

## **Love Will Not Be Sacrificed**

*An Easter Sermon by the Rev. Molly Housh Gordon*

*UU Church of Columbia, MO*

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I have a personal history of confusion about Jesus.

When I was four, I went to a Birthday Party for Jesus at Christmastime (as one does, when one is growing up in Tulsa, Oklahoma) and I was dismayed and disturbed to find out that the birthday boy would not be there to blow out the candles himself!

When I was probably seven or eight, I was told for the first time by a solemn classmate that God sent his only son Jesus to die for my sins. As the classmate waited for me to react to this wonderful, happy news, my reaction was confusion. Why would he do that? Couldn't he come up with a better way than killing someone?

Though some of the theological twistings and turnings around him still confound me, over the years I have come to love the stories of Jesus. I have never been able to say they will be my only sacred text, but I find in them deepest wisdom about the struggle to love this world.

In Jesus, I encounter a teacher who embodied a standard of love so high it makes me dizzy; a radical prophetic who demanded that his followers give up everything but love, and who defined that love not as a warm feeling but as an uncompromising position of compassion and mercy and justice in this world. I believe that Jesus was a child of God in the way that we all hope to be.

This is important when we approach the Easter story of sacrifice, crucifixion, and resurrection.

Theologian and minister Rebecca Parker, who is ordained in both the Unitarian Universalist and United Methodist traditions, remembers a conversation with her Methodist preacher father when she was around the age of 12. With some trepidation, she confessed that she believed that Jesus was only the son of God in the way that we are all children of God.

Her father calmly told her that made her a Unitarian. “But don’t worry,” he said... he was a little bit Unitarian too, and they could both still be United Methodists.<sup>1</sup>

As she grew into adulthood and into her calling as a minister, Parker began to encounter things in the ministry that led her to believe that there was, indeed, confusion around Jesus. Confusion that needed clearing up, if the Christian faith was to be a life-giving enterprise.

Particularly, she began to encounter individuals, mostly women, who were taught by their church that real love is self-sacrificing love, and that bravely bearing the cross of suffering, and even of violence, was somehow an exercise of their faith.

This, too, is important when we approach the Easter story of sacrifice, crucifixion, and resurrection.

In her book *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*, Parker points out that the pervasive Christian doctrine of substitutionary atonement – the claim that God sent Jesus specifically to die, as a blood sacrifice in substitution for all of humanity – is a theological claim that puts violence at the center of faith.

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<sup>1</sup> Brock, Rita Nakashima and Rebecca Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2001. Page 34.

Parker writes, “The actual historical event of Jesus' crucifixion was neither sweet nor saving. In Jesus' time, the Romans occupied all of Palestine. [...] The Romans suppressed resistance by terrorizing the local population. Crucifixion was their most brutal form of capital punishment. It took place in full public view, to teach a lesson through terror.

To say that Jesus' executioners did what was historically necessary for salvation is to say that state terrorism is a good thing, that torture and murder are the will of God.”<sup>2</sup>

Parker continues: “Atonement theology takes an act of state violence and redefines it as intimate violence, a private spiritual transaction between God the Father and God the Son. Atonement theology then says this intimate violence saves life. This redefinition replaces state violence with intimate violence and makes intimate violence holy and salvific.”<sup>3</sup>

Any theology that finds the crucifixion to be somehow necessary for salvation, she argues, is a life-denying position that reifies and justifies brutality, and that even commands us to suffer it willingly, as a sacrifice for the greater good.

Of course most UUs don't uphold this particular strain of theology. You may even congratulate yourself, as you hear this, for never having believed such craziness in the first place, or for long since discovering the errors of your ways.

But we cannot ignore this worldview, because it lives among us.

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<sup>2</sup> *Proverbs of Ashes*, page 48.

<sup>3</sup> *Proverbs of Ashes*, page 49.

In our most honest moments, we probably recognize that it even lives *within us* somewhere dark, where it has been carefully planted by our addicted culture.

We are *all* members of a society drunk on violence, and we cannot ignore the narrative of violent sacrifice and redemptive violence that infects our culture.

On a personal level, it often manifests as shame – that niggling suspicion that we deserve or have earned our suffering through some deep failure.

On a larger scale, well, we crucify people all the time. We name them “other,” deem them without worth, and murder their voice or body.

And, as Parker points out, along with countless feminist and liberationist theologians... when sacrifices are made, from time in memoriam, it is rarely the rich and powerful who are sacrificed. More often, it is the poor, the weak, and the vulnerable whose lives are forfeit.

We see this on our street corners when we sacrifice our teens to the Gods of drugs and money. We see this in our state budgets when we sacrifice health care for our most vulnerable citizens to the Gods of personal political gain. We see this in our own lives when our tender vulnerabilities are exploited.

But it's time we preach the truth: that sacrifice will not save us, until we put down our crosses and nails and guns, and we instead take up one another's hands in gentle and fierce love.

We will not be saved by giving up life, but by dedicating our lives to holy things – beauty and dignity; compassion and liberation; flourishing for all.

This is the sacrifice Jesus made: his uncompromising position of love, which he held even unto death. Not a necessary death, though certainly a tragic one... and perhaps a predictable one: Radical love threatens the power of tyranny.

And the thing is, there are many peace-making traditions that have always sought the good news of compassion in the Christian narrative. There have always been followers of Jesus who have found justice and kindness and mercy in their humble walk with the teacher who commanded us above all else to love each other.

