

Words of Inspiration
Unitarian Universalist Church of the Restoration
January 8, 2012

“Love and Paradise: Early Christianities” Rev. Kathryn Ellis

When I was a girl, I did not have the nurturing church community experience that Holly, our worship associate today, describes in her girlhood. Raised mostly unchurched, I did not come to know the strength and blessing of spiritual community until I was an adult, but I did have spiritual and religious experiences.

My mother was a “fallen” or “recovering” Catholic. Once in a great while, she took me to mass with her. The mass was still in Latin then and the church was beautiful. There were candles, incense and music; people did funny things with water, with standing up and sitting down and kneeling. It was confusing and I felt awe, a spirit of beauty. It felt important. Now, I can say that it felt spiritual.

I was not raised as a Christian – but I was raised in the 1950s and 60s in the Harrisburg, Pennsylvania suburbs. In my public elementary school, the Protestant Lord’s Prayer was recited every morning in the King James English. I made no sense to me. I became aware that all my friends were going to Sunday school and I begged to go to. So every Sunday for a year, my father took me to a Presbyterian Sunday school and then went to his office. I stopped going after that first year because I began to have nightmares about the “poor children in Africa.” The missionaries told us that they would be condemned to hell because they didn’t know Jesus. Now, I thought that was extremely unfair! How could they be punished for something that they didn’t even know?

By early adolescence, what I had learned from these experiences and from the culture around me led me to convinced, out loud atheism, shocking some of my peers. Still, I seem to have always been a seeker, and in college, I visited a number of different congregations, different denominations. I rejected them all because to me they all – definitely including the Unitarian Universalists- they all seemed to be preaching some form of “We’re better than you!” At the same time, I hung out with some ministers who were engaged in social justice work, who ran a coffeehouse for students, who were kind, loving and listening people. And I began to learn yoga and meditation.

In all these life experiences, I experienced both the beautiful and good in Christianity and the negative, dogmatic and wounding in Christianity.

Then I married a man who had grown up in nurturing and supportive churches. All the old ladies in the church were sure that Rick would become a minister, a Lutheran minister. He thought so, too until he went to college and began to learn more about Christianity. What he learned made no sense to him. Like many of you who were raised in Christian churches, he could not believe the church’s creed repeated in worship every Sunday. He left the idea of becoming a minister and he left the Lutheran church. Still, Rick knew the value of healthy religious community and when our daughter was in

school, we began to explore religious communities again.

As long as I have known and understood the word, I called myself a Universalist. I have never called myself a Christian. For about a decade I was a Universalist Quaker until the meeting began to be more fundamentalist Christian and was overtly homophobic. And there was a new Unitarian Universalist church in our town. We moved to the Unitarian Universalist congregation. Eventually and quite surprisingly to all of my family, I felt a call to ministry.

My first seminary studies were at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington. I began to really learn about Christianity and began to let go of some of my prejudices and fears. I learned to translate what my fellow students were saying so that I could understand religious language. Now, I encourage all of us to reclaim that language; many of these words and concepts can have deep and meaningful uses for us if we disconnect them from fundamentalist distortions.

At Wesley, I had course in biblical studies that talked about history, language, context. Those course were quite distressing for traditionally raised Christians, but for Unitarian Universalists they could be both fascinating and freeing. And then there was church history which I loved. It explained so much. Religious institutions and dogmas are always part of their historical and cultural context.

I learned that fundamentalist Christianity was a 20th century development. Most of what we understand about Christianity was not part of early Christianity. Certainly, it was not what Jesus taught. Jesus was a Jewish teacher. He did not say that he was "Christ." He did not teach Christianity. I learned that much of what I value and believe has Christian roots. I hope that you, too, can come to value both our Universalist heritage and teachings from Christianity. This isn't about the supernatural or about life after death. It is about life on earth. It isn't about exclusion, fear and punishment. It is about love and joy.

