



PARADISE

The life of a congregation is a rich community tapestry of people, programs, ministries and worship. We lift up the patterns of this tapestry at Unity Church with the threads of monthly themes woven through our worship and programming. These themes deepen our understanding of our own faith and strengthen our bonds with one another in religious community.

Paradise has burned down. An inferno of flames and wind blazed through Paradise, California, in November, leaving burned-out cars, toppled homes, and a torched landscape in its wake. At least eighty-eight people died, almost all over the age of sixty. Nestled in the foothills of Sierra Nevada Mountains, Paradise had earned its name from the majesty of the area's ponderosa pines. Its location, natural beauty, and relatively inexpensive real estate had made the town a popular retirement spot for working-class seniors.

It's a troubling coincidence to write about paradise after reading so many stories about its destruction. When many Unitarian Universalists consider paradise, we think about the beauty of nature: flower-filled spring meadows, bright blue mountain lakes, craggy, snow-capped peaks, and yes, the cliché of tropical beaches. This earth—and none other—is our chance at heavenly paradise. So we seek out earthly treasures and, in rare, special moments, find ourselves in the sweetness of the Garden. As environmentalist John Muir wrote, we feel the sun and "bathe in spirit-beams." We "blend with the landscape and become part and parcel of nature." Wholeness. Beauty. Paradise. Like Muir, we UUs feel that protecting and nurturing the paradise that surrounds us is a spiritual charge. We have lost one Paradise. Will we lose it all?

The earth always has the seeds of paradise buried inside, waiting to blossom, yearning to be seen and appreciated. Our communities do as well. When we talk about our aspirations for Beloved Community, that is potential paradise. Unity Church's fourth Ends statement says we promise to "know each other in all our fullness and create an ever-widening circle of belonging for all people." Doing that work takes effort,

but it helps us break away from fear and move toward Beloved Community. An "ever-widening circle of belonging" is not a new understanding of potential paradise. Ephrem the Syrian, a fourth-century theologian, believed *reciprocity* held the key to paradisaical delight. What Ephrem called "the richness of one supplying the wants of another" created a form of paradise for both the giver and the receiver. The radical table fellowship of early Christian communities embodied this idea. So did civil rights workers, black and white, who gathered after long hours of work around a pot of beans in rural Mississippi, honoring hosts who were "telling it like it is." Listening as our neighbors offer the fullness of their experiences, experiencing a radical proximity to new ideas, and embracing the messiness, complexity, and beauty of our shared existence, can open us to the paradise that surrounds us.

Or maybe we get the paradise we believe in. Once exiled from the Garden of Eden, ancient Israelites went in search of the promised land, with the journey more important to the story than the destination. Vikings who fell in battle believed they would be carried away by warrior maidens to the land of Valhalla. Once in Valhalla, they would live to fight again and again, training for the ultimate battle, Ragnarök. (You may have seen this depicted in the last Thor movie. It didn't *look* like eternal happiness.) In the *Aeneid*, Vigil describes the Greek paradise of Elysium as a place where "in groves we live, and lie on mossy beds, By crystal streams, that murmur thro' the meads." In descriptions, Elysium features lots of lounging about, plenty of good food and music, and maybe some light sports playing. Early Celtic Christians believed that the Garden of Eden represented not a physical place, but the deepest

dimension of our being. Because humans had been cast out of paradise, Celts believed we live forever in a kind of exile from our truest selves, always searching for our truth. Which version of paradise most resonates with you?

The concept of paradise has the potential to ignite our imaginations and change our world. Poet Mary Oliver explains that "the path to heaven doesn't lie down in flat miles. It's in the imagination with which you perceive this world, and the gestures with which you honor it." Paradise has been destroyed, yes. Again and again. But our actions and our imaginations can still make a difference. Civil rights leader and Congressman John Lewis claims that living "as if" is the key: he notes that "you live as if you're already there, that you're already in that community, part of that sense of one family, one house. If you visualize it... for you it is already there." The future is now.

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PARADISE THEME RESOURCES

FILMS

Cinema Paradiso (1988)

TELEVISION

The Good Place (2016-present)

BOOKS

Justice on Earth: People of Faith Working at the Intersections of Race, Class, and the Environment by Jennifer Nordstrom (2018)

A Different Pond by Bao Phi (2017)

The Overstory by Richard Powers (2018)