover of your order of service today. Our modern minds are a little uncomfortable with the image because our associations with sheep are that they are stupid animals that need to be led. For the cultures in which sheep are a critical part of the life of the community, a source of food and clothing, and evidence of the abundance of life, the role of shepherd had much more positive emotional overtones. The Shepherd is connected to the life of the herd he manages, and to the rhythms of the land and the natural world that are home to the sheep. The Shepherd is watchful for danger and knows that feeding the sheep is a sacred charge that helps protect the health and stability of the whole family and the whole community. "Feed my sheep" is one of the ways in the Gospel of John that Jesus speaks to the world in which he lived, in the language of the world in which he lived, about the lives that people were living:

"If you love me, all you have to do is something that you know very well, something every day, something completely ordinary. That's the paradise in which your love for me finds fulfillment."

If you decide to pick up a copy of *Saving Paradise*, and read it, you will find successive chapters on how the early church described itself as a community that was trying to model what the beloved community of a paradise on earth would act like, how the early Christians prepared themselves to be initiated into a life of creating paradise, and how they related to the powers and principalities of the world. But in the middle of the book, as we move into part 2, we come to the question:

“What Happened?” Why did the Christian church expel paradise from their teachings and their theology, changing it to become a place of reward in another life that you had to earn by loyalty to the correct theology, the correct emperor, the correct denomination, and that you could achieve through sacrificial violence?

The imagery of Christ the Good Shepherd, Christ in an earthly Paradise with his head in the stars, all changed as the image of Christ Crucified became dominant in churches. The visual world of Christians in worship began to center on death and not on paradise. It all began with Charlemagne and the beginnings of the Holy Roman Empire in the 8th century, when Christianity and loyalty to the state became one and the same. At this same time Christian theologians began to teach that bread and wine of the eucharistic table was the literal body and blood of Christ which had to be eaten to obtain the benefits of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross to redeem the sins of humanity. Not long after that the 11th century armies of Christ were pillaging their way across Europe towards the Holy Land marching behind their crucifixes determined to kill those who were not Christians. In a few sentences of this sermon, all I can do is point towards this complex and tragic story that Brock and Parker unpack to explain why the body of Jesus on the cross became so important in the second millennium of Christianity after being so unimportant in the first.

Throughout the second millennium of Christianity, there has been an active resistance to this theology of redemptive violence, a resistance that has attempted to reclaim the teachings of Christ about God’s love for this world and the ways in which we choose to make it a paradise by how we behave towards one another and towards all of life. Our church is the inheritor and the guardian of one of those traditions of resistance, Universalism, the religious tradition that has challenged the idea that Jesus was sacrificed to atone for our sins and those who did not accept this theology would be sent to hell. Hosea Ballou was the most forceful 19th century Universalist leader, and Rebecca Parker’s summary of who Jesus was to him is very compelling:

Ballou’s “Christ..drew people to acts of justice and mercy and to happiness,” she writes.

“Ballou did not accept the idea that selfless devotion to God required enduring misery and sorrow in this life for happiness in the next...True happiness lay in seeking it not only for oneself but for every human being...Hell was what human beings created in this world by cruelty and greed – not a realm of eternal punishment after death. Paradise was also available here and now, manifest in beauty and marked by relationships of justice and care”.

So on this Easter Sunday morning, let’s take heart from today’s resisters to the theology of salvation through violence that still dominates our religious landscape. Let’s celebrate scholars of the quality of Rita Brock and Rebecca Parker , standing in a two thousand year old line of women and men who saw in the life and teachings of Jesus a way to make paradise on earth , not through conquest or domination but through love and justice.

As a child when I wondered how the theology of Easter connected with the beauty of spring time and the joy of family rituals and celebrations, I didn’t know much about the history of the Christian tradition. But my instincts about where you find paradise were pretty good ones.

Growing up UU I never got very deeply into the idea that paradise was any place else than right here. Heaven never seemed like a very interesting place and hell was a vindictive fantasy not even worth considering.

I always enjoyed the rituals and the community of the church and I knew that our services and our celebrations were ways that we make the time allotted to us in this life into sacred time.

I always knew that the beauty of the world in which we live, so evident in the spring, but present within every day of the year, was a place where paradise could be found.

But what I didn’t understand until I got older was that if paradise is not some other place, if we have clues to it in the beauty of the world , if we understand it better through the art and the rituals we create that remind us that our time is sacred, the real key to finding paradise among us is to take responsibility for making it happen. What Jesus’ life points towards for Christians and non-Christians alike is that we are God’s partners in creating paradise in our time.

It's a family project, for all the sons and daughters of God who believe that God so loved the world that he gave it away in love, gave it to us, for us to love back and to take care of and to nourish as a place for all the generations to come.

In their closing paragraph, Brock and Parker remind us that we are not alone in this effort – that Jesus is with us, and Hosea Ballou, and my father, and Kathleen's grandmother, and all those whom you have loved and lost. Easter is a day when those who have left are very much with us:

“We feast in paradise when we open our hearts to lamentation, to all that has been lost and cannot be repaired. The beloved departed who have come before us draw near. The veil lifts between the living and the dead. We recommit ourselves to this world as holy ground when we remember the fullness of life that is possible through our communities, our life-affirming rituals, our love of beauty...We give thanks for the gifts of life that have been ours all along, an ever widening circle of beauty, the Spirit in life. We enter fully – heart, mind, soul and strength – into savoring and saving paradise.” (SP, *ibid.* P. 420)

(silence for a time)

Our Closing Hymn in one of those 19th century visionary hymns that have filled our UU worship for many generations, a hymn of confidence that paradise is within our making and within our reach:

“These things shall be.”