

21st Sunday After Pentecost October 22, 2023

Matthew 5:38–42

“But I say to you...”

1. It has been horrifying and distressing to see and hear the news of violence in Israel, Gaza and now also the West Bank.
 - a. We have been shocked by the intentional atrocities Hamas enacted against Israeli civilians, and by the nonchalant way in which the powerful Israeli army shrugs when Palestinian civilians are killed as “collateral damage”
 - b. Acting Stated Clerk Rev. Bronwen Boswell wrote in our denomination’s statement: *The devastation and loss of life in both Israel and the Gaza Strip in the last few days has been horrific. No words can describe the anguish and suffering of the people directly impacted by and caught up in the violence of these attacks. As we watch the recently declared war unfold, our hearts break for all whose loved ones have died, are wounded, missing, displaced, or taken hostage. Horrific actions committed by Hamas and the violent response by Israel have exacerbated deep wounds, inflicting physical and emotional pain and suffering. We acknowledge that the people of Palestine and Hamas are not one in the same, and we stand in solidarity with the people of Palestine and Israel who seek peace. Hamas does not. We condemn the violence that has taken place in recent days, and we grieve the decades of oppression that have led to this violence.* PCUSA statement, <https://www.pcusa.org/news/2023/10/13/acting-stated-clrk-condemns-violence-israel-palest/>
 - c. The Presbyterian Israel Palestine Mission Network (IPMN) wrote: *We are horrified by the death and suffering inflicted by Hamas on Israeli civilians, including the holding of hostages. And we are horrified by Israel’s massive retaliation against Gaza, whose population of over two million human beings has no way to flee and nowhere to hide from a crushing military assault. An immediate ceasefire is essential to stop the bloodshed now. As this latest abhorrent violence continues, IPMN remains steadfast in our commitment to pursue a just peace for all in the region. We share the conviction voiced by many others that peace will only come when underlying causes are addressed, namely dispossession, settler colonialism, occupation, and apartheid that the Israeli government continues to perpetrate on the Palestinian people.* IPMN <https://www.theipmn.org/blog/in-pursuit-of-a-just-peace>
 - d. We have to remember the conflict bursting in flames on our TV screens didn’t start two weeks ago. There has been in the region a fight for dignity, and the right to exist, without erasing the possibility of a common-life and coexistence.

- e. We as a congregation have felt a connection to the people of Israel and Palestine for many years.
 - i. Members of this church and leaders from our local presbytery have visited Israel and Palestine;
 - ii. I was fortunate enough to travel there in 2017 on a trip led by the Rev. Marietta Macy.
 - iii. We entered into dialogue with Jewish, Muslim and Christian leaders in Galilee, Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Hebron.
 - iv. We have offered our financial and prayerful support for Dar Al Kalima University in Bethlehem, our support of Palestinian farmers in the West Bank by purchasing olive oil they produced, and our support of campaigns to purchase and plant olive trees in the West Bank.
 - v. Locally we have spoken out and acted against Anti-Semitism, and against Islamophobia.
 - vi. We have publicly collaborated with the local Synagogue and the local mosque.
 - vii. And we as a denomination have for decades advocated a just peace and a two-state solution, with a safe nation for Israel and a safe nation for Palestine.
 - f. Today: Hundreds of civilians, citizens of Israel and other countries, are held hostage by Hamas in a barbaric ploy to use them as bargaining chips. Their families suffer from this trauma and pray for their safe release.
 - g. Today: the humanitarian crisis in Gaza has intensified under unrelenting bombardment from the Israeli military. Thousands have died. Thousands are wounded and displaced. And the Israeli government's siege of Gaza is preventing water and electricity to flow into Gaza, and news on Thursday give hope that now humanitarian aid will be able to enter Gaza. The situation remains dire.
2. And then here comes today's passage from the Sermon on the Mount, not inserted by me on purpose but simply as the Gospel set for this Sunday in our lectionary.
- a. And we look at the news, and we read the words of Jesus, and we ask: and how exactly is one supposed to do that?
 - b. This is one of those instances in which the words which Jesus taught, when put into action, create a world so different as to represent a shock to our present system.
 - c. Our translation today puts it like this:
 - i. Not: "Take an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But instead, "do not fight back. Violence will not be defeated by more of the same."
 - ii. And then "treat your enemies with love and respect."
 - d. It seems impossible! And maybe without God it would be impossible.
 - e. But what Jesus is urging us to do here is not something we're doing on our own or alone.

