

***Power & Partnership: Justice & the 4<sup>th</sup> Source***  
(Philippians 2:1-5)

Good morning –

I am here to tell you the good news that Unitarian Universalists can safely embrace the Christian half of the 4<sup>th</sup> source by paying attention to progressive Christian theology – which I have been talking about here for about 10 years!

This morning is a brief primer.

First, I recommend you read John Dominic Crossan's *God and Empire*, and two books by United Church of Christ minister Robin Meyers: *Saving Jesus from the Church: How to Stop Worshiping Christ and Start Following Jesus* and *The Underground Church: Reclaiming the Subversive Way of Jesus*. Robin Meyers preaches the progressive, liberal gospel in the belly of the beast – Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Mayflower United Church of Christ is truly a bright blue Christian island in a very red fundamentalist sea. That it is one of the largest congregations in the UCC indicates there is hope, even in Oklahoma.

Second, progressive Christianity is about radical, distributive justice in this life, not saving souls from hell in the next life.

The Jewish people had a long history of wars and occupations. Nevertheless, they believed that God is just, and the world belongs to God. So whenever they experienced injustice and political turmoil, they knew that God would act to restore God's justice to the world. Otherwise, God would not be God. The stories in Mark, Matthew, and Luke were told to show that Jesus was the one sent by God to set things right. Progressive Christians believe that God acted to restore justice through the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

In Paul's letters to the non-Jewish Christian communities he founded outside Jerusalem, all around the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, he says that God continues to act in the world when we use Jesus's example as a pattern for justice-compassion in our own lives. In Philippians Chapter 2 he says, "I appeal to all of you to think in the same way that the Anointed Jesus did, who although he was born in the image of God" – as laid out in Genesis – "[he] did not regard 'being like God' as something to use for his own advantage, but rid himself of such vain pretension and accepted a servant's lot." When Paul uses the metaphor of a servant – or slave – he is saying that being a Christian does not mean we are lords and masters of all we can conquer in Jesus's name. Instead, Paul describes the powerlessness of those who follow Jesus's Way. This is not an easy path. It means giving up power as power is usually perceived.

In the normal course of civilization, Power means power over everything that is a challenge to human survival: power over the land and its natural resources; power over outsiders – enemies; power over the everyday conduct of life so that order can be maintained, and the civilization can grow and prosper.

But when the distribution of wealth is confined to those who hold the power over health care, housing, education, and food, then injustice becomes inevitable, as access to the basic necessities of life becomes dependent upon the ability to pay. The system then becomes one of payback and retribution instead of fair sharing.

The hope was that Jesus would overthrow that kind of injustice. But that's not what Jesus did. Jesus was himself a victim of the injustice of normal civilization. He died at the hands of the oppressors. Thirty years after his death, the Romans sacked Jerusalem. Twenty years after the death of the Apostle Paul, disillusioned Christians began to believe that Jesus would come again to bring a violent end to all injustice, and establish his kingdom once and for all. Many conservative and most fundamentalist Christians today persist in that belief.

In Philippians Chapter 2, Paul says that Jesus gave up all the usual forms of power instead of taking advantage of them or seizing them for himself. Surely he had plenty of opportunity to join the resistance – the Zealots – and others who carried out a constant guerilla war against the Roman occupation. They would be called “terrorists” today. Quite possibly, some of Jesus's followers were members of those groups.

But Jesus did not do that. Jesus came up with a very different definition of power. By letting go of the usual expectations and definitions of power, Jesus became such a threat to the Roman empire that he had to be killed. He said the emperor was not God. He told people that when the Roman soldier or his representative demanded that you carry his gear for a mile, carry it two miles – because you would force the Roman to break his own law. The threat to Empire lies in the subversion of law that happens when people refuse to act in their own self interest. Jesus said “love your enemies.” When you think about it, to love your enemies means you have no enemies.

Paul continues: “So . . . if you know something about being motivated by love, if you know something about the spirit of fellowship and genuine compassion, then make me completely happy by sharing the same attitude, showing the same love toward one another, and being united in heart and purpose. Don't be always thinking about your own interests or your own importance, but with humility hold others in higher regard than you do yourselves. Each of you should keep others interests in mind, not your own. I appeal to all of you to think in the same way that the Anointed Jesus did.”

When we do that, we inherit the legacy that Jesus left us: the kingdom of God – or in postmodern, nontheistic language, when we abandon self-interest, we step into a parallel universe where distributive justice-compassion rules, because if I do not demand retribution, but insist upon the kind of radical fairness that preserves the well-being of my enemy – if I allow my enemy to win – I give up even the justice that should rightfully be given to me and I subvert the whole system.

But if I demand retribution and payback, I live in bondage to fear, and I am dead to the possibility of inclusive love. I am always afraid of what somebody is going to do to me in payback for what I did to them first. First century Paul used theistic language, God-language, because there was no other way to express the unity of spirit that Paul – and we – can experience

in that moment of giving up self-interest IF, in fact, we abandon the whole idea of looking out for ourselves first. A radical abandonment of self-interest applies individually, socially, corporately, nationally, internationally.

This is not easy. As Matt Fox likes to say, “It’s crucifixion 101.”

When we abandon our own self-interest, we align ourselves with the Creative Force for abundant life in the universe – and we are empowered to enter into an unbreakable covenant with that Creative Force that has nothing to do with any of the things that normal civilization associates with power. For Christians, Jesus is the one who started the restoration of distributive justice-compassion.

And here’s more good news: Distributive justice is not exclusively for believers in the Christian religion. Anyone who abandons self-interest participates in distributive justice-compassion, and steps into the alternative Universe. Anyone who does that becomes a partner with Jesus in the Christ consciousness, the Buddha nature, in the ongoing, great work of justice-compassion.

Jesus is not coming back. Its up to us.