

MUST WE ALSO SACRIFICE OUR HOPE?
LAKEHEAD UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP
EASTER SUNDAY, APRIL 16, 2006
JULIE STONEBERG, MINISTER

Reading: *Selection from "Proverbs of Ashes"*

This story is told by the Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker in her book "Proverbs of Ashes," a book that critically examines a theology of redemptive suffering. She recounts here a conversation with a United Methodist minister, Pat, whose church offers sanctuary and support groups for victims of domestic violence. One of these victims, Anola Dole Reed, has just been stabbed to death by her husband. Parker writes:

"It's just hard," [Pat] said, "not to be able to stop it. Almost every woman who's come here for refuge has gone back to her violent husband or boyfriend. She thinks it's her religious duty. I counsel her otherwise. I tell her it's her religious duty to protect her own life and take care of herself so she can protect her children. But my words and this shelter...are not enough."

Anola came to the group a few times. Pat offered her support and counsel. When Anola's husband assaulted her, the group gave her the courage to call the police. She was reluctant to press charges, but an activist prosecutor brought her husband to trial. Gordon James Reed was convicted, fined \$500, and sentenced to ten days in the county jail.

"While he was in jail, Anola got her ears pierced." Pat smiled broadly, remembering. "It was her act of defiance, a way of saying this is my body. He would never have let her do that. She was so pleased with herself. Then he got out of jail."

"She let him come home, didn't she," I said with sadness. "Why?"

"She thought it would be the right thing, in God's eyes. In the church she went to, the intact family was celebrated as God's will. Anola believed that because this configuration of family was the will of God, God would somehow make it all right. For her to break up the family would make her a bad person. Doing the will of God was more important than her personal safety. The possibility that faithfulness to God's will might mean pain and violence could even have been in its favor. A good woman would be willing to accept personal pain, and think only of the good of the family. You know, 'Your life is only valuable if it's given away' and

'This is your cross to bear.' She heard, just like you and I have, that Jesus didn't turn away from the cup of suffering when God asked him to drink it. She was trying to be a good Christian, to follow in the footsteps of Jesus."

Anola allowed her husband back into her home, but she continued to struggle with her decision. She went to her home church pastor for counsel. He, like Pat, encouraged Anola to take care of herself and her children. She came home that evening and told [her husband] that she wanted him to leave. He went into a rage. Gordon Reed stabbed Anola 18 times using 10 knives. The big kitchen knife was still lodged in her neck when the police found her body.

"Pat," I said, "the only way you could have helped Anola more is if the whole Christian tradition taught something other than self-sacrificing love. If it didn't preach that to be like Jesus we have to give up our lives in faithful obedience to the will of God."

"But," Pat said, "this is what the church teaches. And Anola Reed is dead. I know Gordon Reed is the one responsible. He killed her. But I can't escape the feeling that he wouldn't have had the chance if the church hadn't taught Anola that your life is only valuable if you give it away."

Message: Must We Also Sacrifice Our Hope?

I'd like to begin today by reading one biblical account of the Easter Story; this from the Book of Matthew, excerpts from the 27th and 28th chapters.

(Matthew 27: 27-31, 46, 50-51, 54, 57, 59-60; 28: 1-2, 5-6a, NRSV)

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters and they gathered the whole cohort around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to be crucified.

And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split.

Now the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, "Truly this man was God's Son."

When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph [who] took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away.

After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it.

The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised as he said."

A simple, sad story really. A story about a man whose prophetic words and loving actions stirred the hearts of an oppressed people. A story of an oppressive empire that cared little for the value of lives and easily took them in cruel and public ways. A story of the grief of those who had loved that man and who buried him tenderly. A story of a loss so difficult that even the dark comfort of tending to the dead body is stolen from those loved ones.

