

Baptized Into Paradise

May 11, 2008
Edwards (Knox) United Church
Pentecost Sunday (and Mother's Day)

Acts 2:1-21

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#)

John 7:37-39

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The Rev. Dr. George Hermanson

The image of Paradise has informed our imagination from the beginning of recorded religious history. It has been an iconic image in our secular world, witness the song, "we have to get back to the Garden." Another Joni Mitchell song included the lines, "so they paved over paradise," as a warning about our misuse of the environment. Her latest is full of images of this world as paradise and the danger that we will not honor it.

The passage in Acts is about the formation of the Christian Church. The Spirit of God comes to create a community dedicated to the healing of this world. It is a reversal of the Tower of Babel where paradise is destroyed by the hubris of humanity. This time the vision is of God's healing work in restoring us to a unity where divisions are overcome, and we embrace the rainbow of experience, the diversity of our world. Paradise on earth, on earth, was the core understanding of Christian salvation. Paradise as this life offered humanity ways to be attuned to the imperative of justice and to love beauty as sources of ethics and of life. We are reminded of this this Pentecost Sunday. We celebrate the Spirit of God coming to open our eyes and ears to the beauty of salvation which is paradise on this earth.

It is fitting to have Baptism and communion this Sunday. They are the core sacraments of the affirmation that the Spirit of God forms us in community and the rationale of that community is to sustain this world as paradise.

In the early church Baptism formed the identity of the community and as such it was a demanding process. One studied and practiced faith for at least a year before one was baptized - for it demanded a commitment to a way of life that was lived in worship, peace and justice.

Communion was the meal of sharing which reminded the community of the ethic of the excessive Grace of God and how that it was to be shared with all. Early communions were like pot lucks and there was an excess of food which was then shared with those who were needy. One came to the front to indicate their willingness to be changed by the Spirit of God, and having been fed they then went out to serve.

In the earliest icons of baptism we see how paradise was the core image. It was the garden of delight. In the icons were symbols of the creation of a beautiful and blessed world - for God has said this world is good. So there were images of paradise as our home on earth.

In the images (icons) there are symbols of the Spirit coming down from the mountain through the rivers flowing onto the earth. The rivers nourishing and creating lush pasture lands and gardens. The mountain is symbolic of the home of God who waters the meadows and gardens. Behind these icons are such images, as found in Isaiah, of God making the wilderness like Eden. This captures the watering of life by

the Spirit of God. Often in the middle of the icon is an image of Jesus who joins the heaven and the earth, and baptism is the moment of receiving the Spirit of God where we join in the activity of saving paradise.

In the early church's baptismal liturgy the newly baptized were called to be brides of Christ. This is love as Eros which is a commitment to beauty, to joy, and to glory. It is to have the identity of paradise which is to be the stewards of this world.

Steward is the original meaning of economics - it is to be the steward of the well being of life, to manage our environment out of care for all, to sustain life.

Communion made clear that the job of the baptized was worldly care, to be a steward, to work with all to sustain this world which is God's dwelling. Communion is a celebration of the bread and wine of the earth, blessed by God and shared in community. Feeding reminds us that God is the true source of Life. John Crossan said:

It is food and drink offered equally to everyone that the presence of God and Jesus is found. ... The Lord's supper is a political and economic challenge as well as sacred rite and liturgical worship.

It is important to remember that this paradise is not an idealized afterlife nor a perfect world. It is an affirmation that this ordinary life is blessed by God. As well there is in this world the serpent which means we struggle with evil. To live well in paradise is to be realistic about the issues we face. There are people and ideas that create ill will. In baptism we move out of naiveté to astute attunement to the world and all its forces, courage to face danger, and gaining knowledge to heal our brokenness.

In baptism we join God in care of our world, to maintain paradise. When we step out of the baptismal waters we have put on the mind of Christ and in communion we become the body of Christ. In our gathering we help one another grow in Spirit and Truth, to become divine like Jesus.

Out of this experience of paradise we have confidence in the value of life in this world as the place of salvation. We find our particular role in the care of one another and the earth. We grow in understanding and faith to face the demands of our daily living. While each of us has to find our specific role in this care, we share the identity that we are the baptized community whose job it is to nurture the well being of all, to work for the common good.

Thanks to the Madawaska event on Saving Paradise by Rita Nakashima Brock.

George Hermanson
www.georgehermanson.com