

A Just Peace Begins in the Heart Sermon

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Psalm 51:10 Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.

Psalm 139:23-24. ²³ Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. ²⁴ See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting.

Ezekiel 36:26-27. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you, and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.

Romans 12:1-2, 4 – 5, 9 – 18 (In the sermon). Marks of the True Christian by Paul

Matthew 22: 38 – 49 (In the Sermon)

There's a communal Just Peace Identity associated with the United Church of Christ that came out of a Synod resolution in 1985 that called for our denomination to become a Just Peace denomination. Conferences, Associations and individual congregations have taken on that mandate through the years. 220 or so churches have actually gone through the process of declaring themselves Just Peace churches and created their own covenants.

Each Just Peace UCC church in the country is different. They (and you) have leaned into the outreach focus that suits their historic and emerging identity. That's as it should be. In my work with the UCC Just Peace Steering Committee, I never suggested that churches do it "all" or take on things that don't fit with the character of their congregation. You can see the churches' individuality in their Just Peace and Mission Statements and by the way they act. Discerning what you can do best with the people and resources you have is very important. And that ends up being the most fulfilling approach.

Still, when I visit churches, I am often – or always asked – what more the Just Peace Churches can do? And of course, I can always offer lists of things to do from getting involved with houselessness issues to creating signs on your church property that show you're a welcoming congregation. To do what you do best is commendable – but accepting new challenges shows that you're open to the Holy Spirit. This can be transformative.

It's easy to start asking questions of your church like:

*What **are** we doing to promote a Just Peace?
Can my church do more?*

Or why isn't my church doing more to create a just Peace?

Our world is in such a state of unrest – from the natural environment crisis to human conflicts and the upcoming elections. *How can we have an impact on the state of things? Where is the hope?* It's easy to have a sense of never being satisfied with what's currently being accomplished. And that evolves into thinking why bother trying?

I would like to suggest that your church will do more if you do more to create a Just Peace in your personal life. It's a trickle "up" philosophy. The church can never be separate from the individuals that come together to create a church community. So what each person brings to the church is important. St. Paul, in his discourse to the Romans on what are the marks of a true Christian – suggests that what makes a true Christian individually is what transforms into a true Christian Congregation. So, I invite you to do a little soul searching into your personal life. Consider which of these St. Paul suggestions from the 12th chapter of Romans you're **practicing** well.

Let love be genuine

Hate what is evil

Hold fast to what is good

Love one another with mutual affection

Outdo one another in showing honor

Do not lag in zeal

Be ardent in spirit

Serve God

Rejoice in hope be patient in affliction

Persevere in prayer

Contribute to the needs of the Saints

Pursue hospitality to strangers

Bless those who persecute you - Bless and do not curse them.

Rejoice with those who rejoice

Weep with those who weep

Live in harmony with one another

Do not be arrogant, but associate with the lowly

Do not claim to be wiser than you are.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.

If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

How are you doing with all those spiritual disciplines in your own homes and in your own personal life? It's hard – right? There are several that really challenge me. (Like lagging in zeal – yikes!) I know that if I did just a little bit better with some of those, I'd have a deeper sense that I was living into a life centered around love, justice and peace. AND – I believe that if I carried my intentionally reimagined self into a community or church setting – then by my presence - that setting would be empowered to live into an active ministry of a Just Peace congregation.

The truth is a “Just Peace” begins in your hearts – your individual hearts. If you do not embrace a lifestyle that promotes and lives into a just peace vision in your private lives, you won't be able to truly empower your church on its Just Peace path. You won't be as engaged if the devotion doesn't start in your own heart. You have to be intentional about jump starting what it means to be a person of faith .

So, how do you start? What can you do to live a life and design your personal home around the ideal of a Just Peace?

- First of all, go home and take a good hard look at these areas St. Paul named as necessary for us to live true Christian lives. Sincerely make an effort to tackle a couple of those that are challenging.

In addition to that, the World Council of Churches Just Peace document – entitled *Just Peace as a Spiritual Practice* – suggests:

- Addressing restorative justice in your life through creating a space for forgiveness and ultimately reconciliation. Who do you need reconciliation with – and is it even possible?
- Rather than reacting in anger, being defensive or shutting down completely, try listening in order to enhance understanding. Practice forgiveness, reconciliation and active/affirming nonviolence which are basic marks of the way of Just Peace.
- In order to have that mind of Christ, peacebuilding requires entering regularly and deeply into a daily relationship with God, along the ways that Christ has set out for us. Our personal spiritual practices are important and of great value.
- Allow yourself to be led by the Holy Spirit in the healing and sanctifying of the world. Whoa – that sounds high and mighty. Sanctifying just means considering something holy and raising something to the ultimate

priority. Being safe-guarders of humanity, all life and the planet should be our ultimate priority in these challenging times. We really have no choice but to take actions – big and small on behalf of our planet.

So, if all you get out of this message is to rededicate yourself to recycling, to shop at a farmer's market, check on your neighbors (even the ones you don't agree with or especially like), be a bit kinder and more compassionate, share your resources (time, talent and funds), and contemplate what is fair and just and how you can act toward that end. And, of course, pray a wee bit more – then you'll be on the right track toward a more peaceful and just existence. Don't make it too hard to transform pieces of your life, but begin to take steps to change.

Jesus simplified his ministry and spiritual discipline in these words found in Matthew 22:38-49. Remember, St. Paul was writing to an established early Christian community. Jesus was asked by an individual Pharisee trying to understand Jesus' transformative ministry in the context of his Hebrew Faith.

This Pharisee asked:

³⁶ “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” ³⁷ Jesus quoted the Hebrew Scriptures to him and said, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ ³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.” Everything falls into place under that.

Are you loving God, Neighbor and Yourself deep within your heart? If you are, that will create a Just Peace in your personal life and carry over into acts of Just Peace in your church. Then individuals can create an amazing community together. A community that will radiate a peace based on justice and love. A just peace that begins in our hearts.

AMEN