And what happens next is the stuff of interpretation and theology. I imagine that you know that the Gospels are not first hand accounts of Jesus' life, and that they were redacted and amended over the first few hundred years to accommodate the institutionalization and the evolving theology of the Christianity. The story of Easter that I read from Matthew is not the oldest record ... the earthquake, the empty tomb, the two angels...these things are not present in earlier accounts.¹

And so the theological story is layered over the historical record. It goes like this. "In the beginning, human beings lived in the Garden of Eden, in perfect harmony with God. But Adam and Eve disobeyed the commandment of God. Because of their sinfulness, God had no recourse but to demand repayment for the harm they caused. We inherit their sin. The penalty for sin is death. God loves us and doesn't want to punish us. But his honor has been shamed. God is torn between love for us and the requirements of justice. To resolve this problem, he sends his only son Jesus into the world to pay the price we owe, to bear the punishment that all of humanity deserves."²

This story is as complicated and multivalent as its ensuing theology. It is rooted in history, as well as in Jewish tradition and in the many legends that dramatize the victory of light over darkness at the time of the vernal equinox. It is a product of a religious movement that sprang up in a tumultuous time...when the building of empires stomped on human lives in the race to accumulate territory and wealth (some things never change!) The Lenten season leading up to Easter prepares Christians for this story, or the similar stories told in other gospels, allowing for seven weeks of sermons to delve into its ultimate meanings. Unitarian minister Phillip Hewitt has said that each Easter of his long

¹ Hewitt, Phillip, "What Easter Means for Unitarians" www.cuc.ca/programs/easter_for_unitarians.htm

² Parker and Brock, "Can Sacrifice Save?" UU World, Mar/Apr 2002
<http://dev.uua.org/world/2002/02/feature1a.html>

ministerial career has been different, because each year he is challenged to dig a little deeper, or to climb a little higher to get a different perspective.³ It's difficult to choose one part of the Easter story to focus upon, and as I said earlier, I am tempted to try to pack the whole story and all its possible meanings into this one message. But in reality, that would take a month of Sundays, and I bet you're happy to hear that I'm resisting that temptation. Besides, such an approach could only contribute to our UU tendency toward understandings that are a mile wide and an inch deep. What I hope to do today is to take a close look at the hope that is traditionally imbedded in the Easter story, and about hope's sorry sidekick, sacrifice.

Sacrifice is an unwieldy and uncomfortable concept, at least for me. It's as old as the hills, practiced by the ancient Greeks, Aztecs and Chinese, to name just a few. It is a ritual act in which an offering, sometimes human, is made to a god or other spiritual being in order to win the deity's favor. The idea is that by risking or forfeiting something of value, one will win something of higher value, something endowed by that deity. As such, it's an investment in the future, and could imply that one ultimate goal in life is to be rewarded for our sacrifice.⁴ If we make a sacrifice, we should expect to get something in return, and herein lies the hope. In the Easter story, the hope is of salvation, or at least of eventual resurrection and immortality.

I admit that sacrifice is a more appropriate topic for Good Friday than for Easter Sunday. My launching pad is the book from which Diane read a passage earlier, *Proverbs of Ashes*, written by Rebecca Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock. I'm sorry if this was a tough story to hear, (I almost thought it should be prefaced by a warning that it contained adult content,) but it is important to hear in that it

³ Hewitt, Phillip, "What Easter Means for Unitarians" www.cuc.ca/programs/easter_for_unitarians.htm

⁴ Brock, Rita Nakashima and Parker, Rebecca, *Proverbs of Ashes* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 157.

was a catalyst for Parker in her breakthrough to criticism of the orthodox theology of the Easter Story, and I hope that it can work similarly for us.

The breakthrough is the realization that we should look at Anola Reed's death no differently than we look at the death of Jesus...hers was another kind of crucifixion, also at the hands of a dominant force. Her suffering was also born willing, out of some sense of duty, however misguided. Anola's death, the authors contend, is allowed by an ingrained theology that encourages sacrifice, a theology that equates selflessness with love. In such a theology, human life is less important than the act of giving it away.

