PARADISE
A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Strauss

Have you ever experienced a moment when you felt yourself to be in Paradise? Transport yourself for a moment to that place you remember, that place you still feel inside of you, that place where you felt yourself connected to everything around you.

I think of a state park in North Carolina, where I stood looking across a pond to the breathtaking waterfall that fell down the cliff face into the pond. The sound of the falling water was music of the spheres. It was the sound of birth, the music of eternal beginnings, and the water kept falling and falling and the music kept pulling me in until I wanted nothing more than to merge with the world around me, the paradise of which I was a part.

I remember that feeling. I remember that music. I remember the rock, the pool, the sky, the sure knowledge that I felt in that place. I knew it to be paradise and I knew it was there for me, it was precisely where I belonged at that moment in my life.

Can you remember, just for a moment, can you remember a place like that?

Webster’s dictionary defines Paradise first, as heaven, the final abode of the righteous, second, as the Garden of Eden, and third, as a place of extreme beauty or delight.

Our popular culture today, our movies and television and teen bookshelves are filled with stories of zombies and vampires and apocalyptic visions of the end of the world. There is a darkness in our culture of war and violence, of economic oppression. There is a darkness all around us.

It’s easy to get sucked into that darkness, it’s easy to forget the glimpses of paradise we have beheld in our lives.
To live lives of spirit requires us to know the specific blessings of our lives, to remember and celebrate those moments when we feel the wholeness of belonging to the great web, to the earth and the universe, to one another.

I found wisdom in a book by Unitarian minister Peter Fleck. The title is *The Blessings of Imperfection*.

He moves my thoughts of paradise away from the beauty of nature, toward the beauty of what it means to be human.

He defines paradise as being fully known…and as the reciprocity of mutual knowing. Let me explain.

Think of a time, of a person who saw you, who knows you as you are…in all of your preciousness, in all your failings, in all your self-doubts, in all your amazing gifts. Think of someone who really sees you.

It is such a gift, such a blessing, to be seen, to be known. This is the gift of love, the gift of reminding us that we, each of us, have worth and dignity. We confer this knowledge, this gift on one another. It is a life-giving gift.

And it can be, for those in despair, for those overcome with a dark time, for those who suffer and are in need of compassion…being seen as a precious person is a glimpse of paradise…a moment of knowing you belong. It is the gift of knowing that you are in the right place.

Peter Fleck writes:

*It is life giving because what becomes mutually known is each individual’s uniqueness, each individual’s creativity, each individual’s emotional need to give and to receive.*

*We live by the grace of being known to others lovingly. We give life to others by knowing them, lovingly.*
There is a reciprocity, a mutuality of knowing. It is this mutuality that upholds life.

What does paradise look like and feel like to you? Is it a place in nature that connects you to the web of life? Is it a relationship in which there is a mutuality of knowing and seeing one another fully?

Let me reassure you that paradise does not depend on perfection. It is, I think, a misunderstanding of the story of the Garden of Eden to believe that paradise is/was/can be a perfect place.

The 17th c. poet John Milton began his epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, with these lines:

*Of man’s first disobedience, and the fruit of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste brought death into the world and all our woe, with the loss of Eden.*

Milton, a thinker of his age and time, would have us think of Eden, of Paradise, as a place of eternal life…a place where human perfection is required, a place where no suffering or death will enter.

Milton writes of paradise as something humanity has lost.

An understanding of human nature, of death and sin and suffering, has challenged philosophers and theologians ever since Milton and Dante and the Hebrew Prophets.

The linking of Eden with perfection and defining perfection as a state without death led many to embrace a fundamentalist approach to religion - to a way of living focused on purity rituals - as a seeking after perfection. Much ink and blood has been spilled over the question of the perfectability of humankind.

Liberal religion, on the other hand, makes space for human fallability...sees the Garden of Eden as a story of autonomy and
freedom brought about by human choice. In liberal religion, death is understood as part of life. Rather than perfectability concerns, liberal faith makes way for an acceptance of the whole of life...and for healing and wholeness as a possibility.

A perfect Eden, a perfect paradise leaves no room for human growth, creativity, mutuality, or love. In recognizing our brokenness, our need for one another, possibilities for deeper, more spirit-filled, life-giving relationships open before us.