As Unitarian Universalist minister, writer and singer, Meg Barnhouse has written, "We must insist. Love, not fear, is spoken here. Love, not fear, is spoken here. Love, not fear, is spoken here." That has always been the message of Universalism. And it is the message of much of early Christianity.

The discovery of the Nag Hammadi and Dead Sea Scrolls have allowed scholars to understand much more about the first 500 years of Christianity. To me, it is a fascinating picture. Harvey Cox wrote:

First, there never was a single “early Christianity” there were many, and the idea of “heresy” was unknown. . . . creeds and hierarchies emerged much later than had been thought. (A)n essential key to comprehending the earliest Christians, . . . , is to see their movement as a self-conscious *alternative* to the empire that tyrannized them. And the best way to understand the succeeding generation of Christian leaders is to notice how they reversed course and gradually came to admire and emulate that empire. . . .

There was no standardized theology, no single pattern of governance, no uniform liturgy, and no commonly accepted scripture. . . . (But) all shared the same Spirit and all were engaged in following Jesus and following his message (of peace and love.) . . .The first Christians saw themselves as an essentially anti-imperialist movement.ⁱ

(They) called (their) . . .movement, “the Way.” Jesus himself was addressed as the one who taught “the way of God in truth.” Those who followed him were described as walking the “way of peace” . . .(W)hat bound Christians together was their common participation in the life of the spirit and a way of living that included the sharing of (spiritual practice and food) . . . and putting the example of Jesus into concrete practice, especially his concern for outcasts.ⁱⁱ

It was about living loving lives. Cynthia Bourgeault wrote that she sees Jesus as a wisdom teacher, an enlightened one like the Buddha. The wisdom teachings were about “transformation of the whole human being. Transformation . . . from . . . egocentricity into love and compassion, from a judgmental and dualistic worldview into a nondual accpetingness.”ⁱⁱⁱ It was about life, not about death. It was not about an angry, vengeful god. “In the original Aramaic of Jesus and his followers, there was no word for salvation. Salvation was understood as a bestowal of life, and to be saved was ‘to be made alive.’”^{iv}

Real love changes people, transforms us into greater wholeness, gives us more compassion. Real, inclusive love was and is dangerous to those who want to use religion as a way to control people, to bind them to nationalistic or ethnic purposes. The emperor Constantine needed something new to bind people’s loyalty and conformity to him. He choose Christianity and he was troubled by all the different ideas and ways of worshipping. So, he called the bishops together in Nicea in 325. He told the 320 bishops there that they had to agree. And so they came up with the Nicene creed and Constantine banished those who did not agree.

At Wesley, I read Matthew Fox’s *Original Blessing*. I began to learn a positive Christianity that has continued – often being labeled heresy or being hidden. Fox teaches what he calls “creation spirituality.” Original blessing is about original goodness; the beauty of the earth and the love of life. He grounds his teaching in Jewish and Christian roots and shows how it is related to Jesus’ teaching and the earliest Christian communities. Fox calls Ireneaus the first Christian theologian in the west (130-200 ce)^v; for Ireneaus, “the key to spirituality is a psychology of growth.”^{vi} Creation spirituality is a

justice spirituality rooted in biblical traditions of wisdom from “the forgotten and oppressed ones.” Meister Eckhart “says ‘The person who understands what I say about justice understands everything I have to say.’”^{vii}

Fox wrote that the idea of “original sin” came from Augustine in the fourth century.

The church inherited the Roman empire in the fourth century, and to run an empire efficiently one needs theories like original sin to keep the citizens and soldiery in line.^{viii}

In 2008, Rebecca Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock published an exhaustive, scholarly and compelling book. I heard them speak about it at General Assembly, and as they read some passages, I found myself in tears. The book, this book, is called *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of this World for Crucifixion and Empire*. In their prologue, they write: “It took Jesus a thousand years to die. Images of his corpse did not appear in churches until the tenth century. Why not? This question set us off on a five year pilgrimage that led to this book.”^{ix} One of the earliest Christian catechisms known, the *Didache*, makes no mention of the crucifixion. ^x“(F)or nearly a thousand years, Christianity offered a different image of sanctity: the glory of God was humanity fully alive.”^{xi}

