

TRANSFORMING CONFLICT

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Guest Minister

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Text: Matthew 18:15-22, NRSV

“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church, and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by God in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy times seven.”

Jesus' prescription for how to manage conflict in the community ought to work! It's wise, requiring anyone suffering a hurt to face the situation openly and directly, not letting it fester, not complaining to a third party, not seeking revenge. He says one should go directly to the person who caused the hurt, talk it out, and hope to reconcile. If it works, you've regained a relationship! If it doesn't work, take a few companions and try again. And if that doesn't lead to a resolution, bring the problem to the whole gathered community. Finally, if none of these tactics work, treat the person causing the problem as a tax collector or Gentile, which many people interpret as advising those stuck in a conflict to wash their hands of the whole relationship. However, Eugene Peterson, author of *The Message*, reminds us that Jesus regularly ate with tax collectors, and he sent the disciples into mission with the Gentiles. So Peterson suggests that what Jesus' is really saying is “You have to start over from scratch,” confronting the other with the need for repentance and offering God's forgiving love. I like Peterson's interpretation better.

But what if the sound psychology of this process doesn't work? What if problems aren't resolved—or if they escalate or grow violent? What if it's impossible to separate from stressful or even dangerous circumstances? The word “Conflict” seems too passive for some situations. What about the violence Palestinians in the West Bank or Gaza have to deal with on a daily basis? And the same for war zones around the world like Ukraine and Iran and Somalia, and other deeply unjust human rights crises—even here at home. What about Operation Metro Surge? Trying to talk our way to reconciliation can seem futile. Or foolish. In situations like these, does Jesus' advice even make sense?

The lectionary ends at verse 20 before giving an answer, but for me, there's wisdom in the 2 next verses, so I read those, too. Peter asks Jesus how many times an injured party is required to forgive—as many as seven times? Peter seems to think seven is generous. But Jesus says, “not seven, but seventy times seven.” Which probably means something closer to infinity. He's no longer talking about managing conflict, but transforming it.

Many of you know that I've been immersed for nearly 20 years in the stories of Palestinian Christians who struggle not only to live but to thrive amidst conflict in the land they have called home for millennia. I began serving as the development director for a US-based nonprofit called Pilgrims of Ibillin in 2007 and soon took my first trip to Israel/Palestine. My organization had been created to support a set of exceptional schools for Palestinian students in the village of Ibillin, a Palestinian village in northern Israel. The Mar Elias Schools were founded by Father Elias Chacour, a Palestinian peacemaker and bridge-builder extraordinaire.

Working alongside him and other Palestinian peacemakers has been the privilege of a lifetime. Through my work with Pilgrims of Ibillin I also had the joy of leading pilgrimage groups to visit Israel/Palestine, meeting many local people I think of as Living Stones—visiting their organizations, hearing their stories, and seeing the resilience that helps them stay connected to the land and to each other. This fall, twelve of us from Plymouth Church will fly to Tel Aviv to begin yet another Living Stones pilgrimage and, I hope, to forge a new connection between this congregation and those peacemakers in Israel and Palestine.

The Arabic word for Father is *Abuna*, a term reflecting both warmth and respect. Abuna Elias Chacour modeled how to face conflict without being crushed by it. I heard him tell his life story many times. He was 8 years old in 1948 when Israeli soldiers arrived in his childhood village of Biram, almost on the Lebanese border, and forced the 1500 Palestinian Christians living there to flee. The people of Biram moved to a nearby town and spent the next five years appealing to win the right to return to their village. Several times the High Court of Justice ruled that the people of Biram and another similar Christian village should have that right, but each time, the military overruled the court. Finally in 1953 the High Court ruled in favor of the people of Biram and the military said they could return. That September the entire village began a joyful walk with their meagre belongings to return to their homes in Biram. But just as they crested the last hill and could see their homes 2 kilometers away, Israeli bombers flew over their heads and bombed their houses, destroying the entire village. One gentleman in his late 80's told me a few years ago as we stood in the remaining ruins of Biram, "We watched the stones of our houses flying in the air."

Abuna Chacour had extraordinary parents. In his biography, *Blood Brothers*, Abuna writes that right after the bombing, "Mother and Father stood shaking, huddled together.... In a numbness of horror, they watched as bulldozers plowed through the ruins, knocking down what had not blown apart or tumbled. At last, Father said—to my brothers or to God, they were never sure—'Forgive them.' Then Father led the people back to Gish."