In their book, Parker and Brock take a very personal look at the effect this Christian message of sacrifice has had on their own lives, and how it contributes to ongoing and sanctioned violence, particularly in the lives of women. They argue that you cannot look at Jesus on the cross and simultaneously give thanks to God without ending up a partner in a thousand crimes.⁵ To accept that to do the work of salvation, a loving God must resort to violence, to the killing of one of his children, is to sanction that violence. Swallowing this theology, a theology of punitive dominance, stains our hearts, atrophies our ability to love, and allows us, at best, to turn a blind eye to violence, or at worst, to actually believe that it is necessary. In my mind, this is unacceptable, and just plain bad theology. Violence only begets violence, and can never come in the service of love.

This is important to talk about, not only because it is evident in the story of Anola Reed that such a theology perpetuates violence, but because what we believe matters. What we believe affects how we behave and what values will guide our decisions. Whether we are made in God's image, or God is made in ours, God is the model we use to conduct and measure our daily lives. A God

⁵ *Proverbs of Ashes*, 48.

for whom salvation is connected to violence creates a theology of redemptive suffering. Love gets confused with control and pain. We are expected, like Jesus, to bear it in silence and to drink that bitter cup of suffering.

Seen without the veil of this theology, Jesus' death was a violent one, perpetrated by an oppressive government against an insurgent who was stirring up the spirits of the people. This was not a sacred or ritual act to win the favor of the gods, but an act of cruelty. Somehow we have twisted this act of violence to see it as a cure for dominance, when it is actually a result of dominance!⁶

The weird thing about the theology around Jesus' death is that his human sacrifice is offered by God to God, to placate God's self. Seen that way, it is a self-serving act, a punishment that serves the punisher. This is an act unworthy of a loving god; it is an act which belittles the human life it takes. God took away someone who was offering hope and making a difference in people's lives, in order to exact a price for the sins of all people, which in and of itself is a situation you have to presume an intervening God created, or at least allowed.

This story...this death...this salvation...this resurrection... are central to the Christian faith. It is in this story that Christians everywhere find their hope for living. Many see it as a divine act, and believe that a preferred future will rise from the ashes of this violent sacrifice. Unfortunately, this story has become a meta-narrative for western society.

I am currently reading *Fall on Your Knees*, a novel by a Canadian author, Ann Marie McDonald, and have just finished a section where a young woman dies in childbirth. The year is 1918, the twin babies are breech, and the mother dies an excruciating death. Her death allows the midwife to cut open the womb

⁶ Ibid., 49

and pull the babies to life. People try to make sense of this tragedy by saying that she gave her life so that the babies might live, and perhaps it's comforting to be able to see the mother in this heroic way. But this mother was not given the choice; although perhaps if she had been, she may have chosen that the babies be saved. In reality, her sad death was the result of a misfortune of childbirth, a tragedy, a breach in the fabric of life. Her death was not, at least not in my worldview, a necessary sacrifice so that others might live. If it were, we have to ask why these particular babies' lives required a human sacrifice when so many others do not. To accept that the mother's life had to be sacrificed is to do violence to our own hearts, as it teaches us that there is victory in death. If we accept this tragedy as necessary, or even heroic, we sever the ties between us by allowing us to avoid the need to be with one another in our pain. If we believe that God caused the pain, it's reality is coated with a kind of glory, and we can close our eyes to it. But instead, if we could face the reality of the pain that's embedded in life, we might grow larger hearts... hearts that can embrace both joy and sorrow. Sharing in it all together is an enheartening experience.

Now, I'm not saying that sacrifice is bad or even that it is unnecessary. While sacrifice can perpetuate evil structures, it can also be used for good. As a personal act of choice, sacrifice is a decision to give up something that's important to us in the hope of attaining or serving something life-affirming that we do not yet hold in our hands. We might, like the kids in the children's story today, give our time and creativity to earn money to buy a special gift. We might, just maybe, sacrifice the consumption of chocolate in favor of a slimmer waist. We might sacrifice a certain lifestyle so that we can save for our children's education. We might sacrifice a portion of our time or income in support of social justice causes, or in support of this congregation. What and when and how much and for what cause we sacrifice are questions that we each answer by paying attention to our highest values. Sacrifice has its place and its purpose.

