

# For the Love of This World

A sermon preached by the Rev. Lee Bluemel  
At The North Parish of North Andover, MA, Unitarian Universalist  
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*“...a civilization is not destroyed by wicked people.  
It is not necessary that people be wicked, but only that they be spineless.”*

*“It is rare indeed that people give. Most people guard and keep...  
if one cannot risk oneself, then one is simply incapable of giving.”  
-James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time**

Can you imagine your life without North Parish?

For those of you who are new, that might be quite easy to do!

But for those who've been around for a while,  
what would be different about your life if you had never set foot in this place?

My guess is that this congregation is very much a part  
of your networks of relationships,  
how you experience the rhythm of the week and the rhythm of the year,  
the noting of the passages of your lives and those you love,  
and a key avenue through which your values are translated into action in the world,  
not to mention a place where you get to hear or sing great music.  
This is true, at least, for me.

It is clear, perhaps now more than ever in recent history,  
that we need strong communities—places of both sanctuary and challenge-  
for ourselves *and* for the people surrounding us- those driving by, living in nearby cities.  
There is so much in the world and often in our own lives that we cannot control,  
but in a place like this, where the creative spirit is always moving,  
we can have a clear impact on our local world and the bodies and souls of many.

As Marianne Williamson suggests, our playing small does not serve the world.  
We are meant to shine, born to make manifest the glory of life, of love, of God,  
of the Creativity that moves within and among and around us.

Living with a sense of scarcity rather than a sense of abundance and possibility does not serve our fellow beings—

*and it is not necessary*, when we gather in community.

Among us, *there is enough to do what we set our minds and hearts to do.*

I invite you to pause and consider what would be at risk if North Parish did not exist, or if we shrink, or “play small”, or act from a sense of scarcity?

What would be at risk for you- or your family?

What would be at risk for our larger local community, for Love in Action locally, even for our country?

You know, some might say that the current state of our nation and many of its institutions has to do with a great failure of the imagination, great failures to see and hear one another, failures of knowing and compassion, and an underlying deep anxiety, spiritual malaise and even spiritual misdirection. Our congregations matter.

Today, as we begin our Stewardship Drive, we get honest with each other. We say right out loud that sustaining strong religious communities requires generous financial giving, percentage financial giving.

We say right out loud that yes, it is hard, and yes, it takes willpower, and yes, it is hard to get over our natural resistance,

to our desire to guard and keep what we have. I know the feeling!

(I hate filling out my pledge card- good thing I’m the minister and had to do it, or I might procrastinate!)

As is appropriate, I’m at the top of the percentage giving range for my income, so I know pledging is not a casual commitment!

But it *is* part of our annual, ongoing, communal spiritual practice. And we note with all honesty that we can only sustain this community if we’re all in it, together.

This is one of those “*Ollie ollie in come free!*” moments of the church year.

Did some of you say that when you were kids, playing games?

It's kind of like Christmas Eve,  
when we need all the folks who consider North Parish  
their religious home to help us- quite literally- pay the mortgage.  
There is too much at risk if we end up being having to cut the budget,  
to face the ongoing risk of burnout of volunteers and staff,  
and to think about shrinking instead of shining our light.  
So I invite you to remind your friends- even those you don't see on Sundays much-  
that this month is the time to pledge.  
There are even some "curious questions for conversation"  
that you'll find in your order of service.

As the Stewardship Team has said, North Parish is like a beautiful mosaic of  
interconnected people and ministries.

If you imagine there was a big mosaic behind me,  
each stone might represent a single person—  
with their particular theology, personality, experience and passion-  
and the images in the mosaic might represent  
all the different ministries and activities that make up the congregation.  
Stewardship is the glue or grout that holds it all together.  
If that dries up, what happens?

The mosaic starts to fall apart.  
I'd have to preach with an umbrella for protection!  
(It'd be like the old days, when the paint was flaking off the ceiling!)

Since I've been thinking of mosaics, I found myself thinking again about  
the writings of Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker  
and their book *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World  
for Crucifixion and Empire*.

Brock and Parker are both feminist theologians who went looking  
for early images of the crucifixion... and to their surprise, could not find them.

They went to the catacombs and early churches in Rome,

to the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul and monastery churches in northeastern Turkey, and to early churches in Ravenna, Italy that have beautiful, ancient mosaics on their walls. But these mosaics did not depict the crucifixion.

They had to be sneaky to find the mosaics. In one church, Brock and Parker tiptoed up some upstairs, snuck behind velvet ropes and the altar itself to find what they were looking for. They found a striking mosaic, with an image of Jesus at the top, in front of a dark blue background strewn with white, red and blue clouds. Below him, a dove emerged in a golden sky, and from its beak, a stream of water poured downward. This stream of water fell behind a cross and slowly widened into a pool at its base.

