

Centre Street Congregational Church, UCC

September 20, 2020

*I Hope So*

Rev. Susie Maxwell

*Let us pray . . .*

Today is “Just Peace” Sunday which gives UCC churches, like our, the opportunity to remember our “Just Peace Church” vision of claiming a public identity as a justice-doing, peace-seeking church.

For 30 years now, this vision is a hallmark of our denomination's theological identity. And as a young church, the UCC's contribution to the question of "what about war?" sets us apart from other views such as crusades, pacifism, or even a "just war" view.

Our view is grounded in UCC polity and covenantal theology; and, our position focuses attention on alleviating systemic injustices *of all types* using *non-violence*. Established through our reconciliation in Jesus, we're called to offer and live into the message that "Peace is possible."

And, it's important to remember in these dark, divisive and difficult times that *anything* is possible through God.

So continuing in Matthew, we hear Jesus trying to explain to his disciples what the essence of God is like. He does this because the disciples are concerned with being first and being favored. You know, they have those very human flaws of being competitive and wanting preferential treatment. So through the parable of the landowner and the vineyard, Jesus tries to tell them they've got it all backward.

While the workers agree to the labor and the usual wages, they're incredulous when — at the end of the day — the landowner pays every single laborer — no matter how late they came into the field, no matter how few hours they worked — every single one was paid exactly the same. It's baffling.

At the end of the day, what the parable points to, I believe, is God's essence and in particular to this story, it points to God's mercy. The parable reminds us that God gives us all the same thing, not what we think we deserve — or what we think others deserve — and not even what we've worked for. God gives us all the same measure of mercy.

As Cindy began reading, you may have noticed that the landowner starts out with an agreement, right there in verse 2: *After agreeing **With** the laborers, he sent them into his vineyard.*

Could this agreement be referencing the moment — in the Book of Exodus — when God invites the nation of Israel into a partnership, a covenant with Him so

they can be shaped by God's values and character and represent God to all the other nations. There is of course the usual dose of sin occurring amongst God's people. While Moses was up gathering the 10 Commandments, the Israelites went nuts at the base of Mount Sinai, building a golden calf and losing touch with God. God becomes furious and tells Moses he is going to destroy all of Israel, but Moses pleads with God and even appeals to God's character, reminding God of the promise he had made to Abraham, that he would make from him a great nation and even appeals to God's reputation among all the nations.

So God calms down and while he does bring his judgement, God also forgives.

And it is at this point that God describes his own character to Moses in chapter 34:6-7

6 The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed,

“YAHWEH, YAHWEH

a God merciful and gracious,

slow to anger,

and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,

7 keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,

forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,

yet by no means clearing the guilty,  
but visiting the iniquity of the parents  
upon the children  
and the children's children,  
to the third and the fourth generation.”

There it is at the top of God's self-disclosure: MERCY. God's mercy is part of the covenant, part of the agreement.

You'll also notice the disclosure doesn't say God won't judge, it's clear that God will. And all those who sinned or worked against God — which is another way of saying those who worked against love, justice, mercy, peace, and so on — when they are standing before God, they will be judged. You and I have sometimes worked against the things of God, and we too will be judged.

And while I sometimes fantasize about carrying out judgement on some present leaders for their inequities and frankly evil and greedy ways — I have to admit, I wouldn't be merciful. And I wouldn't be just or peaceful.

But thankfully, God doesn't play the way we do.

As the parable teaches, at the end of the day, God will judge, but will also give the *same measure of mercy* upon each and everyone of us.

It is baffling, I know.

Surely some people deserve less mercy at their time of judgement?

Lest we forget the verses from Isaiah 55:8-9

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.

For as the heavens are higher than the earth,  
so are my ways higher than your ways  
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

So if God is merciful with equal measure, what's the point? Why try harder? Why be good?

It's because as Christians, we remember that Jesus was the living expression of God — sent by God 's very self to once again keep us in covenant with Him. And we agreed to this partnership, so first of all, we are called to be like God in terms of being merciful, loving, seeking justice and so on.

And whether we arrive early in the morning or late at the end of the day, when we miss the hope that God has for us, God will treat us all the same by first coming at us from a place of mercy, or in other words divine love.

Perhaps this is God's way of demonstrating "just peace." And isn't that hopeful?

Doesn't it make you just want to turn around and do the next right thing for such a loving God? Doesn't it make you want to choose to follow Christ — which is perhaps another way of saying that doesn't it make you want to live in the space between this earthly realm and God's realm — accepting and obeying God as determined by God?

Doesn't that make the work of being human just a little bit easier? And hopeful?

Yet in such a deeply divided nation on countless levels, how do we reconcile across the divides in the vision of hope that "Peace is possible"?

In part, I believe we do it *not* by focusing our attention on our want for revenge.

Let God take care of the judgement as promised. Besides, it's exhausting and counter-productive working from a place of anger and fear.

Let's focus on Christ — where we work from a place of justice, love and peace for one another and all of God's people.

Beloveds, as we lift up Just Peace Sunday, it is critical that we remember why we do the good work of showing up to meet and assist those who are oppressed and trapped and need a hand. We do it to help fulfill God's vision of a just world.

For example, as November comes near, recall the joy — and fatigue — that arrives with it as we participate in and as the body of Christ in our annual partnership Mano en Mano.

We don't gather blankets and warm clothing to get in line first with God.

We don't make food and give it away to show others how good we are and how much we have done.

We don't even run the Welcome Resource Fair out of the vestry so that God will favor us.

Beloveds, we do it because as a justice-oriented denomination, it feels good to embody the same Spirit that God has so freely lavished upon us. That is its reward!

So on this “Just Peace” Sunday, my prayer is that you go forth and let our just peace seeking work be manifested in the promises of God’s essence.

In other words, no matter who shows up or when they do — let us also lead with mercy, as we too strive side by side, for ALL of God’s people and for one another.