



Welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga. My name is Jeff Briere, I'm the minister of this congregation. We begin each Sunday at this time with Connections. Connections is a time of community and contemplation, where we share the joys and the sorrows going on in our lives. This is not a time for announcements, political statements or expressions of personal anger, but a time of deep sharing, where we are reminded that we are all human beings and we're all in this together.

Enjoy the experience of sitting in restorative silence until you are moved to speak. Please allow a breath of silence after each person speaks, so that we may focus our attention on what has been said.

Let us pause to dwell inward. Spirit of Life, please meet us where we are, in the struggles we choose for ourselves; in the ways we move forward in our lives, and bring our world forward with us. It is right that we pause to remember those who need love and support; who are ill or in pain, either in body or in spirit; who are lonely or have been wronged. Let us open our minds and hearts to a place of quiet, to a silent prayer for the healing of pain, and the soft, gentle coming of love. In this time of silence let our thoughts be with those who have spoken or been spoken about this morning. Amen and Blessed Be.

I ask you now to rise and greet your neighbors at the door. Please welcome them into the sanctuary with a hand of warmth and a smile.

HYMN 1, May Nothing Evil Cross this Door

GREETINGS

April. I'm April Waggener and I serve on the Board of Trustees. Thanks so much for joining us in worship today. We hope you find the service rewarding and that you leave here inspired and uplifted.

Jesus Took 1000 Years to Die
A Worship Service by the REV. JEFF BRIERE
Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga
August 31, 2008

- Please note the emergency exit over here to my right,
- now is the time to put your cell phone in “Worship Mode,”
- childcare for the young and the restless is available downstairs in the nursery,
- After the service today, please join us for coffee and conversation in the fellowship area right back there.
- If you have a particular joy or sorrow or something you’d like added to the prayer of the people, please clearly write it on an index card and drop it in the basket back there. You may sign it or not, as you wish.

A complete listing of announcements is included with the bulletin and is available on our web site. The best way to find out what’s going on around here is to sign up for a weekly e–mail. To do that, please see Chris in the office.

Marcia begins our service with a composition of Andre Previn. This is “Like Blue”

*PRELUDE
Like Blue*

LIGHTING THE CHALICE

In the light of truth and the warmth of love,
we gather to seek, to sustain, and to share.

ART ON THE WALLS

This morning, I want to tell you a little bit about art, and what I mean is the brush painting and calligraphy that you see hung on the walls around the sanctuary.

Take a look at the Japanese–style hanging scrolls the teens have painted for us. These are paintings done with a brush and ink.

Before we talk about the ink drawings, let's talk about Chinese writing. About 6,000 years ago in China, the people began to write, but instead of letters, they used pictures or pictographs. Over thousands of years, the pictures changed form and though they looked different, the meaning stayed the same.

As the Chinese developed their writing, a style of painting flowers, trees and landscape naturally developed. In fact, the materials used for both have been the same for thousands of years. They are the brush, the ink, the inkstone and the paper and are called the “Four Treasures.”

About 900 years ago, Zen Buddhist monks from China traveled to Japan and other Asian countries. They introduced calligraphy and brush art. The art was usually part of a hanging scroll or a hand scroll.

Many artists still like to study this art. They are taught to find the spirit of the subject and express it on the paper with just a few strokes, making sure the strokes are very expressive and perfect.

Both Chinese and Japanese artists, have favorite subjects which are seen often in their work.

Bamboo, wild orchids, plum blossoms, landscapes, chrysanthemums, and pine trees are very traditional. These subjects are also very symbolic. They represent other qualities or events.

For example, the bamboo symbolizes strength and flexibility. It can blow over in the wind and spring back up when the storm has passed.

The pine tree represents long life. The plum blossom symbolizes winter because it blossoms in February before spring arrives.

Let's look at a few scrolls.

“Pine Tree,” by Chris Ballew. The pine tree represents long life. The calligraphy symbol means destiny. In the corner is the chop in red ink. This is Chris's signature seal. It reads C B.

Next is “Bamboo,” by Haley Solomon. Bamboo represents strength and flexibility. The symbol means balance or peace. Doesn't it look like a scale that's balanced? And isn't that what peace is all about?

“Plum Blossom and Branch,” by Chandler Hunt. The plum blossom is sorta like the crocus. It's the first one in the spring. It is a lucky flower. The symbol means peace or balance. We think that Chandler may have put this symbol on upside down, but then again, maybe not, because his chop is right side up.