I think that sacrifice, properly understood, is a very important spiritual and humanitarian practice. It is an intentional and freely given gift, and in such circumstances, contributes to life. Regardless of value, we might sacrifice by letting go of that which stands in our way of being free to act justly and to love. Regardless of how dearly held, we might sacrifice those things that stand in the way of a clear path to kindness and moral action. We choose to make sacrifices in order to create a better future.

What I'm suggesting that we reject, if we haven't already, is that kind of sacrifice which does not serve life, sacrifice that is exacted from us rather than freely given. If indeed we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, then we cannot condone a ritual act that inflicts pain, or that requires a person to cut away some part of themselves. Such sacrifice is not holy ... it is violence imposed one on another. It is a domination that serves only death, figuratively and literally.

I ask the question, must we also sacrifice our hope, because for many people, a good measure of hope, hope for ultimate salvation, is tied up in the Easter Story. If we reject its message, if we refuse to believe that Jesus was killed in order that we might be saved, where do we find our hope? What or who will save us? I do not believe that we need to burn our hope on the altar of liberal religion. But, we are going to have to find a way to say something about what saves life if we are convinced that no one was saved by the execution of Jesus.⁷

Brock and Parker each believe that it is the awareness of a larger, life-affirming and loving presence that saves us. Rather than a God who would sacrifice a child, Brock describes her God as "a presence gradually unfolded by

⁷ Ibid, 211

life in its richness and tragedies, its devastating losses and its abundance; a power calling us into a fullness of living; a passion for life, for good and ill; an unquenchable fire at the core of life, glimpsed in light and shadows.”⁸

And Parker says, “Jesus didn’t have to die for us to know that God is present. He didn’t have to rise from the dead for us to know that God’s creative power is greater than death. Nobody has to suffer for God to be made known to us.”⁹

You may not use their language, but let us say simply that it is in the affirmation of life that we find hope. We need a theology that teaches us that all life is sacred, and that we can be for ourselves and for others simultaneously.¹⁰ We need a theology that shows us that it is by our actions that we are saved. If we give up a belief in an intervening God, then we must accept that it is our responsibility to name and confront the violence, not bear it in silence.¹¹ Our ability to be the hands of God, as it were, allows us to work for justice. If we depend on some outside force to save us, we essentially sacrifice ourselves by cutting away our creative ability to heal and to restore life.

This was the position of the Jewish prophet, Micah, who argued that God does not want bloody sacrifices, but wants instead that we walk a path of love.¹² When asked what offerings God wants, he replies, “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”¹³ We are not called to sacrifice something in hopes that another will save us. We are called to do it ourselves...to do that which furthers the presence of justice and kindness in our world.

⁸ Ibid, 233

⁹ Ibid, 213

¹⁰ Ibid, 42

¹¹ Ibid, 248

¹² Shade, Tom, “A Passion Reflection” www.uucf.uua.org/shadepassion.htm

¹³ Micah 6:8

We don't do this alone. Our hope is to be found in the great chorus of everyday saints who walk this path with us. Stories of hope, grounded in human action, abound...we need only look for them. And, our hope is to be found in this religious movement and right here in this particular community. Here we are called to accept our human responsibility to work for that which saves us. Here we are called to embrace the whole picture of life...to see our beautiful individual lives as part of a larger purpose...called to witness that which destroys life... called to face the difficult parts of life together and with love for one another ...called to rejoice in that which grows and is born out of that which has died.

No, we do not need to give up our hope just because we give up the idea of a messiah who will save us. We do not need to abandon hope because we refuse to believe that a violent death can be salvific. But in the presence of death, in the shadow of violence, and in the embrace of life, we are changed, or at least we can choose to be changed. The Easter Story calls us to see the complexity of life, and its miracle is its ability to connect us back to the world,¹⁴ reminding us that we are a part of that larger loving presence. To clearly see it all...love and hate, violence and compassion... is to be freed to love, freed to enlarge one's heart, and freed to act. Herein lies our hope. You are the resurrection and the life.

So be it.

¹⁴ Ungar, Lynn, "Resurrection and Other Miracles" *Quest*, Vol LXII, Number 4, April 2006, p. 5.