

***Mercy, Not Sacrifice***  
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Our worship and community theme this month is one of our Developmental Goals – **STRUCTURE**. The goal reads: ***Second Unitarian has an organizational and physical structure that is appropriate for and responsive to our vision for the future.*** So, this goal refers both to how we are organized – in committees and in other ways. And also to our physical building. Today, for Easter, I am not addressing STRUCTURE in either of these senses, but in the sense of the structure of very important stories. There are a number of stories about the meaning and accomplishment of Jesus of Nazareth’s birth, life and death. I share a story structure today of the meaning of Jesus’ death that I hope can be inspiring and healing.

Although you wouldn’t always be able to tell it, we Unitarian Universalists did not spring fully-formed from the seething core of the Universe after World War II. We arose from ***within*** Protestant Christianity over the course of decades in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, after being Christian for the previous century or so.

Even though we are no longer a Christian faith, ***some*** of us Unitarian Universalists, congregants and ministers, ***name*** ourselves as Christian. And Christianity remains a source of wisdom and inspiration accessible to all of us. Our Fourth source of inspiration and wisdom is: *Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.*

Today, because it is the Christian holy day of Easter, I’m talking about Jesus. Out of love, care and respect for our Christian siblings, those who are Unitarian Universalists and those who are not. Out of care and respect for our Unitarian Universalist heritage. I’m also preaching about Jesus to those here who have been wounded by their earlier experiences of Christianity and who are open to healing. These wounds are real. And healing needs to be here for those wounds.

Specifically, I am speaking about the concept of a ***non-violent atonement*** and why this can be valuable and healing for us as Unitarian Universalists.

Last year, in my Easter sermon, titled ***Occupy Jerusalem***, I suggested to you that Jesus was executed by the Romans for crimes he did commit. Not executed by God and not executed because of any Jewish people. The crime Jesus committed was coming to Jerusalem during the Jewish Holy Days of Passover and preaching resistance to the laws and values of Rome. He also preached resistance to those in the Jewish community who collaborated with Roman oppressors. In all cases, the form of resistance he preached was non-violent.

During the last week of his life, as he did his entire life, Jesus preached and modeled a resistance to Roman oppression, to those who would build empires on the backs of the poor and the less powerful. In doing so, Jesus presents to us a powerful prophetic message about ***faithful*** nonviolent resistance to empire and dominion and injustice in all forms. This is the message that has come down to us through the work and the lives of the Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Junior, Nelson Mandela and many others.

Today ... I want to engage with another aspect of the Easter story. That is the spiritually transformative power of Jesus’ death. The ***spiritual*** work that Jesus’ death accomplished. In theological terms, this is called the ‘atonement.’

The word 'atonement' has an interesting history. It did not exist in English before the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Some attribute its creation to the English Protestant reformer and Bible translator, William Tyndall. It was formed from the words 'at' and 'one.' It is literally **at-one-ment** – the condition of being reconciled with others. Of being 'at one' with them. It is most often used to describe the reconciliation between God and humans in Judaism and in Christianity. Reconciliation means how it is that we get into right relationship with God.

Unlike some other doctrines or beliefs within the Christian church, there has never been one single shared understanding of the atonement achieved by Jesus, how he reconciled humanity and divinity. There are many ideas about how atonement worked, what happened and what was accomplished for humans. The way that Christians refer to these various ideas about the atonement is that they are **theories** of atonement. Not **doctrines** of atonement, but **theories**. There are more than 20 different theories of the atonement out there in Christian theology.

Now – I've always been curious about and fascinated by the idea of the atonement. Which is a little odd for someone who was never a Christian. Growing up in a conservative Southern city, what I heard about Jesus was the he "gave his life for us," he "shed his blood for us," "he died on the cross for us," he "sacrificed himself for us." I wondered what was meant by these very strong claims. They seemed so important to some of the Christian people I knew. What I have learned since, on my own and through my time in seminary, is that Christian people can mean **wildly** differing things by these statements.

At the Christian seminary I attended, I found that many of my Christian classmates were appalled by the understanding Jesus' death as a sacrifice. They struggled with the violence and blood of the atonement and many of them refused to wear or display a cross because of it. Some of them said that they ***hated the cross*** and did not want to preach it.

This was very surprising to me. If some of my Christian classmates felt so negatively about the cross, as the symbol of what Jesus' death means, and as a symbol of the atonement, how could there be any good in it for me, as a non-Christian Unitarian Universalist?