Indeed, it would seem that the earliest Christians; those closest to events we recount on Easter week, pinned their faith not on Jesus' death, but on his life, and on the resurrection power of his love.

In their most recent book *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire*, Rebecca Parker and her writing partner Rita Nakashima Brock discover that the focus on the violent Crucifixion as the center of the Christian narrative did not occur until about a thousand years into Christian practice.

Indeed, on a journey through both written and visual history, they found that the first visual image of Jesus' death did not appear until around 950 in the common era.

What they found instead, in the earliest churches and most ancient holy sites, were countless images of Paradise, as a fertile, flourishing, and peaceful garden here on this Earth, an Eden among us.

What they found in the theology of the time was the faith claim that the gates to Paradise on this earth were opened not through Jesus' death, but through his Resurrection.

Indeed, the frescos of the earliest churches had no panel showing the crucifixion, but skipped right to the image of the Risen Christ in a this-earthly paradise, open at once for all people.

Musing upon this discovery, Parker and Brock write: “As the paradise of early Christianity entered our vision and seeped into our consciousness, Crucifixion-centered Christianity seemed increasingly strange to us. We wondered what had happened to the understanding of this world as paradise. When and why did Christianity shift to an obsession with atoning death and redemption through violence? What led Western Christianity to replace resurrection and life with a Crucifixion-centered salvation and to relegate paradise to a distant afterlife?”<sup>4</sup>

They found their answer right about the time of the religious Crusades of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, when the Crucifixion began its theological rise, images of Jesus’ gruesome death proliferated, and the violent sacrifice of self or other became a valid means for atonement and redemption.

“In short,” write Parker and Brock, “the needs of empire—and theologies that justified and then sanctified violence and war—transformed Christianity and alienated Western Christians from a world they had once perceived as paradise.”<sup>5</sup>

In their book, they issue a call to us... that it is time; it is past time, to reclaim paradise as our dominant cultural narrative. We have been sick with justifications for violence for far too long.

We must open the gates of paradise to each other once more.

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<sup>4</sup> Brock, Rita Nakashima and Rebecca Parker. *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2008. Page XIX.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

And we do it by telling that same Easter story once more, but telling it fresh. As one of my colleagues has been known to say, with a twinkle in her eye, perhaps we needn't throw the baby Jesus out with the bathwater.

In our Universalist tradition, we believe in a force of love at work in this world that is all-encompassing and irresistible, a fierce love that sacrifices none, but holds *all*.

Our Unitarian tradition identifies our capacity and responsibility to embody that Love ever more fully, as Jesus himself did when he fed the hungry, healed the sick, and spent his days with society's least and last.

The forces of capital and empire will always be threatened by this kind of Love, which cannot be monetized or oppressed. This is the Love that rises up even in the ghetto and the slum. This is the Love that springs up as wildflowers in the most barren land. The Love that lives even through war and famine, desolation and despair.

That kind of Love is a threat, because it is wild and irresistible. It is impossible to control.

Through a historic lens, the arrest, torture, and execution of Jesus is, sadly, the most logically believable part of the Easter story. We are not surprised when empire executes those whom it cannot control.

But as Unitarian Universalists, we believe in the power of that irresistible Love, and we believe in resisting the dominion and violence of empire the way that Jesus himself did.

Thus, ironically, given our usual skepticism, the truly Unitarian Universalist approach to the story of Easter may be to lift up as

paramount the story's final and most unbelievable claim – the resurrection.

The resurrection – the claim of Jesus' followers that crucifixion would not, could not be the final word. The claim that you can kill Love incarnate, and roll a stone across its tomb, but Love will not be defeated. It will rise up again and again.

This is the story slanted toward paradise, the story removed from the hands of empire and placed in the service of a kingdom of love - a Paradise here on earth.

As Unitarian Universalists, we do not glorify the blood sacrifice of Jesus' life. Instead we make the improbable claim that **Love will not be sacrificed**. That even when faced with the horrors of terror and violence in this world, even when faced with systems that are indifferent to suffering... Love wins. Improbably and always - Love wins.

This is not just a claim we make, but a reality we see and name.

Yes, violence and suffering abound. Yes, the brokenness of this world rends our hearts just as the temple banner was rent as Jesus breathed his last.

*And yet*, for every hand raised in anger, there is another reaching out in solidarity and compassion.

For every anti-Semitic madman opening fire at a community center there are a thousand more human souls who reach out to their Jewish neighbors in love and concern.

For every indifferent act in our legislature, a thousand people pour into the capitol advocating for their neighbors' access to health care and the vote.



As Unitarian Universalists, we attempt always to see our world clearly, and so we know that this world will crucify people.

But experience and our faith in the redeeming power of Love tells us that crucifixion is never the final word. **Love is.**

Violence, suffering, and even death, are never the final word. **Love is.**

King Solomon said it this way in the beautiful love song of the Hebrew Bible known as the Song of Solomon or the Song of Songs:

“Set me as a seal upon your heart, □  
as a seal upon your arm; □  
for love is strong as death, □  
passion fierce as the grave. □  
Its flashes are flashes of fire, □  
a raging flame. □  
Many waters cannot quench love, □  
neither can floods drown it.”

This is our Unitarian Universalist Eastertide proclamation:

That only love prevails. It is strong as death. It will not be sacrificed.

Always, Love wins.