

Saving Paradise
Reverend Cyndi Simpson
A Sermon given to the Second Unitarian Church of Omaha, Nebraska, April 9, 2017



Our worship theme for this month is HERITAGE. As we think about our New Way Forward. As a congregation in Developmental Ministry. As our faith tradition of Unitarian Universalism. And as a nation that has entered truly perilous times. Part of what might be helpful and supportive to us is our heritage. Perhaps we can see our path ahead more clearly if we consider some of what we have been given by those who went before us.

I begin with a story.

Please come with me to a faraway time and place. It is the late tenth century of the common era. We are in northern Europe, in what is now Germany. But there is no Germany and will not be for centuries.

Here are the Saxon people, conquered by Charlemagne two centuries before. The Saxons were the first people, the first nation, ever forced by violence into Christian conversion. Forced by sword, torture and death to accept Charlemagne's version of Christianity.

The Saxons lived in small villages and towns along the Rhine and its tributaries, surrounded by deep forest. Here, around the year 970, a Saxon carver created a statue of Jesus dead or dying on the cross. It is known as the Gero Crucifix. (A cross and a crucifix are not the same thing. A crucifix is a cross with Jesus hanging on it.)

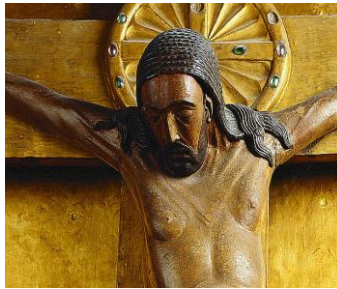
The crucifix is described in Rebecca Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock's book, *Saving Paradise*: *The life-size work, gilded in gold, presents the crucified Christ life-sized and nearly naked. The loincloth, knotted around his pelvis, covers his thighs. His gaunt legs are pushed up and turned at an angle from his splayed feet, which are nailed to a block at the base of the cross. His slack hands are nailed to wide planks of wood, and his distended arms strain with the downward weight of his thin, sagging body.*



His hips pull away from the cross, twisting his torso into an s-shaped slump, his belly protruding over the top of his loincloth.



His bare head hangs on his chest, and his long hair is spread in waves across his shoulders ... Beneath heavy brows, his eyes are closed. His mouth gapes open. Deep lines scar his sunken face.



This image of the suffering, dying Jesus is familiar to most of us. For most Unitarian Universalists, even those who identify as Christian, this type of image and its implications usually are not acceptable, either theologically or spiritually. Yet these images remain powerful for many of us.

What matters about this image, what mattered so much to theologians and ministers Rebecca Parker and Rita Brock, is that this image, so familiar to us in its depiction of a suffering, dying and crucified Jesus, this image is the **first such image** known in history. Did your head just explode?

Yes, for almost 1,000 years, the image of a suffering Jesus on the cross was unknown in Christian iconography, art or architecture. For almost 1,000 years, the sacrificed and dying Jesus on the cross was unknown in the key rituals of the church, such as Baptism and the Eucharist. For almost 1,000 years, Jesus' suffering **was not central** to the teaching or life of the Christian people and their communities.

This important fact, of the non-centrality of the suffering of Jesus in the early Christian church, is one of the key findings of Parker and Brock in their book, *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Violence and Empire*.

The Reverend Doctor Rebecca Parker is a Unitarian Universalist and Methodist minister and also the former President of our Unitarian Universalist Starr King School for the Ministry in California. The Reverend Doctor

Rita Nakashima Brock is a Disciples of Christ minister and the Research Professor of Theology and Culture at Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, Texas.

In October of 2008, I was fortunate to hear Rebecca Parker speak on *Saving Paradise* three times in three days at the annual meeting of the Unitarian Universalist Liberal Religious Educators' Association. I bought the book there and devoured it in a week . . . I could not put it down.

Saving Paradise is weighty and filled with enough compelling information for a dozen sermons. What I'm going to focus on today is **why** Parker and Brock undertook this research, which led them all over Europe and the Middle East, **what** they found and **why** it should matter to us as Unitarian Universalists.

As Rebecca Parker shared with us, *Saving Paradise* is a followup to her previous book, also written with Rita Brock, titled *Proverbs of Ashes*. *Proverbs of Ashes* is a searing indictment of the substitutionary theory of Jesus' atonement. This is the idea that Jesus went to his death willingly and intentionally, as a sacrificial substitute for all the sinners of the earth. To redeem us all from our sins. *He paid the price for us*.

