

Trading Blood for the Oil of Gladness: An Easter Sermon

Offered at Countryside Church, Unitarian Universalist

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READINGS

From the Book of Isaiah

to let the oppressed go free, and break every yoke
to deal thy bread to the hungry
bring the poor that are cast out to thy house..
when thou seest the naked, cover him,
and hide not thyself from thine own kin?
Then shall thy light break forth as the morning,
and thy healing shall spring forth speedily
And if thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul;
then shall thy light rise in darkness, and thy gloom be as the noon-day;
And the LORD will guide thee continually,
and satisfy thy soul in drought, and make strong thy bones;
and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not.
thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations;
the restorer of paths to dwell in.
the LORD hath anointed me to bring good tidings unto the humble;
He hath sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the eyes to them that are bound;
To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion,
to give unto them a garland for ashes,
the oil of gladness for mourning,
the mantle of praise for the spirit of heaviness;
that they might be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD

From *The Dream of the Rood*, a ninth century Saxon poem...

I thought I saw a splendid tree
Lifted in the air and surrounded with light,
The brightest of beams. All that beacon was covered with gold...
Yet through the gold I could glimpse
The old torture: the right side of the tree
Began to bleed. Sorrowing I beheld it...

From *Saving Paradise* by Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker

The Passion narratives broke silence about the shame and fear that crucifixion instilled.
To lament was to claim powers that crucifixion was designed to destroy: dignity,
courage, love, creativity and truth-telling. In telling his story, his community
remembered his name and claimed the death defying power of saying his name aloud. In
using ancient literature (the psalms) to expose what torture did to the soul and to

communities, the passion stories brought testimony before a higher court of appeals than the bogus trial of Jesus they indict. The purpose of such writing is assuredly not to valorize victims, to praise their suffering as redemptive, to reveal “true love” as submission and self-sacrifice, or to say that God requires the passive acceptance of violence. Such interpretations mistakenly answer the abusive use of power with abnegation of power. The story of Jesus’ crucifixion, in marked contrast, asserted that the answer to abusive power is the courageous and decisive employment of the powers of life – to do deeds in Jesus’ name.

Sermon

My father and I enjoyed dyeing Easter Eggs together. My parents didn’t hide the eggs. I have no idea if they knew that you were supposed to hide them or not. It wasn’t until sometime in junior high school that I attended my first Easter Egg hunt. By then, it was beneath me to scramble around with the little kids. But, I didn’t need to participate to see their joy. Being outside and foraging for brightly colored objects – things hidden in plain view. This year, the idea of hiding and seeking at Easter became much clearer to me. It is a Holy Day of deep mystery. A mystery in hidden in plain view.

It is a mystery story – a sacred story in which only the initiate might grasp the meaning. A man, tortured, dying an ignominious death before a crowd. Later he reappeared to those who loved him. It’s a *different* kind of mystery that this tale of suffering and loss became the central mythos of a whole religious tradition. I remember – must be 28 years now – going to see theologian and iconoclast, Mary Daly. She quipped that if Jesus had died today people might be wearing little electric chairs on necklaces. Of course, I’ve heard that ironic line again since. The cross is an instrument of execution. On top of that, the central value of the life of Jesus has become his suffering, death, and blood, said to redeem humanity from sin.

Suffering has been valorized based upon this story. On Good Friday in churches the faithful are told to be grateful that he suffered for them and that their own suffering is small in comparison. Does the story, told in this way, paint a vivid picture of chosen suffering that inures us to suffering? Does glorification of suffering discourage or encourage the use of torture? “This is my cross to bear.” Says one person to another in times of hardship. When Mel Gibson put his *Temptation of Christ* on the big screen it raised concerns by focusing less on Jesus than on his blood. Perhaps humanity is too tempted by violence. I’ve known people abused because of the powerful ethos of suffering as a path to purification. This cannot be what the Son of God – or as he also called himself, the son of man, intended with his life.