They show that early Christian art is often about paradise on earth, showing flowing rivers and lush valleys. They show “how the stories and teachings of Jesus use paradise to present his work as resistance to and critique of the Roman Empire.”^{xii}

Jesus shows ethical grace in action: love and generosity in community, care for all who have need, healing of the sick, appreciation for life, confrontation with powers of injustice and exploitation, and advocacy for freedom of the imprisoned. The New Testament presents him as the model or forerunner of a restored human community that saw its mission as sustaining ethical grace.^{xiii}

The resurrection was the gift of persistent love, stronger than death. (from their communities and rituals) they took strength to embody ethical grace in the world – the world that God so generously loved.^{xiv}

Early Christianity was fluid, diverse and inclusive. Jesus' teaching were about becoming more fully human, about living well on earth. They were not about death; they were definitely not about himself as a god. Ireneaus taught that the church was planted as a paradise in this world. Both Jesus and the early communities were gender inclusive. There were women leaders – priests, bishops, teachers, prophets, apostles.^{xv}

My friends, if you or others you care about have been hurt by Christianity, I suggest that you reframe that belief. You were not hurt by Christianity. You were hurt by people. You were hurt by those who use religion to control, to feel superior. You were hurt by those with empty, thoughtless Christianity. You were not hurt by what Jesus of Nazareth taught. It's time for us to reclaim those parts of Christianity (and Judaism) that continues to be our valued heritage.

There is a Balm in Gilead. There is healing. Jesus taught love for all, love for life and love for living. He said paradise is here and now. May we follow this way!

Amen and blessed be.

ⁱ Cox, Harvey. *The Future of Faith*. Harper Collins e Books, 2009 ,pp. 58-59.

ⁱⁱ Cox, Harvey. *The Future of Faith*. Harper Collins e Books, 2009 ,pp. 76-77.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bourgeault, Cynthia. *The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind – a New Perspective on Christ and His Message*. Boston: Shambala, 2011, p. 4.

^{iv} Bourgeault, Cynthia. *The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind – a New Perspective on Christ and His Message*. Boston: Shambala, 2011, p. 21.

^v Fox, Matthew. *Original Blessing*. New York: Jeremy Tarcher/Putnam, 2000, p. 11.

^{vi} Fox, Matthew. *Original Blessing*. New York: Jeremy Tarcher/Putnam, 2000, p. 85.

^{vii} Fox, Matthew. *Original Blessing*. New York: Jeremy Tarcher/Putnam, 2000, pp. 16-17.

^{viii} Fox, Matthew. *Original Blessing*. New York: Jeremy Tarcher/Putnam, 2000, p. 5.

^{ix} Brock, Rita Nakshima and Rebecca Ann Parker. *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of this World for Crucifixion and Empire*. Boston, Beacon Press, 2008, p. ix.

^x Brock, Rita Nakshima and Rebecca Ann Parker. *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of this World for Crucifixion and Empire*. Boston, Beacon Press, 2008, p. 158.

^{xi} Brock, Rita Nakshima and Rebecca Ann Parker. *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of this World for Crucifixion and Empire*. Boston, Beacon Press, 2008, p. 202.

^{xii} Brock, Rita Nakshima and Rebecca Ann Parker. *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of this World for Crucifixion and Empire*. Boston, Beacon Press, 2008, p. 28.

^{xiii} Brock, Rita Nakshima and Rebecca Ann Parker. *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of this World for Crucifixion and Empire*. Boston, Beacon Press, 2008, p. 29.

^{xiv} Brock, Rita Nakshima and Rebecca Ann Parker. *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of this World for Crucifixion and Empire*. Boston, Beacon Press, 2008, pp 54-55.

^{xv} Brock, Rita Nakshima and Rebecca Ann Parker. *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of this World for Crucifixion and Empire*. Boston, Beacon Press, 2008, p. 192.