For Brock and Parker, the idea that God would willingly send God's child to a planned and hideous death, with that child's agreement, is unthinkable. It is unthinkable because it is inconsistent with any idea of God's eternal love, mercy and justice. What kind of God, they ask, would sacrifice an innocent for the guilty? What kind of God, they ask, would do that to God's own child? That child who is also God's own self in the traditional Trinitarian understanding of divinity. They concluded: not the God of the Jewish and Christian and Muslim people.

In *Proverbs of Ashes*, Parker and Brock also trace the evil consequences of this theology in the widespread belief that human suffering is acceptable and even redemptive for Christian people. Their most notable examples are war, domestic violence and child abuse.

Parker told us that critics of *Proverbs of Ashes* asked several questions of them, including:
What is Christianity without the love-equals-sacrifice death of Jesus at its center?

Parker and Brock found this question compelling. What, indeed, **is** Christianity without the suffering and sacrificial death of Jesus at its center?

What set Parker and Brock on their course of looking at early Christian art, architecture and history was that single footnote in an art history book on Christian images. The footnote that said the Gero Crucifix is the oldest known image of the crucified Jesus.

This seemed unbelievable to Parker and Brock. They had never questioned the centrality of Jesus' death as the supreme example of self-sacrificing love in Christianity. Even though they found this notion deeply disturbing as humans, as women and as Christian theologians.

But this footnote made them think. They know, as I'm sure you do, that all the important religious beliefs of a people are going to be expressed in the art of their community and culture, as well as in their writing and their religious rituals and worship. If there were no suffering Jesuses in art, architecture or religious imagery before the 10th century. Then Jesus' sacrificial suffering was not at the heart of Christianity for the first 1,000 years. Could this be true?

To explore these questions, Brock and Parker first set off on a search across Europe and the Middle East, looking for the crucified Jesus. They looked for a suffering Jesus on the cross in Christian art and architecture. Just as important, they researched the theological and liturgical writings of early Christianity for themes of self-sacrificing violence. They looked in the early rites of Baptism and Eucharist.

They did not find those images of Jesus' death and suffering. They did not find those themes of death and suffering and sacrifice as being redemptive in early Christian writings or worship.

As they say in the preface to the book: *It took Jesus a thousand years to die*. The idea that Jesus' torture and sacrifice on the cross took place so that humans won't suffer endless torments in Hell was a product of late Medieval times. A time of Christian empire and conquest, such as Charlemagne's. The Gero Crucifix is a spiritual expression of Saxon Christianity, a people who had been forced brutally to accept Christianity. A people who had likely been told that their suffering had brought them closer to Jesus.

Not so surprisingly, medieval and modern theologians and historians have insisted on seeing the crucifix, the suffering Jesus on the cross – in artwork and liturgy – even when they weren't there! They have looked at the past through the lens of the present and seen the past wrongly.

So, what did Brock and Parker find? What did they find in the artwork and architecture and theology and rituals and sacraments of the early church? What did they find in a new examination of early Christian scripture and other writings?

They found PARADISE! A paradise of light, of earth, of sky, of living creatures and abundance!

Not Paradise to be achieved in the afterlife! Not Paradise earned after death as the result of self-sacrificial suffering! Not even Paradise as an ideal impossible to reach.

They found a Christian faith that believed in Paradise as a state in the here and now – even amidst the suffering and pain of the world. They found a community and a practice of Christianity that focused on enjoying what is good and beautiful in this world, in this lifetime. A Christianity that focused on healing the sick, comforting the suffering and feeding the hungry.

The verses of Efreem of Syria we heard as our reading exemplify this belief in Paradise in the present world, and how Paradise can be spread and nurtured to heal the world. Efreem wrote, as we heard,

*A person falls sick – and so another can visit and help them;
A person starves – so another can provide them with food and give
Them life;
A person does something stupid – but can be instructed by another
and thereby grow
In this way the world can recover: tens of thousands of ways are to
be found, ready to assist us.*

In *Saving Paradise*, we read:

The [early Christian] church was a concentration of paradise, a place where strengths, weaknesses, needs, and contributions of each member could complement the others. Their life in paradise was a shared

accomplishment in which the exercise of human powers and the imperatives of human need worked together to save and sustain life for all members. People could come to see the value of their own lives and learn that their actions mattered to others, to see power in a personal sense of agency.

Heavy burdens and difficulties that might have crushed individuals could instead be borne on the shoulders of many. No form of governance and no society can thrive without this . . . zone of human contact and interaction, what the ancient church called the body of Christ, the church of the Holy Spirit, the assembly of saints, and paradise on earth.