- f. So, to begin, the passage is bringing up a cultural permission that if someone harms you, you have the right to harm them back.
 - g. But this isn't basketball, where a foul leads to free throws. Jesus is talking about breaking the cycle of violence.
 - h. A commentary helps us with a sense of perspective connecting us to the larger culture of the time of Jesus.
 - i. "In the Mediterranean world, no one fights in public without others intervening to break it up... Should someone be publicly insulted, the bystanders are sure to intervene. The real question raised by [Jesus'] image here is whether an insulted person should seek to defend [their] own honor or let another person defend [them]. Allowing others to come to one's defense enables one to be reconciled later with one who dishonored and not proceed to a demand for satisfaction and feuding." (*Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*. By Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh p. 55)
 - j. And if viewed in that community context, then the other things Jesus says make more sense.
 - i. If someone strikes you on the cheek, or is trying to bankrupt you in court, or an occupying power is trying to take advantage of you, not only go with it, but do MORE than what is asked: show to the community their shamefulness and wait for the community to step in.
 - ii. Yes, the fight might be between two people, but it is the whole community who steps in, especially when it's not a fair fight, especially when one is oppressing another.
 - k. If this sounds completely foreign or unattainable, consider the non-violent direct action of Mahatma Gandhi and of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to oppose systemic injustice.
 - i. Think of those young people sitting at lunch counters in the American South trying to desegregate them, only to be hit, derided, spat upon, and finally jailed.
 - ii. Think of those marchers who were trying to get African American people registered to vote, and instead the police beat them mercilessly, sending them to the hospital or to jail.
 - iii. They were speaking up for themselves and for their community, but their actions were meant to have a global message, a kind of SOS to the whole world to expose the gross injustices they suffered to keep people oppressed.
3. Seeing the incredibly painful cost of the terrible violence taking place in Israel / Palestine, we can grow weary, and we can even feel hopeless, thinking that the world is losing its humanity. But that's precisely where Jesus' words reshape the conversation.

- a. Jesus is calling us to approach the world not as a place of winners and losers, not as a place where the powerful assert their influence and the marginalized just take it.
 - b. Jesus is calling us to have the internal courage to oppose gross injustice.
 - c. But to only say that is basically a death sentence, unless we add the second element.
 - d. Jesus is calling us to be attentive to when someone refuses to answer violence with violence.
 - e. Jesus is calling us to rush to their side, to expose the injustice taking place, to side with those being trampled, even risking being swept up in the pain of injustice ourselves.
 - f. Because then we'll also notice the courageous people in Israel and Palestine who already support a just peace and oppose the occupation and the marginalization of a specific group
 - g. Then we will also notice the courageous people here in the United States who join in solidarity with indigenous people cornered into a Reservation, or unhoused neighbors ignored and maligned, or people of color who yet today are treated unfairly by law enforcement.
4. You've heard it said that it's all hopeless. But I say to you: we can be instruments of hope.

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/seventh-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-matthew-538-48>

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/seventh-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-matthew-538-48-2>

Questions for Reflection

1. Share how you've been impacted by the news stories coming from Israel / Palestine.
2. How do you interpret Jesus' teaching in this portion of the Sermon on the Mount Matthew 5:38–42, in particular "turning the other cheek" and "loving your enemies"?
3. What are ways in which we can be in solidarity with people trying to break the cycle of violence?