

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“The Missing Dead Body of Jesus”
Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore February 5, 2012

Sermon

Not much remains today *of* Jesus. What we have of him is way too much of the religion *about* Jesus. If Jesus returned tomorrow and witnessed that religion, I expect he would weep and rend his garments in extreme grief and anger like the Hebrew prophet he was. I expect he would loudly reject much of what is done in his name. Like what is currently being done to the memory of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Jesus has been domesticated by rulers over the centuries and his message tailored to fit the agenda of empire building. Beginning to remember how that happened is our agenda this morning. You may start weeping and gnashing your teeth too when you hear what has been done to the compassionate, life giving message Jesus originally brought to life.

The one thing argumentative Jesus scholars all agree on is his proclamation of the Baselia of God, commonly translated as the realm or kingdom of God. Many contemporary Christians interpret this as a future event. The second coming of Jesus along with some kind of apocalyptic series of disasters predicted in Revelations will happen first.

Some contemporary scholars understand the Baselia of God as covert language of resistance to Roman oppression. As the Roman Emperor was considered a God and ruled by divine mandate, when Jesus used the term Baselia of God, it usually implied a comparison. The Realm of God defined what the world would look like if the Jewish God was in charge as opposed to the oppressive rule of the Roman empire.

But mostly Jesus didn't talk about the Realm of God as some future event, he announced it had already begun. The way his first several centuries of followers understood this was as the restoration of the paradise lost by Adam and Eve. Not necessarily as a literal paradise of lush vegetation, but as a paradise of restored relationship with each other and with God.

I take my inspiration this morning from the work of Starr King School for the Ministry President, Rebecca Parker and her collaborator, Rita Nakashima Brock. Their recent book titled, *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire*, reviews over two thousand years of Christian history. It tells the story of the loss of Jesus' vision of the restoration of paradise in this world and its relocation to a time after death.

The consequences for worldwide human civilization have been catastrophic.

Their exploration of the topic began by looking at art in the Roman catacombs and in the early churches. At first they were looking for the familiar images found in contemporary Catholic churches, scenes of the stations of the cross and crucifixes. They expected to see depicted Jesus' tormented and dead body as a primary focus of that art. Yet those images

were absent. What they saw were images of a robust, handsome Jesus in beautiful gardens with flowers and birds and swans and sheep.

So why are those gruesome images missing? Parker and Brock researched the early Christian church and found remarkable answers. The images reflect how that community saw itself and imagined their relationship to Jesus and each other.

The primary focus of the early church was not on the way Jesus died but their belief that he returned to life. His return sealed the promise for them they had nothing to fear in death. The Eucharist celebrated his return and the regeneration of his followers now and in the future. The sharing of bread and wine were fruits of the newly restored community. The communion table of the early church was abundant with grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, pears, mulberries, peaches, cherries, almonds, plums, grilled fish, fresh milk, roses and lilies. (interestingly NOT red meat, melons mushrooms and garlic). The bishop often would read from the first chapters of Genesis that celebrated the divine origin, the goodness of creation and the beauty of the cosmos that God found good. The church was the foretaste of the unfolding restoration of humanity to new life in paradise.

That beautiful, positive religious vision started down the wrong road. That decline begins, to my mind, with the adoption of Christianity by the Roman Emperor Constantine in the beginning of the fourth century. His mother Helen was a Christian which may have influenced him as a child. His conversion happened however before the critical Battle of Milvian Bridge in 312. Constantine looked up at the sun before the battle and saw a cross of light and the message in Greek "by this, win." He had his soldiers to put crosses on their shields. They won, leading Constantine to claim the emperorship of the West. I think this was the first time any image of Christianity was used in a military campaign. It certainly was not the last.

With the endorsement and patronage of an emperor (and his mother), wealth began to flow into the Christian churches. At first they resisted Rome and strove to retain their independence. But the corrosive effect of wealth and power gradually started changing the character of the church.

By the time Charlemagne took power at the end of the eighth century, Christianity had spread across Europe, but it didn't look like early pre-Constantine Christianity. These non-Roman churches were fusions of Christian ideas, rituals and practices with indigenous nature and pagan worship. This was especially true of the agrarian Saxons who continued to worship in their sacred groves along the Rhine. Some also baptized in the name of "The Father and the Daughter." As happens when religions meet, people take the parts they like and create their own new synthesis.

The Franks and the Saxons had fought over this area for many years. Each time the Franks conquered territory they would convert the Saxons to Christianity. Later the Saxons would go back to worshipping Yggdrasil, the sacred tree of life and their old pagan gods. This

happened dozens of times. Charlemagne decided he would finish the job. He subdued the Saxons permanently and ruthlessly by enforcing religious conformity. Yet the Christianity he forced upon them didn't look like early Christianity. His religious agents changed Christianity from a religion of love and persuasion, to a religion of empire, violent conquest and forced conversion.

At that time, the shedding of human blood was still considered a sin. The night before the Carolingians readied for battle with the Saxons, they would line up for confession. Echoing Constantine's victory, they would eat the body and blood of the all powerful Christ who assured them victory in battle and paradise after death. Carolingians sought to purify Saxons of their pagan ways by destroying the Saxons sacred groves, stones and springs, forbidding them from worshipping there.