Three years ago a travelling company came to Lafayette, Indiana, and launched a huge, grotesque, not so funny fun house – a hell house – called Final Exit. I went, with a small group to check it out. We walked through tableaux of human tragedy and what they considered sin – teenaged drinking, drugs, teen pregnancy, and abortion. We passed into the pit of hell, where tortured souls greeted us with piteous cries for help. We were pressed through that space on a narrow walkway and then found ourselves face to face with the crucified and bleeding Jesus. The crown of thorns cut into his brow. He looked at us sadly and accusingly from the cross. We were told to remember that he died for us.

A few years ago Rebecca Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock wrote *Proverbs of Ashes* which critically indicted this ethos of suffering.

Many religious traditions – and our own have tried to move beyond the horrific story to one of hope: that his life and not his death were redeeming. Indeed the story of the life of Jesus is a profound tale of a man born in a time of scourging oppression who chose to speak truth to power and love to powerlessness and was put to death for it. Yet he was remembered. That's a significant victory. Many traditions, including our own have come to identify Jesus with the cycle of life, rebirth, and hope in the springtime. Certainly, in our lives, full of inevitable suffering, the story of hope -- the miracle of rebirth holds great power. Who amongst us has not seen a bitter winter of suffering and longed for the warm solace of a new springtime? But it doesn't explain how his battered and bloodied body came to hang in so many churches and around people's necks.

As Unitarian Universalists, we do not hold the notion of a God who would ordain the death of God's son as cleansing of the sins of the world. This God would not create humanity with a stain and would not require of frail human creations that they should see suffering as a virtue. Rather, any God worth God's salt would wish to send help to these frail creations – through a teacher, a compassionate friend, a seeker of justice, an example of how to survive hardship and leave a record of resilience and love. If I read my Bible aright, for the most part, that is what I see. So – where did the notion of this redeeming blood come from? Seeking to go more deeply into this mystery upon a mystery, I turned back to Parker and Brock and found myself surprised – something I treasure – and enlightened – something I crave.

In a new book – Saving Paradise -- Parker and Brock decided to explore the pervasiveness of the dead Corpus Christi. Just as I felt, in that moment when the bloody Jesus faced me at Final Exit – that this made no sense – they had felt, also, that this image made no sense as a central redeeming motif. They went to Europe and the Near East to find out why this was the image that had survived.

Here's the thing: they found no images of the tortured Corpus Christi – no images at all of the dead Jesus until the 10th century. For the first millennia of Christianity the cross never bore the body of Jesus. As Parker and Brock went to the oldest churches they could find – they found, instead, images of Jesus full of life, surrounded by symbols of paradise. Sanctuaries blossomed with flowers and fruit; the lion and lamb were side by side. Church after church they explored. Down into the catacombs they went. Even in the halls of the dead they found no Corpse. Instead, again and again, they found images of the garden, the living Jesus and, at times, the simple cross.

The meaning of Jesus was found in his resurrection – not his death. Crucifixion was a shameful death in which the body was left until scavengers destroyed all wholeness and identity. Yet he was taken down by Joseph of Arimathea, he was openly mourned, women came to tend him, and he rose in love and imparting a vision of life rising over cruelty. Inspired, the disciples – who'd failed repeatedly to grasp the message he'd tried to teach during life – who'd followed him like sheep – finally got it and set forth with the strength to build a community of kindred spirits in his earthly name. Resurrection.

The early Christians – for the most part – like the Hebrew tradition from which they came – celebrated the world and the body. It was the world created in Genesis and, in spite of human failing, it was still good. To Cyril, Bishop of Jerusalem in the 4th century – the body was the temple of the spirit and the senses were the means of perceiving the beauty and sacred life all around us. He even called the tongue – the minister of the senses. He said: “Endure not any of those who say that the body is not of God. Defile not this – your fairest robe. “ Cyril charged his students to focus on feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, clothing the naked, and

visiting the imprisoned. All done in Jesus' earthly name. More than that – what they celebrated was an earthly Paradise – Paradeisos in Greek or Pardes in Hebrew – which both mean Garden -- was the gan eden – the Garden of Eden. To our day arguments continue about what Jesus meant in saying that the kingdom of heaven was at hand. But in the gospels as well as the texts rejected from the canon – it seems to me that Jesus meant that heaven was at hand for all with eyes to see, ears to hear: the sense to know the miracle. Here. Paradise emerged when two or more gathered and did so in love and service. It wasn't otherworldly – but this worldly and it wasn't individual – but communal.