Next to this pool, there were two delicate deer standing on a hill of grass and flowers, and below them, the pool formed the four rivers of Paradise from Genesis. Sheep drank from these streams which then merged with the Jordan river, where swans and cherubs swam, and a peacock perched in a palm tree. They realized they were gazing at an image of paradise, an image taken from a popular 3<sup>rd</sup> century text.

This was just the first of many such mosaics they found. In other churches, they would see the themes repeated: stars in midnight skies, golden sunlight, sparkling waters teeming with fish, exuberant fauna, and verdant meadows filled with flowers and fruit trees, along with images of “the great cloud of witnesses”- the saints of the church. They discovered that an earthly paradise, not crucifixion, was a dominant image for the early church.

They write, *“To our surprise and delight, we discovered that early Christian paradise was something other than ‘heaven’ or afterlife. Our modern views of heaven and paradise think of them as a world after death. However, in the early church, paradise- first and foremost- was this world,*

*permeated and blessed by the Spirit of God. It was on the earth.*

*Images of it in Rome and Ravenna*

*captured the craggy, scruffy pastoral landscape, the orchards,  
the clear night skies, and teeming waters of the Mediterranean world,  
as if they were lit by a power from within.*

*Sparkling mosaics in vivid colors captured the world's luminosity.*

*After thirty years of working in religion and theology,  
we had stumbled inadvertently into paradise.”*

Have you ever stumbled in advertently into paradise-- a paradise on earth?  
How lucky we should feel if our answer is yes,  
or even, “Yes, sort of, I think”, or “Yes, not perfect but close enough,”  
or “Yes- in fact I don’t always know it, but I’m in paradise  
whenever I’m in the presence of Love...  
or in the presence of my child... or in the presence of God...  
or in the presence of living things on this earth  
in this vast and cold and mostly indifferent universe.”

If we were to hire someone to create a mosaic on this wall behind me,  
a mosaic to represent our vision of paradise, what do you think it would look like?  
If we wanted a mosaic to represent beloved community,  
what do you think *that* would look like?

I doubt there would be a human at the center of our image.  
Perhaps we would go with an image of a Tree of Life, or a river of life,  
and I expect we, too, might include stars and rivers, fish and birds,  
orchards and flowers. There would be a lot of creatures and living things to fit in!  
The kids could stare for hours; they’d *love* to come to church!

And then perhaps we would add circles of people,  
adults and children of all ages, some playing, others talking, some singing or gardening,  
maybe some knitting prayer shawls, some reading books,  
some cooking or handing out food, some lighting candles, some meditating,  
some holding signs with strangers in a public square.

Of course, if we tried to fit in all the circles of folks who are part of this church, this space wouldn't allow us enough room; we would have to fill up the rest of the walls too! Y'all would come to church just to look around and daydream, to remember old friends no longer with us, to be re-inspired by their examples, and to remind yourselves of all that is beautiful and good in the world. That doesn't sound like a bad way to spend an hour on Sunday morning, does it?

For Brock and Parker, their encounter with the mosaics of the early church led them to re-examine everything they thought about Christian history, theology and ritual. They studied how this faith traded love for this world for a focus on crucifixion, a theology of atonement, and a vast empire. If you'd like the whole story, they wrote a 424 page book about it, with another 90 pages of notes.

Here's a shorter version of their new understanding:

*“To experience the Spirit of God in all things and the beauties of this world, early Christians cultivated acute attunement to the life around them.... (They) struggled to stay grounded in love, in justice, in nonviolence, in wisdom, and in freedom, to live together as humanity in the garden of God. Church communities helped everyone to share resources, to cultivate wisdom and honesty, to understand ideas and doctrines, and to care for each other in sickness and need... Within their church communities, Christians sought to help life flourish in the face of imperial power, violence and death.”*

We, too, seek to help life flourish. That's what this congregation is all about-- to help the lives within it to flourish, and to help lives beyond its doors to flourish. In fact, as I read about Brock and Parker's conclusions about the early church,

what struck me is how similar it seems to have been  
to what we try to create here, at North Parish.

We, too, try to stay attuned to the present moment,  
to what is beautiful and good.  
We, too, struggle to stay grounded in love, in justice,  
in nonviolence, in wisdom, and in freedom,  
to live together as a beloved community on the holy ground of our earth.  
We, too, help each other to share resources,  
cultivate wisdom and honesty, understand ideas  
and care for each other in sickness and need.  
We, too, seek to help life flourish even in the face of imperial power,  
violence and death.

Like the early Christians, we seek to create deep, meaningful relationships,  
to help the children- and adults- learn to love the world and each other.  
Like them, we offer rituals to mark and to navigate the tragedies and joys of life.  
We come here to reclaim love of this world, of persons, of beauty,  
of community, of God, of neighbor, of self.

We seek to offer the companionship of those who know  
that on the other side of pain there is healing,  
on the other side of anger, forgiveness, on the other side of lamentation, joy,  
on the other side of despair, wisdom.  
We try to stay aware and responsive to legacies of harm and injustice .  
We understand that we walk and sit on holy ground,  
surrounded by a communion of saints and sinners  
whom we are blessed to count as companions in our time on earth.