Charlemagne installed his bishops and abbots to head cathedrals, monestaries, and schools throughout Saxony. The churchmen took possession of vast estates and became the people's landlords. They brought books and teachers ... captured [and enslaved] Saxon soothsayers and magicians [creating] institutions of control and instruction to solidify what warfare began.

These Carolingian Christians did not share a confidence that paradise could be found in this world. Instead they focused on stirring up anxiety over the danger of eternity in hell. God allowed the Saxons to be defeated, they said, because God was punishing them for their pagan sinfulness. That punishment was connected to the suffering of Jesus on his way to and on the cross.

This bloody theology arrived at the point of a sword. Within a few generations, the Saxons hewed from a formerly sacred, felled tree, one of the first images extant of the tortured, dead body of Jesus on the Cross. The Gerod Cross.

Starting with Charlemagne, the vision of the Eucharist began to change – and with that change came a profound change in Christian identity. I quote now this stunning description from Parker and Brock's book.

With the triumph of a Eucharist that presented a dead body on the Communion table, death, instead of being defeated, became eternal. This innovation changed the ontological status of death. Whereas in the traditional Eucharist, Jesus had overcome death, never to die again, with the new Eucharist he entered a state of perpetual dying. Death, no longer in the past, became co-eternal with life. Christ's dying became eternally present and began to haunt the Western European imagination, riddling it with a diffuse anxiety about existence, a terror of judgment, and a piety of holy suffering...The change alienated [Jesus] from humanity by changing the meaning of the human nature he revealed. Previously, Christ's incarnation revealed humanity's likeness to God and restored humanity's divine powers as first given in paradise...Now, Christ's incarnation revealed humanity's mortality and powerlessness

and its brokenness and suffering...The Carolingians...taught the Saxons that the correct interpretation of the Eucharist required them to see themselves as killers of Christ, accused and condemned unless they performed sufficient penance. (p237)

I hope you hear the march toward the Crusades in this violent language and imagery. And after the Crusades, one of the most wretched times in Christian history, the Inquisition soon followed. This kind of twisted Christianity validated the taking of Africans as slaves to save their souls. When it becomes holy to kill infidels for Christ, the beautiful life affirming message Jesus brought died and was buried in institutional evil.

From the time of the sixteenth century Reformation forward, Unitarians and Universalists have taken strong stands against this kind of understanding of Jesus and his message, sometimes paying with their lives. One early American Universalist who directly attacked Carolingian theology was the influential Universalist minister Hosea Ballou. He wrote forcefully in his Treatise on Atonement:

The belief that the great Jehovah was offended with his creatures to that degree, that nothing but the death of Christ, or the endless misery of mankind, could appease his anger, is an idea that has done more injury to the Christian religion than the writings of all its opposers, for many centuries. The error has been fatal to the life and spirit of the religion of Christ in our world; all those principles which are to be dreaded by men have been believed to exist in God. (p 390)

Ballou preached:

...no matter how much sin and death abounded, grace was greater. Nothing humanity might do could overcome the loving, generous grace of God. Death was not a punishment for sin, but a natural condition of human life, even before the Fall. Those who knew the love of God need not fear death because God's love "is stronger than death, which many waters cannot quench, nor the floods drown." (p 390)

Quakers, Shakers and Unitarians rejected the severe, "sinners in the hands of an angry God" Puritan theology, reinterpreting the beginning of Genesis emphasizing our being made in the image of God. They celebrated the indwelling spirit of God in humanity.

Founding light of American Unitarianism, William Ellery Channing

...preached that the human capacities for reason, affection, imagination, will, creativity, aesthetic sensitivity, and moral conscience reflected the image of God. He said that Christ came to restore the obscured image of God in humanity, the "impulse to what is divine within us." The divine likeness in humanity was found not in supernatural or miraculous gifts but in the human faculties of "understanding, conscience, love and the moral will. (p 395)

This morning, I've just been opening up the loss of Jesus and the recovery of his life giving

mission and message. Every year I like to spend some time with Jesus' teachings during the time of Lent. This year, I'll be starting my Lenten Bible Study class the last Tuesday of February. The last session will be the first Tuesday of April. We'll use the Saving Paradise book as our text to explore early Christianity, to review its fall after Constantine and Charlemagne, and see how Unitarian and Universalist Christianity recovers his message of love and redemption in this world. You can sign up at the sign up site in Channing Hall.

This picture of Jesus in a worldly paradise has resonance with how we do religion here. The image of a bloody Jesus dying, nailed to a cross, does not. Yes there is suffering in this world. Yes there is evil in this world. That suffering and evil will not come to an end by glorifying torture, violence and crucifixion. The first millennium of Christianity didn't need it. Only a conquering, empire building Christianity does.

As humanity begins to envision a nonviolent, green, sustainable, tolerant world community, those who follow Jesus need to recover a world affirming, progressive Christianity rather than a violent, world denying, apocalyptic Christianity. Thankfully, the early church preserves the vision of a world affirming Christianity. Were Christianity to recover these early roots, it would be a giant step toward saving the paradise not yet destroyed and moving the world toward a paradise yet to be restored and created a new.