The Japanese like to use different scrolls for different seasons and different holidays. They store them in a special wooden box when not hanging.

As you go to your classes today, we'll give you the opportunity to make your offering to the church.

OFFERTORY
Should I?

On the last Sunday of the month, this congregation generously shares the plate with an outside agency working to make the world a better place. Today we will share the plate with the Knoxville Relief Fund. All donations in the offering plate, less payments to annual pledges, will be directed to that fund.

The Knoxville Relief Fund was established by the Unitarian Universalist Association and the Thomas Jefferson District to bring ministry, spiritual care, and practical financial assistance to those affected by the tragic and shocking shooting at the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church in Knoxville. Gifts to the fund will

assist members of the that church and the Westside Unitarian Universalist Fellowship and their loved ones, and will show them that they are not alone during this time of shock and grief.

Income from the Knoxville Relief Fund will be managed by the Thomas Jefferson District and will be used at their discretion to assist the churches and their members. No more than 5% of the funds raised will be used to cover administrative costs, including fees for credit card processing.

We'll collect the morning offering now, for the Knoxville Relief Fund. If you have a check for your annual pledge, please mark it that way. If you wish, you can learn more about the fund and contribute online at <www.uua.org>. As always, the Wood– Wilhoit Memorial Food Bank is happy to accept your donations of non– perishable food and household items, which eventually go to the Community Kitchen. The collection basket for that is by the front door. And thank you very much for your generosity.

If you wish to light a candle of personal joy or sorrow, you may step up here and I will assist you.



Eternal Spirit of life and love, we are profoundly thankful for the blessings we experience today. Would that we recognize our blessings every day and be thankful for them. Marcia, please lead us in our *Hymn of Thanksgiving*. The words are in your program.

HYMN OF THANKSGIVING

Oh, we give thanks, for this precious day,
For all gathered here, and those far away,
For this time we share, with love and care,
Oh, we give thanks, for this precious day.

ORISON

Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. Dona Nobis Pacem.

Ever since John Kennedy was assassinated and especially since John Hinckley took a pot shot at Ronald Reagan, the Secret Service has been zealous in its efforts to protect the president. Their protection was extended to presidential candidates some years ago and as I understand it, they are especially alert for threats against Barack Obama and his family. I presume they afford the same level of protection to John McCain and his family.

This week, in Denver, the Secret Service and local police busted a couple of men on their way to shoot Senator Obama. They evidently believed that a black man ought not be president and that they were chosen to prevent that from happening. I am glad they were arrested before they could harm anyone, and I hope the judge throws the book at them.

A few people have quietly suggested that Senator Obama, because of his skin color, would attract more than his share of negative attention were he elected president. If this week's would-be assassins are any indication of who is out to get him, I think Senator Obama can, if not relax, then at least trust the Secret Service to protect him. Truthfully, the two men who were arrested seem like a couple of low-life meth heads with delusions of competence. They certainly did not possess the skill and intelligence needed to fool the Secret Service.

Nonetheless, as the story played out, I was reminded of the comments made by people who fear that Senator Obama, because of his skin color, makes an inviting target for an assassin. I believe that it may be impossible to get near the President these days, and just as difficult to approach the candidates, so I am not afraid that one of them will be assassinated. I fear that someone—or some

ones—much smarter and better equipped than the bozos in Denver may slip by security forces and wreak havoc with other people. I fear that innocent people will be hurt.

So today, I pray for Senator Obama and Senator McCain, their families and the men and women assigned to protect them. I pray that they receive no threat more credible than the one they thwarted in Denver. I pray that all Americans be safe from gun violence this election season.

In these few moments of silence, let us hold close to our hearts anyone who has suffered the effects of gun violence, especially those who suffer the fallout of war.

Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. Dona Nobis Pacem.

RESPONSE

When our heart is in a holy place
When our heart is in a holy place
We are blessed with love and amazing grace
When our heart is in a holy place

HYMN 20, Be Thou My Vision

SERMON: Jesus Took 1000 Years to Die.

Today, my sermon is inspired by this book, *Saving Paradise*, by Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker. I wish I could claim credit for my sermon title today, but I can't. "Jesus Took a Thousand Years to Die" is a clever and provocative statement that I stole from the book. It's the first sentence in the prologue.

Although the newsletter indicates that I preached on this book last week, I will actually do so this week, and combine it with what I

would have said this week had I not changed my topic for last week. Clear?