Before 1948, Abuna's father had earned his living from a fig orchard he had lovingly created and tended—planting the young trees, laboriously carrying water uphill to them until they were strong enough to survive on their own, caring for the trees as if they were family members. After the war a new Israeli settlement was established on part of Biram's land, and Abuna's father learned—to his horror—that the Israeli government had sold his precious fig orchard to a settler as an investment. Adding insult to injury, the settler who bought the orchard then hired Abuna's father and brothers to care for the fig trees they had owned. They did it because they cared so much for the trees. Abuna wished his father would rage about this injustice, but when Michael Chacour finally spoke, he said, "Children, if someone hurts you, you can curse him. But this would be useless. Instead, you have to ask the Lord to bless the man who makes himself your enemy. And do you know what will happen? The Lord will bless you with inner peace—and perhaps your enemy will turn from his wickedness. If not, the Lord will deal with him."

These stories are from more than 70 years ago, but the violations have never ceased and in fact have steadily escalated. Certainly there have been Jewish friends of Palestine, from within Israel and from around the world, who have struggled alongside Palestinians to resist Israeli government policies and actions that have stolen land and homes and property, displaced hundreds of thousands of Palestinians,

and engaged in the Judaization of historic Palestine. Conversely, a small number of Palestinians have certainly retaliated, meeting violence with violence and hatred with hate. October 7th, 2023—when Hamas attacked Israel from Gaza—was certainly the most horrific retaliation of all.

But violence of one side against the other has disproportionately harmed Palestinians. Much of the world labels the Israeli slaughter of Gazans that started immediately after October 7th as genocide, and it continues even to this day, enabled by our US tax dollars and US government policies. Almost 74,000 Gazans have been identified as killed in Gaza in the last 3 years, but most likely thousands more are buried under collapsed buildings. When I have been volunteering on the Tent of Nations farm outside Bethlehem, even after last October's supposed ceasefire that "ended" Israel's war on Gaza, there hasn't been a day on the farm when Israeli jets were not also flying to or from Gaza over our heads, and the booms of explosions sometimes echoed the 40 miles between the bombing sites and our farm fields.

I have only been able to go back to Ibillin twice over the last 6 years, due to the pandemic and then successive wars, but when I've been there not much seems changed except for the teachers' palpable anxiety and a greatly reduced student population. Real changes, but mostly not visible.

I've spent a lot more time in the West Bank over the last 3 years, and the changes I've seen there are truly frightening. New settlements are encroaching on Bethlehem, and razor wire fencing now lines much of the road from Bethlehem out to the farm where I volunteer, 6 miles away. There are 900 new orange iron gates installed on Palestinian roads throughout the West Bank to allow soldiers to stop traffic whenever they want. One of those new checkpoint gates is in a village on the way to the farm, and when it is closed, which happens multiple times each week, my friends who own the Tent of Nations are often stuck waiting in their vehicles for hours.

A new settler outpost has been planted literally next to the Tent of Nations. Settlers installed street lights—outfitted with security cameras and listening devices—right on the farm's lot line, to light us up at night and to watch and listen, while our little community of international volunteers tries to maintain a semblance of normal life.

In Bethlehem, military patrols drive through the city every night, and soldiers often raid random homes, breaking doors, trashing furnishings, terrifying residents, and sometimes taking men or teenagers away for hours or days or months of questioning and too often, torture.

And this year, out-of-control settlers are working in the West Bank at a frantic pace to attack vulnerable Palestinian residents and steal their land and property—an effort that seems aimed to create as many unchangeable facts on the ground as possible before this fall's Israeli elections. The goal seems to be to get Palestinians to self-deport, although 3 million Palestinians remain in the West Bank and 2 million in Gaza, and most will never voluntarily leave.

I told my good friend in Bethlehem, Usama Nicola, that I was going to preach on Jesus' teaching on conflict this week, and I confessed it seems like there are times and places where none of his teaching feels like it works. I said to him, "You are living that reality. I don't know how you keep going. But somehow you do and that helps more of us keep going."

He responded, "Sometimes conflict goes on for so long, with so much injustice and imbalance, that forgiveness can feel almost impossible to talk about. For me, Jesus' teaching does not mean accepting injustice or remaining silent. Maybe forgiveness begins with refusing to let hatred take away our humanity, while still seeking truth, justice, accountability, and change. We keep going because we have each other, because of our faith, and because we still believe another future is possible."

My visits to Israel and Palestine are strangely hope-filled and renewing. As I've watched my friends there struggle with increasing violations and humiliations in their lives, I've also seen their resilience and their

refusal to lose hope. They may get depressed, but they remain kind and generous. They still laugh. They work hard. And they relentlessly practice forgiveness. It isn't easy and it doesn't even mean the circumstances of their lives get better. But forgiveness transforms more than conflict, it changes hearts and minds.

May that be so for us, too—today and always.