That famed last supper – the Passover meal – was a signal as well of Paradise. At Passover one eats Charoset – nuts, honey, fruit, and wine. No one knows, exactly why. But, just this past week an article by Rabbi Arthur Waskow described the recipe for Charoset which, he said, is hidden in plain sight in the Song of Songs which is recited each year at Passover – the Rabbi quotes –

Feed me with apples and with raisin-cakes/ Your kisses are sweeter than wine

The scent of your breath is like apricots/ Your cheeks are a bed of spices

The fig tree has ripened/ Then I went down to the walnut grove...

He goes on to say: The Song of Songs is sacred not only to Jews, but also to Christians and to Muslims, and especially to the mystics in all three traditions. Its earth-and-human-loving energy has swept away poets and rabbis, lovers and priests, dervishes and gardeners. "Love is strong as death," sings the Song. At one level.. it celebrates the springtime rebirth of life... the parallel goes far deeper. For the Song celebrates a new way of living in the world. The way of love between the earth and her ...earthlings... Whereas the original Garden was childhood, unaware, the Garden of the Song is maturity. Death is known, conflict recognized yet joy sustains all." Thank you Rabbi Waskow. This song is recited in celebration of the persistence and victory of life. It might have been recited before the disciples drifted off to sleep. They'd have had no need to say, "next year in Jerusalem" but they'd all have understood that this rite signified hope in a new world born in this world – a just world, a free world.

For centuries after the death of Jesus remembrance was centered on the Resurrection and the promise of Paradise – not a place apart or after – but imminent and earthly. Confused, some early church fathers debated the exact location of Paradise and agreed that it was on a mountain, somewhere to the East. But that was the conjecture of the literally minded. The signature of early Christian communities was that they offered care to all who were in need. They lived out the lessons of Jesus. They were creating the mature Paradise, that arose in the midst of this world – in response to and in the face of suffering. They were, in fact, the manifestation of Paradise. Augustine – in one of his brighter moods, wrote: "the word Paradise properly means any wooded place, but figuratively it can be used for any spiritual region; so a certain joy springing from within man himself is paradise. Hence the church, in the saints who live justly ... is rightly called Paradise." He wrote also, "Paradise is the church as it is called in the Song of Songs, the four rivers are the four gospels, the tree of life is the holy of holies, Christ; the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the will's free choice."

So how did we get from this Eucharist and Tree of Life to the torn body hanging from a Cross? The earliest surviving crucifix is the Gero cross, in Cologne, Germany – dating from the later half of the 10th century. It was carved by the descendants of early Saxons who had practiced the resurrection and a this-worldly Christianity. Their rites mingled the tree worship, sacred groves, and springs of pagan traditions with celebration of the life and teaching of Jesus. Charlemagne sought to do two things – first to control Saxon land and second to erase the signs

of pagan nature worship. When efforts at persuasion and conversion failed, threats of damnation were made. When threats of damnation failed, an English monk – Boniface – arrived in Saxony and took an axe to the sacred tree of Thor. He returned with an army, cut down more trees, and slaughtered whole communities down to the last person. For decades the Saxons resisted and were executed or exiled. It was in this time that the Dream of the Rood was written “the right side of the tree began to bleed.” Eventually the new, violent interpretations of the cross won out. Where once it had signified a weapon over which love and life had triumphed it became the sign of Jesus’ awful suffering. Where once the Eucharist had been the sweet taste of paradise on the tongue it became, in the words of one of Charlemagne’s priests: “the means by which the lamb is sacrificed daily on the altar by the priest in memory of the sacred passion.” The cross became a symbol of the life humanity owed God in exchange for his bloody death. This tragic transformation unleashed a violence from which the world still reels. Just study the crusades and pogroms that followed.