I want to show you some of what Parker and Brock found on their journey to the oldest structures of Christianity in the Mediterranean area. Most of them are from the 5th and 6th centuries.

This is the dome of the Arian Baptistery in Ravenna, Italy, from the late 5th century. A baptistery is a special building devoted only to the rite of baptism. Arians were Christians who believed that Jesus was not divine and not the son of God – they thought he simply was a very special human being, beloved of God and humans. Although the Arian view of Jesus had been deemed heretical by the 5th C, there were still lots of Arians around, many of them in central Europe, including the Goths and the Vandals. It shows the Baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan. There are the 12 Apostles surrounding, amidst palm tree and grass and lushness.



Here is a close-up of the vault. Notice that Jesus is youthful, beardless and naked. This is important – it symbolizes the newness, the freshness and the new beginnings available to folks in the Christian faith. The wild man to the right wearing the animal skin is John the Baptist. The person to the left is the local deity or spirit of the River Jordan. Notice the source of the Jordan, flowing from the vessel behind him. And notice his crayfish horns!



Here is the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia. She was a leader and major benefactor of the early church. Ravenna, Italy. 5th century. Roof is painted with stars – whole mausoleum is intended to be Eden. Here is Jesus as Good Shepherd.



Here we are closer. Here is Jesus peacefully in a meadow, watching his sheep. You do see crosses in early Christian art – of course they knew and valued the cross as the vehicle and symbol of Jesus' death and resurrection. But there were no crucifixes. Here the cross is simply part of Jesus' staff as the Good Shepherd.



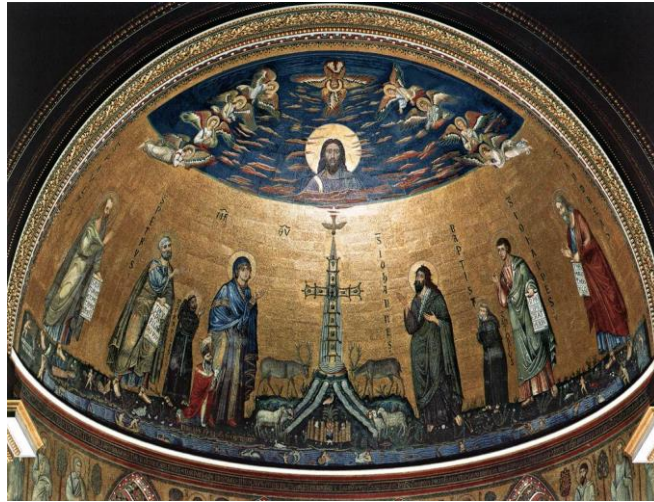
Here is Jesus – again beardless, young, peaceful. Petting one of his sheep.



Here is the church of San Giovanni di Laterano. Rome. 4th Century. Other parts of the church are newer, as recent as the 13th century.



So, here is the cross again, but a cross covered with living water flowing from the Holy Spirit. The water is flowing down to form the four rivers of the earthly paradise described in Genesis, and then to all the waters of the earth.



Again, here are scenes of abundant life – deer, sheep, plants, flowers. There are cherubs playing in the water. The second cherub from the left in the river is *wind-surfing*! Image is filled with joyfulness, playfulness.



Church of St Vitale in Ravenna. Early 6th century. Jesus as *Pantocrator* - or ruler of this Earth. But he does not hold a scepter or orb or other symbol of earthly rulership. He's just hanging out on the Earth, simply dressed. The outer figures are the current Empress and Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. Jesus outranks them. They are all standing in a lush meadow with flowers and streams. Mosaic work.



Church of St. Apollinaire. Ravenna. 6th century.



A mosaic of the Transfiguration. Jesus went up to the top of a mountain, began glowing and a voice came from God saying *You are my son*. But Jesus was on the earth, not in a heaven, making the connection between God and the Earth. Here we see St Apollinaire ... again in the vistas of growth and greenness and abundance. The twelve Apostles as sheep led by the Good Shepherd. This is not heaven because above this are clouds and the face of God – on the wall above the apse.



Why should this discovery of the original focus of Christianity as the building of Paradise on earth matter to us as Unitarian Universalists? Certainly, we can hope for the growing presence of a Christianity that wants to recover, reclaim and SAVE Paradise as present with us now. That would be a Christianity of increased blessing for the world. And many progressive Christians do indeed have that focus.