Unitarian Universalism is known as a liberal faith.  
But at times, I would argue it is conservative--  
in the sense of attempting to conserve the central messages of the great saints  
and conserve the heart of some ancient religious traditions.  
Here we sit- side by side- Humanists and Theists, pagans and Buddhists

and all sorts of folks, those who affirm a goodness exists at the heart of the universe,  
and those who sense our vast universe is indifferent,  
yet affirm a potential goodness in the hearts of humans and other living things.

Ours is a love- affirming, life-affirming faith.  
We sustain this church not only for ourselves,  
but for the love of this world and its beings.

In closing, I'd like to share a dream I once had-  
which is probably a dangerous thing to do.  
Years ago I had one of those vivid dreams-  
the kind that are so emotionally powerful that they stay with you for days.  
In the dream I was sitting on the steps of a building, waiting for something-  
I knew not what. But then I was invited in to a hall  
that was filled with long tables full of people eating.  
And on the walls in the room there flashed the photographs  
of famous African-American leaders, activists and saints no longer with us.  
(Most of the folks in the room were African-American.)

Now, given how I felt in the dream, that great hall might have been heaven...  
or paradise, or a black church in this world.  
But regardless, I was immensely moved that- given the realities of history-  
I had been invited in, to sit at their welcome table.

As I thought about the early Christian church this week  
and remembered that dream,  
I thought about the welcome tables of people eating together  
that filled the hall at the Third Baptist church  
after I was invited to preach a sermon at their revival weekend a few years ago.

And I thought about the welcome tables of people eating together  
that filled the hall at Chinmaya Maruti Hindu Temple  
when I went to one of their Sunday services a few years ago with a friend.

And I thought about the tablecloth spread on the floor  
of the Islamic Center of Haverhill when I was invited



at the end of Ramadan last year to join the women in prayer  
and a meal to break their long fast.

I thought of these and other religious communities I have visited  
that each in their own way have created a welcome table,  
a bit of paradise on earth, a place where community can thrive,  
the stranger is welcomed and love moves.

And I thought of the tables that filled our Parish Hall downstairs  
at the interfaith potluck on January 21<sup>st</sup> of this year,  
tables full of people of all different faiths and none,  
a truly Universalist welcome table for people of all theologies.

This church is a work of love.  
It is *our* work of love... a unique mosaic...  
and I honor you for being the glue that holds it all together.  
Amen.

## **Readings**

**Opening Words:** *We Cast Not Our Eyes Below*, by Ma Theresa Gustilo Gallardo, with adaptation.

We cast not our eyes below,  
we say to ourselves we are how we came,  
wounded from struggles, triumphant in our survival,  
entitled by birthright to belong to this- the only humankind there is,  
saying I am included, I belong, I am here, and I will be and do.  
I will breathe joy into a desolation,  
I will breathe peace into conflict,  
I will breathe life into destruction,  
I will breathe boldness into fear.  
I will be the earth I wish to see.  
I am growth, and hope, and courage, and glee.

**Meditation:** *The words of Universalist minister and evangelist John Murray from about 250 years ago, and some modern day words, slightly edited, from writer Marianne Williamson:*

“You may possess a small light, but uncover it, let it shine,  
use it in order to bring more light and understanding  
to the hearts and minds of men and women.  
Give them... hope and courage.” (Murray, #704)

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.  
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.  
It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.

You are a child of the universe, a child of God.  
Your playing small does not serve the world.  
There is nothing enlightened about shrinking  
so that other people won't feel insecure around you.

We are all meant to shine, as children do.  
We were born to make manifest the glory of Life,  
of Love, of God that is within us.  
It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone.  
And as we let our own light shine,  
we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.  
As we are liberated from our own fear,  
our presence automatically liberates others.” (Williamson)

**Reading:** From the book Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire, by Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker.

“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.

Initially, we didn’t believe it could be true.  
Surely the art historians were wrong.  
The crucified Christ was too important to Western Christianity.  
How could it be that images of Jesus’ suffering and death  
were absent from early churches?  
We had to see for ourselves and consider what this might mean.

After we realized that the Crucifixion was absent,  
we began to pay attention to what *was* present in early Christian art.  
We found one arresting image in an unlikely place,  
the most important church in Western Christendom...  
The image depicted a vision of Paradise  
found in a popular third century Christian text.

As we looked at early church interiors,  
we saw more clearly how *each* captured dimensions of paradise.  
The spaces placed Christianity in a lush visual environment:  
a cosmos of stars in midnight skies, golden sunlight,  
sparkling waters teeming with fish, exuberant fauna,  
and verdant meadows filled with flowers and fruit trees.  
Punctuating such scenes were images of the great cloud of witnesses,  
many dressed in purple robes of nobility....  
Paradise, we realized, was the *dominant* image of early Christian sanctuaries.

After thirty years of working in religion and theology,  
we had stumbled inadvertently into paradise.”