The particular theory of atonement that causes most of this distress is one widespread in Christianity. It is called the ***substitutionary theory of atonement***. It is legalistic, rather than theological, in its conception. Here's how it works, as defined by Peter Schmiechen, a United Church of Christ theologian, who wrote an excellent book describing all the various theories of atonement. Peter writes:

*The theory begins with the reality of sin as a violation of the covenant between God and humans, thereby creating separation from God and incurring the judgment of God. Using the analogy of the law court, human beings are judged guilty before God and stand under the penalty of death. The crucial issue is the satisfaction of God's justice. Humans must be punished to satisfy God's justice. But God shows love for us by sending Jesus as a substitute to die for us, thereby satisfying the demands of the law for punishment. In his death and resurrection, Jesus frees us from the [death] penalty of the law and offers new life to those who have faith in him as Lord and savior.*

This understanding of the meaning and effect of Jesus' death was first proposed in the 11<sup>th</sup> century by theologian Anselm of Canterbury. Please note this means for the first 1,000 years of Christianity, this was not a Christian understanding of the meaning of Jesus' death. And the metaphor of the court of law and the need to

*satisfy God's justice* were completely new ideas that emerged from the European culture of the time for a number of cultural and historical reasons.

However, the most difficult aspects of this theory of the atonement cannot be laid at Anselm's door. This theory was elaborated by John Calvin and many others over the years, most notably Presbyterian theologian Charles Hodge in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in ways that made it even worse.

So, the substitutionary understanding of the meaning of Jesus' death became widely taught after Anselm. Yet, resistance to the idea also emerged pretty quickly. French theologian Peter Abelard, writing in the 12<sup>th</sup> century said:

*Who will forgive God for the sin of killing his own child? How cruel and wicked it seems that anyone should demand the blood of an innocent person as the price for anything, or that it should in any way please him that an innocent man should be slain. Still less that God should consider the death of his son so agreeable that by it God should be reconciled to the whole world!*

Abelard's cry has echoed through the centuries in the words and thoughts of many Christian theologians, laypersons and ministers. Substitutionary atonement creates many theological and other problems for Christians, problems that have long been recognized. Yet it remains a significant view within Christianity and too often, is the only understanding of atonement that people know, both inside and outside of Christianity.

What are these problems? I turn to the works of Mennonite theologian J Denny Weaver, Unitarian Universalist theologian Rebecca Parker and the late Methodist theologian Walter Wink for a deeper understanding.

J. Denny Weaver, as a Mennonite, is committed to the practice of non-violence in all ways. He struggled for years with the moral and theological disconnect between his understanding of the atonement as violent punishment and his dedication to the nonviolence of the Mennonite tradition. Here are some of the problems Weaver identifies.

Substitutionary atonement presents God as vengeful, a child abuser and ultimately as an example of injustice, by executing an innocent person. How is that compatible with an understanding of God as the most just and most loving and merciful being in the Universe?

Substitutionary atonement also means that violence is not only divinely sanctioned but also both **required** and **sufficient** for reconciliation with God. Thus there is no benefit – no reconciliation and no salvation – to be gained from Jesus' teaching or the model of how he lived his life. Reconciliation with God depends **only** on God's violent retribution as enacted in Jesus' death. So that makes the rest of Jesus' life pointless.

With substitutionary atonement, there is also a problem with the image and understanding of Jesus. Through God and, in the Trinitarian understanding, **as** God, Jesus is complicit in the violence against him. If God is the angry and vengeful one demanding retribution and punishment, then Jesus is a passive and helpless victim who goes along with the plan for his own unjust killing. He is the Lamb of God, God's helpless sacrificial lamb.

How can we square this passivity with the creative resistance Jesus shows in the rest of his life, especially his last week in Jerusalem? This is the man who spent his entire life in nonviolent resistance to the Roman Empire. He could not possibly submit to his own unjust death as a sacrifice and be faithful to his own life and teaching.

These negative images of the work of God and Jesus through substitutionary atonement have also had a terrible impact on human society over the centuries. Substitutionary atonement as the method of reconciliation means that violence and violent practices are legitimized in the social order. ***They are even made sacred.***

Christian Unitarian Universalist Rebecca Parker illuminates this problem in her book ***Proverbs of Ashes***. The sacralizing of violence happens in several ways. One is the notion that God sends us pain and suffering, as he did with Jesus, so we can grow stronger in faith and all ways. The reality of our genuine grief and tragedy is taken away from us rather than faced and lived and healed. As Parker says: *Tragedy is re-named a spiritual trial, designed by God for [human] learning.*

What has disturbed me personally about this concept is also its extreme narcissism. If the grief and suffering in my life happen only so that I may learn from it, then all the rest of you are merely bit players in the drama of my personal development. And I am therefore at the center of the Universe. And I do not believe I am at the center of the Universe in any way, shape or form!

