

Communion and Establishing Paradise Here on Earth

REFLECTIONS: Part 1, Paradise is Here and Now

The remarks for today are based primarily upon *Saving Paradise*, by Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, which Rev. Jean Lloyd first introduced to us last spring. If you have already read the book, perhaps you will meet some familiar thoughts and insights; if you have not read it yet, do . . . ! You are in for a treat. . . But please wait until after the service to order it over your smart phones! I have also taken material from the notes on Transylvanian Communion services written by Judit Gellérd, who incorporates much of the thinking and the liturgy as conducted by her father, Dr. Imre Gellérd, a Transylvanian Unitarian minister. . .

These remarks draw on the Christian tradition, in which Unitarian-Universalism has its origins, but the message is as relevant to our faith today as it was 200, 500, or 1500 years ago. For they examine what “paradise” is and means and how to establish it here on earth, for early Christians and modern UUs.

The early Christians did not focus on the Crucifixion as being the central message and issue in Christianity for nearly 1,000 years (sometime in the 10th century the first Christian crucifixion images appear—perhaps tellingly in northern German territory). Wherever Brock and Parker looked—in early churches and monasteries, the catacombs of Rome, small chapels—they did not find Jesus’ dead body or any images whatsoever of a judgment day or hell. What they did find was images of paradise, which by the 3rd century was conceived of as a beautiful landscape of green meadows, flowers, flowing streams, animals living at peace with one another (often sheep and deer); central to this paradise would be Jesus, usually depicted as a shepherd, as a healer, a miracle worker, and a caretaker for the impoverished, the hungry and the destitute, surrounded by his disciples, Old Testament figures, saints, and local worthies in the church.

The message is plain: early Christians focused on the life-giving power of Jesus’ incarnation, and paradise was for them not some other-worldly/ next-worldly place of abode, but a very real here-and-now place, perhaps existing in a parallel dimension, but one that could be accessed by those living in this world. Paradise was also, according to the teachings and writings of such early church fathers as Augustine, Ambrose, and Ephrem the Syrian, not just a place but “an allegory for the church’s mission in the world.” (B&P, p. 105) and an allegory for human spiritual development (p. 93).

Perhaps no early church thinker better embodies the early concepts of establishing paradise on earth through mutual support and universal love than Ephrem the Syrian (c. 306–373), a poet, teacher, and lay ascetic from Nisibis, Syria (located in the borderlands between Roman and Persian empires). His *Hymns on Paradise*, a book of 15 long poems, speak of paradise “as a landscape that called humanity to live ethical, just and joyous lives and to journey toward God. . .” and, as we heard in our reading, “. . . to care for one another, to live nonviolently and wisely, to resist empires when necessary, and to appreciate the beauties and pleasures of ordinary life” (B&P, p. 99). For Ephrem, all dimensions of life—heart, mind, soul and strength—belonged to paradise.

Ephrem was a refugee from his native city when it was razed during a war between Rome and Persia and resettled in Edessa. When a famine and epidemic broke out in Edessa in 372, the leaders of the city’s

church asked Ephrem to organize relief efforts. Through his work in response to those civil catastrophes, he showed “what living in paradise required . . . : [he] organized food distribution networks and set up hospitals to care for the sick. He enlisted the cooperation of the healthy to maintain the community and extended the church’s care to the entire city” (pp. 97–98). “Christians, Ephrem said, were grafted onto Christ, the tree of life, through their responsiveness to one another’s needs. Even Christ had need of human care. . . Life required reciprocity, the richness of one supplying the wants of another. ‘Our need for everything binds us with a love for everything,’ [he said]. Sharing vulnerability and using one’s power to help others kept the circle of love complete.”

Moreover, to ask for help was a sign of . . . generosity, allowing another to demonstrate love:

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

(Ephrem the Syrian, *Heresies* 10:9) (B&P, pp. 97–99)

The church itself was a community where “the strengths, weakness, 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 together. 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.” (B&P, p. 106) “Church teachers asserted that even in a conflict-ridden, difficult world, paradise existed on the earth. They suggested that its most concrete, realized form was lived out in the social practices and spiritual training of the church.” (p. 89) The church itself is the “renewed paradise of God.”

How does this attitude and conceptualization inform our lives as Unitarian-Universalists today? How does Ephrem’s vision, the vision of the early church, work itself out in our world today? How does our faith community create its own paradise? How do we provide shelter for each other? Barb Francese will answer those questions for us here at SUUS.

REFLECTIONS: Part 3, Communion as the Portal to Paradise

If mission to our brothers and sisters, our neighbors and, yes, our enemies, was the means of establishing paradise here on earth, how did the common woman or man connect to that paradise inhabited by the dear departed, by the saints, by Jesus himself? For most early Christians, paradise was both *here and now* and *not here*; rituals connected the two, so that the ordinary person could inhabit the world and paradise simultaneously. It was through the rite of Communion or Eucharist—which literally means “good offering”—that Christians believed they made an actual, real and physical connection with the parallel world of paradise and opened the gate, inviting the dead and living to partake of food together. “Christians welcomed the departed into life and affirmed that neither suffering nor persecution could sever the bonds of love. . . .” (B&P, p. 59).

Eucharist rites in the early church took place every Sunday, the day of resurrection. As the leaders prepared the elements of the Eucharist, those gathered who were eligible to partake of the Eucharist exchanged greetings and the kiss of peace. Members brought “gifts to support the church and offered foods for the Eucharist meal. Heaped on tables, the offering represented the community’s shared resources, its common wealth in God” (pp. 140-141), in the Bounty of Nature.

Common foods at early Christian Eucharist celebrations were bread (always), cheese/fresh curds, milk, honey, fruits (but not melons, other cucurbitae or vegetables), olives/olive oil, grilled fish (sometimes), salt, water, wine (not always), and sometimes flowers (but usually only roses and lilies—some churches forbade any other flowers); never red meat. Some Eucharist rituals aimed to be “bloodless” and thus also excluded wine, to avoid any allusion to the blood of Christ.

Following such banquets, it was traditional to distribute food or coins to the poor—extending the grace of the feast to benefit others.

Dr. Imre Gellérd (1920–1980) minister in the Transylvanian Unitarian church, explained the Communion in the Transylvanian tradition thusly: “The Lord's Supper pertains rather to psychology than theology. It starts a fertilizing process of association in us which leads eventually to value transformation. Remembering Jesus and his teachings reminds us of our commitment to follow his example. This then urges us to evaluate our spiritual life and to meditate upon our moral weaknesses. It gives us an opportunity to affirm what is positive in us. At the same, time it creates the psychological conditions for repentance and change, for forgiveness, for purifying ourselves, for becoming better human beings, for getting closer to the divine, and eventually to divinize—to become divine in spirit. The Lord's Supper is not only the first, starting step of this process, but it is the acting forth as well. It is the divine spark which starts positive changes and it is the fuse which leads to the explosion of right actions.”

COMMUNION

(Margaret Fikrig:) We will now begin our own Communion ritual, passing around the plates of bread, symbol of the Bounty of Life, the Spirit of Goodness, the Communion of Sharing. If you would like to participate, please take of the harvest but hold it until everyone has been served so that we can eat in and as community. I would ask you also to face across the aisle, to look your fellow communicants in the eye, mindful of our common bonds and covenant to support and nurture one another.

(At the taking of the bread:) “*One person falls sick—and so another can visit and help him; one person starves—and so another can provide him with food and give him life . . .*” Take, eat, in remembrance of these words.