I have never thought of myself as a visual artist. My stick figures are stuck; a three-year-old could draw better than I can. I don't use crayons too well, either, but I am glad for the lines in coloring books. I never have been able to guide my hands to render what I see, either in reality or in my mind.

About twenty years ago, I tried for awhile to develop the skill required to make stained glass. Not the big pieces, like transoms and windows. I just wanted to make small light catchers to hang in windows. Couldn't do it. My welds were sloppy and my cuts were jagged. And with a square pattern, I created a trapezoid.

The static arts defy me; I'm better at the lively arts. I can make a little music. I can bring some life to a character. I can write a few words that hang together.

Even though I am not an artist, I am blessed—sometimes cursed—with artistic sensibilities. At times, I want to create something, but I don't have the tools. What I do have, though, are words *about* art. And one thing I know about art is that it undergirds culture, or expressed another way, it reflects the culture that produced it. Beverly Sills once remarked that art is the signature of civilization.

I have several examples from various artists who painted between 1935 and 1941. These are some paintings produced under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration. And a few others from the same time.

These paintings seem to show strong people, people who are very big and very bold. They aren't timid. And yet, in some pieces, they are dwarfed by modern life, buildings, machinery, airplanes. Contrast this with the art created in any other era: the smooth and refined lines of the Romans and Greeks, the opulent backgrounds of the

Renaissance, the in-your-face Op art & Pop Art.

If you do a Google image search with the phrase "Christian Art," you'll get about 45 million hits. That is, Google has identified 45 million images on the internet that could be categorized as Christian art. Among the results are many renditions of Jesus: as shepherd, as king and on Easter morning. There are scenes from biblical stories, snapshots of Mary and her son, God creating the world, Daniel in the lions' den and the classics, DaVinci's *Last Supper* and Michaelangelo's *Pieta*. But the most frequent image is the crucifixion, either with or without the two thieves, with or without a body, and either realistic or fanciful.

And if I am correct that art expresses the culture that produced it, then Christianity has, for many years, been fixated on the death of Jesus to the exclusion of his message. I have no scientific basis for my observation, but I'll bet there are more crosses than Christians. And if that is true, then it follows that the death of Jesus is the most important event in Christian theology, the central idea of the faith.

But apparently, this was not always the case.

In the first thousand years after Jesus died, Christians did not paint pictures of Calvary. Nor write poetry about it, nor create an opera about it, nor obsess about it. Given the central role that the crucifixion now plays in Christian theology, isn't it a bit odd that the first crucifix was not carved until 965?

It's the Gero Cross, and it is the earliest surviving artistic object representing the death of Jesus. It was carved in northern Germany, by descendants of Saxons who were baptized at the point of a sword by Charlemagne. Charlemagne's objective was to baptize the world and unify it under his rule. His methods were effective, but brutal. His army slaughtered most of the Saxons, destroyed their shrines and deported the rest. Pressed by violence into Christian obedience, the Saxons produced art that reflected their baptism of blood. No one

knows who carved the cross, but I can easily imagine a Saxon with a pocket knife, identifying with a suffering Jesus.

Earlier crosses have been discovered, but in those, Jesus is rendered as alive; Jesus appears triumphant, or at least not beaten down as he does here. This is the Gero Cross. It is carved in oak, and painted and partially gilded. The figure, the halo and cross-pieces are original, but the surround was added in 1683. The cross is almost six feet tall and nearly five and a half feet wide. It has its own chapel in the cathedral in Cologne, Germany.

About this same time, the theological idea of substitutionary atonement was concocted by Paschasius Radbertus. It was later refined by Archbishop Anselm of Canterbury. This theology held that human beings commit the most grievous sin—just by being born—and they offend God in the process. And for that sin, God has, in his mercy sent his own son to earth, so that, with the help of Jesus and his sacrifice, we are able to atone for our sins and eventually find our way to heaven. The death of Jesus is substituted for our own so that God is satisfied.

That's the theory, the theology of substitutionary atonement. Only Jesus could substitute for us in a ritual that would atone for our sins. Only Jesus, because only his sacrifice would appease God. This idea refocused the point of the Eucharist so that it became a re-enactment of the death of Jesus, not a communal celebration. This idea made it easier for men to join the army and it made it easier to justify the Crusades. And this idea caught on and permeated Christianity for the next thousand years.

The death of Jesus and what it supposedly accomplished became more important than the life of Jesus and what he preached. And, from my perspective as a former Catholic, that's a shame, because with so many Christians focused on salvation in another world there are too few left to work for salvation in this world. The doctrine of substitutionary atonement distracts us from the point Jesus so

obviously makes in the gospels: Love your neighbor and pray for your detractors. And that message, you see, is focused on this world.