A second real-world problem with the spiritualization of suffering is that people may believe their suffering is heroic and that through their suffering, they become like Jesus. By sharing in Jesus' God-ordained suffering, they achieve spiritual martyrdom and raise self-sacrifice to a spiritual virtue. As Parker notes: *This theology will leave an abused child or a battered spouse defenseless . . . the spiritualizing of suffering makes God the author of all pain, who uses pain to edify or purify human beings. It clouds the realities of human violence in a haze of spiritual glory.*

And you heard my experience of this earlier.

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So, as Christian theologians have noted for centuries, substitutionary atonement has many, many problems in how it conceives the meaning of Jesus' work of reconciliation. Problems of what God and Jesus are really like. And serious problems of how Jesus' suffering is to be understood in the context of everyday life.

Then.....what is there to ***oppose*** this understanding of the meaning of Jesus' death? And why should any of this matter to Unitarian Universalists?

The late, great Walter Wink, a theologian from the Methodist tradition, unpacks Jesus' core message of nonviolent resistance this way, beginning with the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:38-41, which follow the Sermon on the Mount.

*You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if anyone would sue you and take your cloak, let him have your tunic also; and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.*

Wink says:

*Many who have committed their lives to working for change and justice in the world simply dismiss Jesus' teachings about nonviolence as simplistic idealism. And with good reason. "Turn the other cheek" suggests the passive, Christian doormat quality that has made so many Christians cowardly and complicit in the face of*

*injustice. "Resist not evil" seems to break the back of all **opposition** to evil and to counsel submission. "Going the second mile" has become a platitude meaning nothing more than "extend yourself" for others. Rather than fostering structural change, such attitudes **encourage** collaboration with the oppressor.*

*Jesus **never** behaved in such ways. Whatever the source of the misunderstanding, it is neither Jesus nor his teaching, which, when given a fair hearing in its original social context, is arguably one of the most revolutionary political statements ever uttered.*

As Wink notes:

*There are three general responses to oppression: (1) violent opposition, (2) passivity, and (3) the third way of active nonviolence articulated by Jesus. Human evolution has conditioned us for only the first two of these responses: fight or flight . . . Neither of the dreadful alternatives of flight or fight is what Jesus is proposing. Jesus abhors both passivity and violence as responses to oppression. His is a third alternative not even touched by these options.*

Let's look at one of the three examples given by Jesus: *if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.*

As Wink tells us, in Jesus' day, Roman soldiers required the subjugated Jews in Palestine to provide assistance to the Roman army. A Roman soldier could force a Jewish civilian to carry his pack, weighing 85-95 pounds, for one mile only.

To force a civilian to go further would subject the soldier to severe penalties under Roman military law. In this way Rome tried to limit the anger of the occupied people and still keep its armies on the move. The penalty beyond one mile was an attempt to make the command **appear** reasonable and fair. And of course, it could always have been increased, and still claimed to be 'reasonable' and 'fair.' This rule was a bitter reminder to the Jews that they were a conquered people even in their own Promised Land.

To his oppressed people, Jesus does not counsel violent revolt. Jesus keenly was aware of the futility of armed revolt against Roman imperial might. Every recent armed revolt by the Jews – and there had been quite few in the decades before Jesus' death – had been met with extreme force and brutality, and the deaths of thousands of Jews.

Wink asks and I quote:

*But why walk the second mile? Is this not to rebound to the opposite extreme: aiding and abetting the enemy? Not at all. The question here is, how the oppressed can recover the initiative, how they can assert their human dignity in a situation that cannot for the time being be changed? The rules are Caesar's but not how one responds to the rules. The **response** is God's, and Caesar has no power over that.*

*Imagine then the soldier's surprise when, at the next mile marker, he reluctantly reaches to assume his pack. You say, "Oh no, let me carry it another mile." Normally he has to coerce your kinsmen to carry his pack; now you do it cheerfully and will not stop! Is this a provocation? Are you insulting his strength? Trying to get him disciplined for appearing to make you go farther than the law allows? Are you planning to make trouble?*

*From a situation of servility, you have once more seized the initiative. You have taken back the power of choice. The soldier is thrown off-balance by being deprived of the predictability of your response. Jesus' listeners could imagine the hilarious situation of a Roman infantryman pleading with a Jew to give him back his pack so that he would not get into trouble.*