So where is our paradise? Where shall we look?

Sometimes we must look in the darkest places to see a glimmer of wholeness. Sometimes we must enter the dark to see a moment of reciprocity, to know the mutuality that upholds life.

Having had the privilege of visiting South Africa a decade ago, I visited Robbin Island and saw the rock quarry where the prisoners were taken to labor every day. Nelson Mandela was one of those prisoners. And many days in those 30 years at the quarry, Mandela taught the other prisoners to read and to do numbers by writing on the quarry walls. He knew his companions and found a way to offer his gift of compassionate teaching.

Standing at the edge of the quarry, I could imagine how the guards must have looked away, allowing Mandela to be fully human in those moments, allowing the teacher to see the students - all those men in the hot sun, in forced senseless labor - all of them upholding life, even there, practicing mutuality.

Was that not, in those moments, a glimpse of Paradise? Did that not allow them to survive, knowing they were seen as precious and worthy human beings?

I don’t think paradise has been lost; I think it’s something to be found, to be found again and again, to be created, to emerge from human loving, and from loving life.
Sometimes, I lament, even in my comfortable life, I am sometimes filled with sorrow. I long for a return to the waterfall, to the times when I felt whole and connected, to the moments when I felt I truly belonged. I am grateful for this longing. It is the spiritual part of me desiring a glimpse of the holy, an experience of paradise.

In all my research and reflection this week, this line kept coming back to me: Our great mistake is to act the drama of our lives as if we are alone. There is always somewhere to turn, there is always someone waiting to see and be seen, ready for the mutuality that heals.

Rebecca Parker, Unitarian Universalist theologian and president of Starr King Seminary, in her book called *A House for Hope*, says that the seeds of Eden are sown everywhere as the human gifts of our resistance, our compassion, our creativity. She writes: “Lamentation leads to hope. It is from within the heart of the world that paradise will arrive.”

Pay attention to your heart. Write the story of your life from out of your heart. Turn in a new direction, enter the dark, if that is before you. Do not be afraid. You will find, if you open your heart, you will find, you are not alone.

Perhaps paradise is something to return to and to know, as the poet says, to know it for the first time.

Faith traditions the world-over hold out images of eternal recurrence, of return to the source. There are mandalas, wheels of life that conceptualize sacred time as cyclical rather than linear.

Perhaps an appreciation of the idea of paradise is an idea worthy of return, knowing, as Plato taught, that the form of an idea is not perfect, but a mere shadow of the idea itself, knowing no image or experience of paradise is perfect, still there may be possibility there.
There may be glimpses of life-giving wholeness in many of our days. Keep lamenting. Keep longing. Keep looking.

Spiritual practices, therapy, honest, deep conversation with loved ones, turning in a new direction, embracing change, entering the dark...all these and more, if done with the intention of ritual and a longing for wholeness, lead to a time of sacredness. There you may find the value in your own life...the gifts you have to offer others, a way to see and be seen, to know and to become known.

Might this not be as paradise for you?

A place of wholeness and knowing the value of my own life has always been in working with children and teens. My years as a teacher were both heaven and hell for me...I was so fully invested, so totally present with my students. And so I will end with a story that has touched me deeply.

It is the story of Malala Yousafzai, who at age 16 was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Malala lives in a part of Pakistan where girls were not allowed to go to school, or at least not for long. Boys were allowed to learn, but girls were denied.

Malala longed so passionately to read, to learn, to think, that at a young age, she began to speak out in protest, to speak out on behalf of girls. Her lamentation led to hope. Her seeing other young girls suffer led to compassion. Her experiencing the imperfection of the system that oppressed girls in this way created possibilities for action.

She was so effective in her life-giving message that, at age 14, she was shot by the Taliban. We all saw the hospital photographs. We followed the progress of her recovery. And we were amazed to learn two years later that she is still speaking out, still standing tall, still risking her life so she and other girls can go to school.

For Malala, paradise is a classroom.
I close with the words of Peter Fleck:

_We live by the grace of being known to others lovingly. We give life to others by knowing them lovingly. There is a reciprocity, a mutuality of knowing. It is this mutuality that upholds life._

May you go forth and find your paradise.

Amen/Blessed Be/Shalom