But there is also importance in this idea for us as UUs. First, as Parker and Brock note, even when the redemptive violence paradigm became paramount in Christianity after the Medieval era, there were always individual men and women, as well as religious groups, who resisted it, who attempted to undermine it and proposed an alternative.

Groups deemed heretical, such as the Albigensians, Cathars and Waldensians....all very much resonated with the idea of Paradise in the here and now.

In Eastern Orthodox Christianity, which split from Western Roman Christianity soon after the creation of the Gero crucifix, there is a greater focus on Jesus' resurrection than on his death *per se*. There is also a much greater emphasis on living as much like Jesus as possible....on creating paradise here on earth through our likeness to Jesus. Eastern Orthodoxy does not often depict the crucifix.

Both the Unitarians and the Universalists were part of this resistant strain of Christianity. They both were faiths that resisted the idea that violence and suffering are redemptive in and of themselves. The Unitarians strongly rejected the idea of an Original Sin that needed to be redeemed through Jesus' suffering or any other mechanism. They had an optimistic view of human nature and what it is possible for humans to accomplish to improve the world.

The Universalists guaranteed Paradise for everyone in the afterlife, Universal Salvation. No Hell, no suffering, no violence. They also insisted that Heaven must be created here on Earth. So for us, as Unitarian Universalists, understanding the importance of realizing Paradise in the present moment is also about understanding our own religious history and theology – who we were and who we are.

According to Parker, though, what is most important about reclaiming the present Paradise is how it can transform and re-orient and sustain us in this present time.

I imagine that many of you, as I do, feel overwhelmed at the violence and suffering of the world. It seems to us, right now in our own nation, that we are entering a time of great evil, confusion, suffering and violence. It's been getting worse in our country over the last few months. This creates feelings of hopelessness, helplessness and despair in me.

What Parker said to us is that seeing Paradise in the here and now is not about seeing the world as perfect or without struggle. Rather, seeing Paradise is seeing the beauty. The goodness and love that ARE here, here right now, along with the suffering and pain. In the midst of this present beauty, we can resist evil and defy it and change it. Because we also see Paradise right here, right now. We can expand it.

In both Jewish and early Christian teachings, Paradise isn't the unattainable place of lost innocence. It is the place of goodness and beauty here and now where our struggle takes place.

Understanding Paradise as in the here and now makes the difference between working for justice because of what we have seen that is good NOW, and working for justice and beauty as an unattainable ideal.

To work for an unattainable ideal is exhausting! It is impossible! It leaves us hungry and thirsty and sacrificing and suffering for what we know we can't have and can't achieve. It makes us sad saints and foolish martyrs and lone ranger crusaders. And burn out cases.

But to know and believe that Paradise is present here and now with its beauty and goodness is to live and struggle for beauty and justice from a heart that is FULL, not a heart that is BROKEN. A heart that is FULL and not BROKEN. A heart that is full of gratitude for what we already have. This gratitude gives comfort to our grief over what is wrong in the world. It gives us a grounding of strength and courage to make this world even more like Paradise. Because we see Paradise around us right here, right now. We don't have to imagine it, but simply to see it as it is.

To do this isn't denying all that is wrong. It is claiming what is good and right as the model for what we want to create.

Parker and Brock say:

We come to know this world as paradise when our hearts and souls are reborn through the arduous and tender task of living rightly with one another and with the earth. Generosity and mutual care are the pathways into knowing that paradise is here and now. This way of living is not utopian. It does not spring from the imagination of an idealized world, but from a profound embrace of this world. It brings hope home to today, to this moment and its possibilities for faithful love.

Our hope need not be that Paradise will descend from on high, into the smoking ruins of an earth destroyed by self-fulfilling prophecies of violence. Even less need our hope be that a righteous few will be raptured to another world. Nor do we need to look only to the future, laboring to serve an idealized vision of what could be.

*Our hope can be that from within the heart of this world, Paradise will arise. It will arise from the seeds of Eden sown everywhere; from the life that is within us and around us in our communities and cultures; from the gifts of our resistance, compassion, and creativity; and from the very stones and the earth and the waters crying out their praise and gratitude for **the Spirit of Life that is here, right now, among us and around us.***

So, your spiritual homework. How do you experience the presence of Paradise right now in your life? What are your sources of beauty, love, justice, creativity and strength? How do those sources feed your soul? How do they inspire you to spread your sources farther, to share them with others? How can you do that? Thus do we

Please take some time in the coming weeks to ponder these things. Please savor the Paradise that is in your life and all around you on this Earth. May its power and beauty inspire you in all ways.

So may it be! Blessed be!