

# INTO THE GARDEN

A Service/Sermon by Rev. Barbara W. ten Hove  
Cedars Unitarian Universalist Church — Sunday, Nov. 14, 2010

## Reading from *A House for Hope*

by Rebecca Ann Parker & John Buehrens, Beacon Press, 2009, pp15-17, abridged

A few summers ago, [a friend] and I joined my brother's family for a weeklong backpacking trip into...in the Sierras. To get to the trailhead, we took a...bus with other climbers, hikers, and fisherfolk. While the bus switchbacked up the narrow road through the pine forest up to the meadows, my seatmate and I began to talk. He'd overheard my brother talking to me...about [my] theological work and wanted to know what [I'd] written...

I told him about [my] book that exposes how Christian ideas that the death of Jesus saved humanity have sanctioned domestic violence, sexual abuse, racism, homophobia, and war. He said he had been raised Catholic and that his wife was the daughter of a Methodist minister. Church was important to him.

"But I can't believe all those old doctrines," he said, "and I never was comfortable with the bloody crucifix hanging over the altar. I couldn't understand why we would be worshipping it. But I learned a way of life from the church that I have not rejected."

What is that way of life? I asked.

"Oh, it's simple," he told me. "Love your neighbor as yourself. Try to help, not harm. Do what you can to make a difference. We do foster care for kids. It's heart breaking to see some of the violence, abuse, and deprivation these kids have experienced. But my wife and I welcome them into [our] home and [do] what [we can]. Not even love can repair the damage sometimes."

I know, I replied.

"What is the book you are working on now about?" he asked me.

Paradise, I answered.

"Paradise," he mused, and looked out the window of the bus for a few moments at the bright sky, the deep green pine forests, the alpine meadows coming into view. And rising above them the sharp peaks of the Minarets.

"Do you mean 'paradise' like where we are right now?"

Yes, I said. Like where we are right now.

We both gazed out the window for a few moments, breathing the pungent, fresh air.

"This is enough," he said.

You know that because you help kids, I said.

A cloud of thoughtfulness passed over his face.

"Yes," he said. "That's right."

## Sermon: *Into the Garden*

Rev. Barbara W. ten Hove

*We gaze up in wonder at the stars and the sun.  
We look down in wonder at the beauty of the earth.  
And we live with a whole world of wonder inside.*

(From *The Sun at High Noon*, Hymn #14, *Singing the Living Tradition*)

I love this hymn for it speaks so beautifully to the way our faith challenges us to see, as wondrous, this world we share with all people, plants and animals. It recognizes that creation is marvelous, incredible, and amazing.

As most of you know, I grew up Unitarian Universalist in a minister's home. Though Jaco will tell you I don't spring from an outdoorsy clan, my childhood was not without its exposure to the wonders of this world we live in.

My father's first ministry was in Northern Virginia and the church owned ten acres on top of a high hill not far from George Washington's Mt. Vernon. From the age of 3 to the age of 8, I lived on this old estate where there were oak trees nearly 200 years old, tall pine trees that we climbed to the very top, and formal gardens planted with Japanese cherry trees and old world boxwood. Each spring the hill would blossom with violets, periwinkles, crocuses and daffodils and not long after the climbing roses would take over, their scent filling the early summer air.

My sisters and I had a lot of freedom on this property and would spend hours roaming about enjoying the diverse beauty of what we all called our "Holy Hill." Even in recent years, when I've returned to find housing developments encroaching and old trees fallen down, there is still something powerfully moving about this place for me. When I return there, I feel the presence of something Holy, something that spoke to me from the trees when I was just a child. I did not know that I was in paradise and that God was near. But I felt it then and I know it to be true today.

I think most people have places in their lives that are sacred. Places that feel special, places where your heart feels at home. Places where it is clear that the Holy is present. Let's take a moment and think of such places. Are there Holy places in your lives?

While it is certainly true that there are human made places that evoke spirit (great cathedrals come to mind as well as wonderfully laid out gardens) most places that evoke this special feeling are natural ones. When I've asked folks at a new member class where they feel most spiritual I can't tell you how many times I am told of mountains and oceans and deserts. There is something deep inside the human spirit that responds to the world around us as if it were sacred.

And yet, throughout much of what we know of western history, humans have been taught that the earth is not sacred. In fact, much of what became modern Christianity teaches just the opposite. The earth is the profane and secular realm of humans in all our sin. Paradise, we are told, is only to be found in heaven. After we die. If we are lucky and get to go there.

This view – that paradise as far away and unavailable to us except after death – is a primary tool used to encourage people to believe in certain things. Things that will, for instance, get you into heaven.