*The humor of this scene may escape those who picture it through sanctimonious eyes. But it would not have been lost on Jesus' hearers, who must have delighted in the prospect of thus disturbing and discomfiting their oppressors.*

Wink also counsels us never to mistake Jesus' uncompromising love and non-violence for being **nice**. He says:

*Even if nonviolent action does not immediately change the heart of the oppressor, it does affect those committed to it. As Martin Luther King, Jr. attested, it gives them new self-respect and calls on strength and courage they did not know they had. To those with power, Jesus' advice to the powerless may seem weak. But to those whose lifelong pattern has been to cringe before those who oppress them, to those who have internalized their role as inferiors, these steps are momentous.*

In the understanding of Wink, Parker, Weaver and many other Christian theologians, Jesus did not go to his death as a helpless lamb to the slaughter. Rather, by **choosing** to go to his death without offering violent resistance to his captors, he remained strong and faithful to his own teaching. Jesus refused to compromise **or** to submit meekly **or** to become like those who offered him only violence. And he never stopped teaching, even on the cross.

Jesus' violent death is not a sacrifice offered to appease an angry God. It was the Romans who killed Jesus because they correctly understood his teachings of non-violence to be revolutionary. And they assumed, **falsely**, that anyone who offered such defiance inevitably would choose to lead another armed resistance.

This commitment to nonviolent resistance is the understanding of Jesus' life and words that inspired the Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. and Nelson Mandela. As people living under extreme and extended oppression, they understood what Jesus was doing in offering a third way besides violence or passivity as a response to injustice.

As Unitarian Universalists, those of us who commit to the work of nonviolence can be heartened and inspired by this understanding as well. When the Unitarians emerged in New England, part of what they believed was that Jesus was not divine and not the son of God. They were not Trinitarians. Yet they remained Christians.

Unitarians and Universalists revered Jesus as a superlative teacher and role model for a life of dedicated to social justice and right relations. When asked about what we believe as Unitarian Universalists about Jesus, many of us will say that he was a great teacher, a great role model. We know that's what we're **supposed** to say!

Yet if we are going to make that claim with integrity. It is imperative that we **understand** what it means so that it is not an uninformed platitude. Jesus was a role model of nonviolent resistance to oppression. He was a person, like his later students, who always sought to change the hearts of those who oppressed him. Not by rolling over and asking for more oppression, but through the third way of nonviolent resistance.

Unitarian Universalists often have come to our faith wounded by their experience of Christianity. Disturbed by the idea that innocent and good people are condemned to Hell simply for not being Christian. Or wounded by the idea that Jesus was a human sacrifice demanded by an angry God. A sacrifice that has led to the glorification of violence, a sacrifice that has made violence sacred.

If you have been wounded by these or other false understandings of the meaning of Jesus' life and work, then hearing a liberal religious understanding of these painful messages can be healing. Accepting this healing doesn't mean that you will become a Christian. It means you can know the messages that wounded you are not the **only** messages.

You can know that there has always been resistance to those wounding messages. Resistance on the part of Christian and other scholars and teachers and preachers and laypeople. You can know that you **truly** can be inspired by Jesus' life and teaching as you might be inspired by the life and teaching of Gandhi, of King, of Mandela and so many others. And in that inspiration also can be **healing** for you.

So, progressive Christian teachings never make the sentimental and soft mistake of confusing Jesus' uncompromising love with being 'nice'! Jesus' third way is about seizing the moral imperative, about finding a creative alternative to violence, about refusing to submit to or accept the inferior position, about taking control of the power dynamic, about recognizing one's own power. Nonviolent resistance is also the only response to violence that holds out the hope of change and repentance on the part of the oppressor. To respond to violence **with** violence is to become the oppressor yourself. Our greatest leaders of social change have always known that.

Jesus' death was not a sacrifice demanded by an angry God. Jesus chose it out of his certain faith that the way of compassion and of peace and of justice is the only **true** way. Jesus' death was a victory for all oppressed people because he chose it with no compromise to his own values. Freed from the false legalism of pro-violence understandings of Jesus' death, we as Unitarian Universalists can read the life of Jesus as a how-to manual of resistance. His story becomes a structure of justice in so many ways.

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And when we hear this message, we can **also** be resurrected. Resurrected to a new way of nonviolence in thought, word and deed. We can be resurrected to **change** the world, beginning with ourselves.

That is a beautiful message for Easter Sunday and for **every** day of our lives.

So may it be. Amen.