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**UCC JUST PEACE SUNDAY SERMON SPARK**

Sermon Text: Luke 16:1-13 (14-18)

Theme: Breaking Through: The Disruptive Power of Just Peace

Theme Text: Ephesians 2:14

Reflection by: Rev. Dr. Sheila Harvey

I. AN INVITATION TO A WAY OF JUST PEACE

1. JESUS SPEAKS (16:1-2)
   1. Jesus speaks through a parable about handling others’ finances
   2. Jesus speaks, inviting all to be wise about personal wealth
   3. Jesus speaks on the expectation of wealth and honesty
2. JESUS ILLUSTRATES A DISRUPTIVE POWER OF JUST PEACE (16:3-7)
   1. Jesus teaches how to deal with pride in relationships
   2. Jesus brings a new expectation for all relationships to be just

II. A FORMULA FOR JUST PEACE AMONG THE NATIONS

1. DISMANTLING OF WORLDLY GREED (16:8-12)
   1. Jesus teaches all to use worldly wealth to make friends
   2. People with great integrity will receive more wealth and vice versa
2. THE APPEAL FOR JUST PEACE (16:13)
   1. Jesus warns that money can take the place of God in one’s life
   2. Jesus calls upon the privilege to trust in God’s generosity

III. SEEKING THE HEART OF CHRIST

1. GAINING GOD’S APPROVAL (16:14-15)
   1. Jesus challenges the economic understanding of the privilege
   2. Jesus teaches that God sees our hearts and we will be rewarded accordingly
2. BREAKING THROUGH TO THE GOOD NEWS OF GOD (16:16-18, Ephesians 2:14)
   1. The same God working through Moses is working in Jesus
   2. The same God working through the prophets is working in Jesus
   3. The same God working through the law is fulfilled by Jesus

Narrative Context:

Jesus tells the parable of the shrewd manager to offer healing and hope in an unjust world. As this passage of Luke begins with teaching about the wise use of one’s possessions. However, this parable emphasizes that the kingdom of heaven operates differently from the ways of this world. As Jesus explains to his followers how they are to use worldly wealth. Jesus uses the shrewd manager as an example of how to handle the finances of others, their personal wealth, and the importance of doing so with honesty. Jesus also speaks about the importance of building trusting relationships that lead to friendships among those of every nation. As Jesus teaches them to use their wealth to make friends and to do so with integrity. Jesus warns that not following the way of honesty and integrity with worldly possessions could lead to hopelessness and worldly greed.

Conflicts at Play:

The conflicts at play arise as Jesus turns the expectations of pious religious leaders, upside down. In doing so, Jesus strips away the notion that there are people and nations superior to others. Jesus strips away the notion that the bad intentions of those who were financially privileged will be rewarded. As Jesus challenges the disciples to fully trust in the disruptive power of God, by breaking through every obstacle that stands in the way of peace and justice for all people.

Way of Just Peace:

In moral distress, Jesus tells the parable of the shrewd manager to the disciples to help them build peaceful relationships with others near and far. As the story focuses on God’s generosity being greater than earthly possessions. We see God as the loaner of money; the Pharisees as the religious leaders who are lovers of money; along with the manager and the rich man who example a way of peace and justice through friendship.   
  
In this parable, Jesus uses typical relationships to show how godly people can help to spread friendships among nations. Jesus speaks of the Good News that heals us from worldly greed and gives us hope for a better tomorrow. We also hear the message of healing and hope being highlighted in today’s Just Peace Sunday theme text, “For he is our peace… and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.” (Ephesians 2:14, NIV) As the parable teaches us how to break through the walls that divide us. And Jesus is helping us to come up with solutions that bring us together, instead of tearing us apart.

As the story speaks about a manager who handled financial matters for a rich man. This manager also had extensive authority over the rich man’s financial affairs. He even had the ability to make contracts in the rich man’s name. Jesus points out that any person in this position should possess a great deal of integrity. Unfortunately, the manager did not have such high integrity. And when the rich man was informed about the dishonesty of the manager’s work, the manager was granted some time to produce a financial report for his boss.