Heaven – that wonderful paradise we’re only supposed to go to after death. Imagining the world beyond this one as better and brighter and more beautiful is understandable. Living in this world is hard. And there is much that doesn’t feel like paradise that we encounter every day, at least somewhere. Hurricanes bring torrential rain and wind that uproot trees and bring deadly floods. Tornadoes destroy everything in their path. Freezing rain and snow chill us deep in our bones and require that we hunker down just to stay warm and survive. And the blistering heat of the desert causes most living things to dry up and die, including humans.

Yes, our planet is not always a happy and peaceful place. It is not surprising that we long for something better. A paradise where lions and lambs lie down together. Where it never rains except at night (Camelot anyone?) and the sun always shines and the sky is always blue. The religions that emerged out of the deserts of the Middle East share a vision of an afterlife that is so much better than the place we already live. And over time, humans began to develop theologies that determined who would get in and who should stay out.

One of the most repulsive of these theologies (in my view) is the idea of the rapture. Popularized by the *Left Behind* books of Tim LaHaye, this theology suggests that only those who believe a certain way will be taken up by God to live in a far away paradise while the rest of us are left behind to survive in the hell that is our planet. I find this concept very odd indeed.

But the rapture has so permeated even my progressive religious brain that the other night when Jaco and I and our friend (and liberal Christian minister) Dee Eisenhower came out of the Pavilion rather late and saw absolutely no one, we all commented on how maybe the rapture had come while we were watching the film and we’d been left behind! Strangely, my first response to this was a great peace. I looked up at the stars and all around me at the Bainbridge Island night and thought to myself – how lucky am I to still be here! For this is paradise, not some place far away.

In their wonderful book, *A House for Hope*, theologians and ministers Rebecca Ann Parker and John Buehrens challenge progressive religious people to reclaim religious ideas from conservatives. I’ve shared some of their ideas about salvation and religious community in earlier sermons. Today I bring to you one of their most radical but powerfully compelling ideas.

For the bulk of Unitarian Universalists, the idea of an afterlife is interesting, but not terribly important. Unlike many other religions, which not only speculate but spend enormous energy preparing for heaven (or worrying about hell) our faith takes quite a different approach. Much of this stems from our Universalist forebears who had a Biblically sound but unacceptable (to the masses at least) idea that if there is a God, he (and yes, our forebears did use such language to talk of God) must be so loving that no one would ever be condemned to hell.

As early as the 4<sup>th</sup> century of this era, theologians had thought this way about God, but it was our religious ancestors, mostly in England and America in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, who made the idea of Universal salvation popular. For of course it *was* popular. Who wouldn't want to believe in heaven for all when other preachers were teaching that God would send us straight to hell at the first inkling of sin!

And our Unitarian forebears also brought an unusual perspective to the idea of heaven. Many of the Unitarians of the 19<sup>th</sup> century began to preach a Christianity that was less about how Jesus died and who his father was than about who Jesus was as a person and how he lived. This emphasis on morality and living a good life in the here and now had an enormous influence on what became modern Unitarian Universalism (and on other progressive religious groups).

Both Unitarians and Universalists preached what was called the Social Gospel. Popularized within our faith community by the great Universalist thinker Clarence Skinner, social gospel folks believed we had to work hard in the here and now to bring heaven to life on earth. These religious people were as diverse as the Catholic leader Dorothy Day, great American (and liberal Christian) Martin Luther King, Jr., and Unitarian minister and humanist leader John Haynes Holmes. All of them, however, expected humans to get to work, bringing heaven to life through our hands.

This is still a powerful part of our faith today. It is a rare UU congregation that doesn't have social justice somewhere in its mission. There are congregations all over the country who serve people in so many ways from hosting safe places for GLBT youth to meet to building Habitat for Humanity houses, to protesting immigration policies and even getting arrested in Arizona.

Here at Cedars we live a social gospel serving our community through the work of hands whether it's the different groups who host Super Suppers each month, the hours we spend each year helping to clean up Helpline House or our upcoming Alternative Gift Program, which will give all of us a chance to serve the world through our holiday giving. This is such a wonderful way for us to bring a little heaven here on earth! Like the man in the reading, the work of service opens our hearts in powerful ways.

But in a *House for Hope*, John and Rebecca challenge us to approach the process of trying to "create heaven on earth" with caution. They do so partly because the "onward and upward" forever mentality of 20<sup>th</sup> century humanism has proven to be an elusive goal. The century that was supposed to see the end of poverty and hunger and war and despotism was, instead, one of the worst and bloodiest of all time. Despite all the good intentions, all the hard work and constant striving toward change, the "kingdom of God on earth" did not come. No matter how hard progressive people tried, we could not fix it all.

I know about this first hand. My father was a convert to our faith in the late 1950s alongside my mother. He believed, truly believed, that it was in his power to bring about the kind of change his faith taught him to believe in. He worked his entire life, as we called it in our home, "to save the

world.” He was an early laborer in the field of civil rights, the anti-war movement, political campaigns for liberal candidates and much, much more. Such work inspired him and there were moments during his career that it seemed as if he really could bring about a new heaven on earth.