It’s fascinating history – but it is not where history ends. As truths will do – the truth of the life affirming message of Jesus continued to inspire followers. They often suffered and died. They often went underground. But in the 19th century – in a strange and wondrous wedding of science, humanism, and romanticism – the ancient Jesus was reborn. In poetry and prose, nature became beautiful and holy again. One Ralph Waldo Emerson, a Unitarian minister, addressed the Divinity school class of 1838 and said: “Jesus Christ ... saw with open eye the mystery of the soul. He saw that God incarnates himself in man, ... But what a distortion did his doctrine and memory suffer in ... the following ages! The idioms of his language... the figures of his rhetoric, have usurped the place of his truth... churches are not built on his principles, but on his tropes. He spoke of miracles; for he felt that man's life was a miracle ... and he knew that this daily miracle shines, as the character ascends. But the word Miracle, as pronounced by Christian churches, gives a false impression; it is Monster. It is not one with the blowing clover and the falling rain.”

Miracles were one with the blowing clover and the falling rain – the simple miracles of life. Another Unitarian, Henry Thoreau, headed to a cabin to live simply in nature. There he discovered that his soul was free – his mind free to consider the smallest occurrences as miracles. He felt himself drawn to a great cause: that of redeeming humanity through nature. He wrote of folk so busy plowing the land they missed the miracle, “Heaven had taken place around him and he did not see the angels going to and fro, but was looking for an old post hole in the midst of paradise.” “in Wildness,” Thoreau wrote, “is the preservation of the world.” It was a religious assertion.

In Universalism and Unitarianism both – the ancient Jesus was born again. Not alone this time – but in the company of the Buddha and the other sages of the world. The crucifix of tragedy began to turn back into a tree of life. And as it did – the injustices in this world rankled and called people out of their fearful reveries and fevered reflections on the virtues of pain and suffering. Christians began to awaken to the injustice of slavery and work for its abolition. Women began to take back the fruit of knowledge and take back their place in a wiser Eden. Social movements grew as a rising awareness of the sacred value of this world dawned again. The energy of that new dawn has built and built. It has sent new generations out to farm organically out of love for our bodies and our Earth, it has sent people to the streets calling for peace, it has sent people arm in arm across bridges in Alabama. Said Dr. King: It's all right to talk about "long robes over yonder,"... But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here! It's all right to talk about "streets flowing with milk and honey," ... It's

all right to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God's preacher must talk about the new New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Memphis.”

I am not a Christian – but I have had clear experiences of the power of Jesus to console and strengthen – I have watched people as prayer eased suffering rather than glorifying it. I met a priest who had gone to jail more than 70 times because he believed in this world and this life and the example and lesson of Jesus. In Bethlehem I met Christians who lived the teaching of peace in the midst of conflict and everyone of these things happened because, hidden in plain view is this truth – Paradise is something that we create here and now. It only awaits our attention.

As I walked the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem – and knelt at the site where Catholics believe that Jesus died – as I looked onto Golgotha – the site where Protestants believe that Jesus died – as I stepped out of the cave at the Garden Tomb and read the little sign that quoted Scripture: He is not here – he has risen I knew that the reality of Jesus was far larger than these sites of death. Though ten centuries before the pilgrims had begun to glorify his suffering over his resurrection and hope he had continued to speak to and through new generations. He was all around for those with eyes to see or hands to reach out. I could feel him in the stones of the churches and in the people who sang in church after church. I could feel them turn to him for comfort and turn over their suffering for his healing touch. He was not dead. Hidden in plain view it was clear -- Jesus was a living miracle.

This year, I felt like I had found a most exciting painted egg in the garden of earthly delight – a symbol of life and new birth – into this world – this precious world. One more piece of the mystery came clear and the true mystery deepened. Each year, each day – we are all given new life – as long as we serve one another, stay together, and so love the world – the tree of life – hidden all around us – in plain sight.