So if early Christians did not depict the death of Jesus in their art, what did their art reflect? I would think that early Christians, being closer to the real message of Jesus, would create art that more closely reflected that message. Traveling throughout the early Christian world, Brock and Parker discovered that early Christian art reflected paradise in this world.

If we go back to Google image search and enter the phrase “early Christian art,” we'll get only about 41,000 hits, which is about a thousand times fewer than our previous search. Of course the 41 thousand are in the 45 million, but I think you get the picture. There's not too many examples of early Christian art that are still around. That's due to the fact that there were fewer artists in those days and much of their work has been destroyed. But the images that do survive are quite different from our previous research. No pictures of the nativity, none of the crucifixion, some bible stories from the Old Testament, and many depictions of paradise.

The paradise depicted in churches, catacombs and monasteries, from Istanbul to Portugal, is located in this world. It's not in the heavens, it's not in the clouds or in some other-worldly location. It's not the afterlife. It's right here.

Some of the best-preserved early Christian art is found in Ravenna, about 80 miles south of Venice. Ravenna is just one of many places visited by Brock and Parker, and these words come from their visit to *Galla Placidia*, a mausoleum built around 430 in Ravenna:

As soon as we entered, we stood in a three-tiered sacred cosmos. The interior central dome displays a midnight blue sky that teems with gold stars. A simple Latin cross marks the center apex of the sky, and the creatures of Ezekiel's heavenly vision—a lion, an ox, an eagle, and a man—emerge from red and white clouds in the corners

of the dome. Below the celestial heavens, arches frame half-moon lunettes that depict paradise. Spiraling grape and acanthus vines grow abundantly, bushes are laden with fruit, deer and doves drink at fountains and pools, and saints stand in green meadows. What we did not see was a depiction of Jesus's death.

Brock and Parker also visited the sixth-century *Sant'Apollinare Nuovo* Church in Ravenna. This is from their account of it.

Near the ceiling of the nave, 26 rectangular mosaics tell the life story of Jesus. On the wall near the chancel, an image of the Last Supper began the thirteen scenes of his Passion. At panel ten we encountered Simon of Cyrene carrying the cross for Jesus to Golgotha. We expected to see the crucifixion on panel eleven. Instead, we saw an angel who sat before a tomb.

We found no crucifixions in any of the early churches. The death of Jesus, it seemed, was not a key to meaning, not an image of devotion, not a ritual symbol of faith for the Christians who worshiped among the churches' glittering mosaics. The Jesus they saw was the child of baptism, the healer of the sick, the teacher of his friends, and the one who showed the way to paradise.

The words of Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker. They didn't just go to Ravenna. They visited places in Turkey, Syria, France, Italy, Greece and Crete. You can read more in this book.

So, for me, here's what all of this boils down to: Making intelligent deductions from the historical record, from archeology, anthropology and sociology, and from art, the expression of a people's culture, I conclude that early Christians found their paradise on earth by following the great commandment of Jesus: Love your neighbor and pray for your detractors. They found that following the teachings of Jesus led them to a renewed life, a life that helped to make the world a better place.

In the 1043 years since the Gero Cross, Christians moved from a very

gentle, peaceful and spiritual ethos to the Moral Majority, the 700 Club and the Promise Keepers. I just picked on three of the more outrageous examples, but any Christian church, to a greater or lesser degree will teach the same thing.

Even though church membership around here is strong, across all denominations and across the world, it's down, and I think that an obsession with salvation in the next world is part of the reason for that decline. Beginning about the ninth century, Christian theology turned from finding paradise on earth and became fixated on salvation through death. How they did that is the subject of this book and I recommend it to you.

A Christian preacher ought to give you the good news, right? Well, I'm not a Christian preacher, but here's the good news: Finding Paradise again is easy. It's here, it's now. All we have to do is love our neighbors and pray for our detractors. And you know, this is not an exclusively Christian idea. It's a refinement of the Golden Rule, which appears in cultures everywhere. It's taking the Golden Rule to the next level, going beyond actions and good deeds to pure intention. It's just a good way to live this life.

HYMN 34, Thou I May Speak with Bravest Fire

EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE

We extinguish this flame,
but not the light of its truth
the warmth of this community
nor the fire of our commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
and share with all the world.

POSTLUDE

Why Are We Afraid?