But he didn’t. What happened was my father passed away at age 60, literally dying from overwork and from the wounds he inflicted on himself through bad habits. Though of course I can never know for sure, I wonder if he might have lived longer and found more happiness and contentment had he discovered the third way to view heaven and paradise that Rebecca and John talk about in their book. They, of course, don’t believe in the view of heaven as something we must die to experience, but they also gently suggest that the idea that we can create heaven on earth through hard work is a fallacy. Rebecca insists that *“idealistic belief in progress [is] too fragile a foundation for sustained social activism.*

Wow! That’s a pretty harsh thing for me to hear. My parents taught me to believe that the work I did in the world could bring about peace, harmony, justice and hope. I’ve always thought our faith did, too. But as I think about the people like my father who burned himself out trying to “save the world” I wonder if John and Rebecca aren’t on to something. What *A House for Hope* suggests is that sustained justice making must rest on a belief that this world is already holy. As Rebecca says, *“We are already standing on holy ground. This earth – and none other – is a garden of beauty, a place of life”*(p.12).

We are already standing on holy ground. Paradise isn’t in some heaven far away. It’s also not something waiting to be created through our hard work. Paradise is already here. We just need to look around us to know. We just need to step into our own garden and see it for what it is – the most amazing and astounding creation ever known. When we recognize the earth and all its creatures as a paradise already among us, can we ever see it any other way? Those who are able to live in the world and love it not for what it might be but for what it already is are the blessed ones. Those who see it as a thing God hates (as he prepares a better place for us after death) will no doubt abuse it. But even those of us who beat ourselves up trying to “improve” the world far too often forget to love it now, as it is.

That can be hard to do, I know. We as humans have done and continue to do so much to injure this paradise we live in. At times it can feel as if our world is everything but a garden of paradise. Sometimes it seems that unless we start fixing things right now, all will be destroyed.

But here’s the truth. The earth is powerfully strong. Flowers grew in Hiroshima years before anyone thought life could return. The Gulf of Mexico is already bouncing back from the horrible oil spill of last spring. Spring still follows winter and the earth continues to turn even though there is so much harm we humans have done to it.

Please don’t get me wrong. I’m not suggesting that the earth is not in trouble, that global warming isn’t real or that we have nothing to do with either messing up or cleaning up our planet. What I am suggesting is that we may do a better job of healing the harms we have brought upon this earth if we

take time now and again to simply stop and appreciate it in all its wonder and complexity. To find moments in our lives when we take a break from only seeing how awful things are to note how extraordinary and wonderful things are, too.

This perspective is deeply religious. Faithful people from all different religions and cultures have believed this. Early Christians, long before they worshipped Jesus as a dead man on a cross come to save them through suffering, had faith in the paradise they were given and the one they created each week when they shared bread and wine and, most important, love and hope. Native peoples in this part of the world taught their children to bless the plants and the animals they knew they had to eat to survive. They saw the earth as holy, a place where the divine dwelt in both love and loss. Ancient Jewish people wrote the story of creation in what became the Bible. After each day of creation their God looked out at the wonders he had just made and called them good.

Of course we need to work to make this world a better place. But can't we also look around and know it for what it is – a garden we've been blessed to live in? A paradise of life in a swirling mist of nothingness? Heaven, yes heaven on earth!

Or, as Rebecca Parker writes:

*“To say paradise is accessible here and now is not to say the world is perfect or that we should focus on the good and deny the evil and pain around and within us....paradise is a place of struggle, a place where suffering happens and where destructive systems that harm life have to be resisted. But [it is also a place] where the hand of comfort can be extended, the deep breath can be taken, and we can live at home in the world knowing that this is enough”* (p. 15).

I think of this in relation to my father. In all his striving to “save the world” he far too often forgot to notice the wonderful paradise he'd be given, as a father and a husband, and he neglected to care for us in his zeal to “save” others. This is a trap so many well-intentioned progressive religious people fall into. Thus, I find Rebecca's third view of paradise to be quite powerful. Heaven isn't some place we go to after death (if we're lucky) and it's not some place we create through hard work and suffering. Heaven is already here. It is right here. It is among us even as we breathe.

When I preached on salvation a few weeks ago, I gave us reasons to say yes! When asked if we are saved. Today, I challenge us to also say yes when asked if we believe in heaven. For of course we do. Heaven is this garden, our earth. This place of wonder right here and now. Heaven is a paradise where flowers bloom and die, where people love and struggle, where life is wonderful and achingly hard.

I don't really care where I will go when I die. For how lucky I am to be in this garden home, this rocky planet, this blue-green ball we call earth. I'm already in paradise. And for that I give great and glorious thanks.

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