Since the manager was afraid of losing his job, he used this window of time to produce a report to figure out how best to handle the situation. The manager came up with a plan to reduce the debts that were owed to his boss by the debtors. In doing so, the manager removed the interest earnings from each debt that would have been paid to him. As a result, the manager created favor among the debtors by saving them money. He also created favor from his boss by ensuring all debtors would be able to pay their debts. Since it seems that the debts were very high, a substantial reduction would be a major benefit to both his boss and the debtors.

The story suggests that while the manager was shrewd, the ungodly businesspeople would be much worse. In the text, the godly refers to the disciples and the ungodly refers to unbelievers. As Jesus is teaching the disciples how to handle themselves with financial honesty and wealth integrity. And in doing so, Jesus teaches the disciples to look at their situation, be prepared to make some decisions, come up with a strategy, and do what is needed. And this is exactly what the shrewd manager examples in the parable.

It is also important to note that Jesus did not commend the dishonesty of the manager. However, Jesus does highlight the manager’s foresight and diligence to follow through on his financial responsibility and in return, make friends. The manager exampled how we all fall short of being perfect but teaches us there are ways to make up for it. And this is exampled when the manager forwent his profit by reducing the debts to win favor with the debtors, earning their trust and ultimately, their friendship.

Thus, the text itself provides four interpretations of the manager’s commendation. First, “the children of this age are shrewder in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light” (16:8). In other words, Jesus’ disciples are often referred to as “children of light” (see John 12:36) and could learn something about acting shrewdly from the “children of this age.”

Second, the disciples could learn that instead of using dishonest wealth to exploit others, they are to use wealth to make friends for themselves. As friendships can be based on reciprocal and egalitarian relationships. Therefore, releasing other people’s debts not only enriches them but also establishes a new kind of reciprocity with them.

As a broader context for this, we might note that Luke often depicts how Jesus’ ministry and that of his followers are dependent on the hospitality of others (8:3; 10:7). Moreover, hospitality is often provided by those who are considered religious outsiders or lower down on social hierarchies. This is exampled in other stories such as the Good Samaritan, 10:33; tax collectors, 5:27-39; 19:1-10; and Cornelius, 10:48.

Third, there is also a connection between being faithful with “very little” and “very much.” Our dealings with dishonest wealth and what wealth belongs to another say a lot about how one will deal with true riches and what is owned by us (16:10-12). In addition, how we use the resources at our disposal in this life, especially in tight circumstances, matters, even though our true riches can only be found in that place where no thief can draw near, and no moth destroys (12:33-34).

Finally, the main point to all this is that “no one can serve two masters … you cannot serve God and wealth” (16:13). Luke is talking about a different way of using wealth. Our wealth belongs to God and is to be used for the purposes of God’s reign among the greater good and not simply for our own interests.

So, we may ask why is the manager shrewd? He is shrewd because even though he is selfishly looking out for his own interests (6:32-34), he models behavior the disciples can emulate. Instead of simply being a victim of circumstance, he transforms a bad situation into one that benefits himself and others. By reducing other people’s debts, he creates a new set of relationships not based on the vertical relationship between lenders and debtors (rooted in monetary exchange) but on something more like the reciprocal and egalitarian relationships amongst friends.

This breakthrough exampled by Jesus is the Good News of God. And in this story, Jesus shows us that the Good News of God’s loving power transforms us from the inside out. As we see that a dishonest manager sets into play what happens when the reign of God emerges among us (17:21). And through this disruptive power of God, we can also believe that peace with justice is also possible among the nations. A time when we will see old hierarchies overturned and new friendships established. Indeed, outsiders and those lower down on hierarchies can now become the very ones we depend upon to welcome us, not only in their homes in this life but even in the “eternal homes” (6:20-26) that await us. Now, that would be a breakthrough. Let it be so. **Amen.**