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I'm guessing there won't be a lot of resistance to the Center for Progressive Christianity's 2011 Point 6. It goes like this: “By calling ourselves progressive, we mean we are Christians who strive for peace and justice among all people.” To clarify, this is the new Point 6 out of the 8 Points the Center for Progressive Christianity uses to define what constitutes a progressive Christian. In the previous, 2003, version, it fell under Point 7 as, “By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who form ourselves into communities dedicated to equipping one another for the work we feel called to do: striving for peace and justice among all people, protecting and restoring the integrity of all God's creation, and bringing hope to those Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers.” While this earlier statement connected the dots between human peace and justice and the integrity of all creation, a stand-alone point highlights the deep significance of peace and justice to progressive Christian theologies and practices.

If we were to take an aerial shot of the bible, a primary theme that would stand out in that photo would be the long, broad arc of striving toward justice. Be it the words of judgment from the prophets, the ministry of Jesus, or even the family dramas of Jacob and Esau, that nudge from above is present: “Love one another.” “Care for the widows and orphans and the least among us.” “Love your enemies.” Granted, in some contexts the message is more obvious than others. Often it is so mixed up in human understandings of what it means to be “chosen” that it can be challenging to parse. But, overall, it's there.

Why is it, then, that some Christian theologies emphasize these values far more than others do? The concept of “chosen-ness” is certainly pivotal here. But so, too, is the distinction between theologies with a “this-worldly” emphasis and those with an “other-worldly” emphasis. Because progressive Christianities focus on the earthly ministry of the historical Jesus, there is a strong sense that what we do *in this world* and *for this world* matters, that heaven on earth is possible if we all to live into the values espoused by Jesus and the prophets. For many progressives, *this* is what salvation looks like. It’s not about doing good in order to be saved from eternal torment in the next life. It’s about recognizing that *this life* is already hell for many people—be they oppressed, poor, hungry, or homeless--and that nothing could be further from the will of God.

Progressive Christianity’s embrace of religious pluralism is also key here. To believe that there are many valid paths to God, that salvation is available to people of all religions, whether mediated directly or indirectly through Christ or by some other route entirely, now that really opens things up! Gone are the urgency and, indeed, the *need* to compete with other religions in order to guarantee that all will be saved. Gone is the propensity to exalt Christianity above all other faiths... Suddenly a whole lot of time and energy are freed up to focus on the here and now. Mission becomes a means of expressing the gospel of God’s extravagant love for all creation, instead of merely a tool to convert needy captive audiences to Christianity. Evangelism is transformed into a gracious expression of God’s extravagant hospitality, instead of an unwelcome act of coercion.

With universal salvation on the table, is there any room to talk about chosen people? Well, yes...and no. Within this progressive framework, to be chosen means *not* to have some special status that others will be forever denied, *not* to have a special “Get Out of Jail Free” card, or

riches and honor beyond the reach of less worthy souls. To be chosen is to be a servant of God or, in Christian terms, a disciple of Christ. And this concept of chosen-ness is actually where it all began. It's at the deepest roots of our Judeo-Christian faith. In Genesis 12, God said to

Abram,

"...²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.

³I will bless those who bless you,...and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."
(Genesis 12:2-3, NRSV)

Not for his own or his family's personal gain was Abram blessed, but in order to be a blessing to others, not just some, but all the families of the earth.

Later, in Isaiah 42, God said to the prophet Isaiah,

"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.

²He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; ³a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice.

⁴He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth...

⁶...I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."
(Isaiah 42:1-4a, 6b, NRSV)

Lest we still think there's some lingering elitism involved in this *chosen thing*, there is Jacob-- Jacob who received God's blessing *despite* himself. As we discussed a couple of weeks ago, Jacob was a liar and a thief: manipulating his brother Esau's birthright out of him, lying to his father about his identity in order to steal his brother's blessing, sneaking away in the night to avoid his brother's wrath, and, this week, skipping out on his father-in-law with family and cattle in tow. And yet, through Jacob, God did indeed give birth to Israel, a nation, which, although every bit as human as Jacob, understood itself to be God's chosen servants... If that still feels a bit too exclusive, take note: Ultimately this didn't detract from Esau's legacy. When brothers

Jacob and Esau are reunited, we learn that Esau, too, had been abundantly blessed with the beginnings of a nation. And that he had matured and acquired the spiritual practices of grace and forgiveness, precious gifts, which enabled his former enemy Jacob to experience the face and the character of God through him....

If we are open and available to receive and enact God's call, we just might find that we are all chosen by and for God. And by Jesus too, who appointed modest fishermen as disciples and counted a tax collector and a variety of other ritually "unclean" people among his followers, a motley crew if ever there was one.

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It is God's original blessing of creation that ultimately both frees us and obligates us to get our hands dirty by doing the earth-bound work of justice and peace. As God created the world, God called each element good and called upon human beings to be stewards, or conservationists, of that goodness. Later Idealistic Hellenistic philosophies would creep in, along with Gnosticism, and finally St. Augustine's doctrine of original sin. And soon flesh and spirit, heaven and earth, would seem to be not only separate, but opposite. In Paul's letter to the Romans and the Gospel of John, we would learn that, as Christians, we were to be *in the world, but not of it*, as though there were something inherently wrong with creation. As though we were supposed to isolate ourselves to avoid being tainted and set our sights on heaven. As though a *superiority* complex might just be a foregone conclusion... But all that changes if we return to our roots, both Jewish and Christian. That is, if we return to God's early blessings in Genesis...and the responsibilities nestled within those blessings. And if we return to the down-and-dirty example of Jesus' life and ministry on earth.

What else might we discover when we embrace our origins? Perhaps that blessings and ministry, by their very nature, are reciprocal. We are commissioned to strive for peace and justice both because we are Christian and because we are human. As human beings, we were created in the image of God. God loves all of creation. Therefore we, too, were made to love all of creation as God does. When we struggle for peace and justice, we seek to act as the hands and feet of Christ and therefore of God. While we cannot and do not claim to *be God*, we do hope to be vessels, channeling God's abundant love and mercy to those we serve. In the peoples' faces, we may perceive the face of Christ himself...and we wouldn't be wrong. As Jesus said in the Gospel of Matthew,

³⁵*for I was hungry and you gave me food,
I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink,
I was a stranger and you welcomed me,
³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing,
I was sick and you took care of me,
I was in prison and you visited me.' ...
'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'* (Matthew 25:35-36, 40b, NRSV)

To break down one last wall of elitism, we must also expect that we will encounter God in the faces and the stories of the people with and for whom we struggle. Hairy or smooth, clean or dirty, truthful or dishonest, forgiving or forgiven, brace yourselves,... because God is there. Indeed, God *lives* in the seeming mess of our earthly existences and meets us there. And so it is truly a blessing and a privilege to serve. Not only is it an opportunity to spread the light of Christ and move in the direction of heaven on earth, but, however difficult or unlikely, it is fertile territory for a close encounter of the divine kind.

So let's get in the world and get our hands dirty, shall we?

Amen.