

I finished my high school career at an international boarding school, and one of the most beautiful things I've ever witnessed came from a pair of my classmates. Typically, in that two-year program, second years were assigned first year roommates. You needed someone to show you the ropes, teach you where things were, help you find the best times to sneak out. *I* never did that, of course, but theoretically that's what second years were for. In my year, a student from Israel and another from Palestine became fast friends. They were drawn to each other by a sort of wary curiosity and ended up inseparable. And then, when it came time to request roommates for the coming year, they requested each other. And the school gave them their wish. Two kids entered this place with a history of being told they were mortal enemies, and they begged to live side-by-side while they could. Graduation was a heartbreaker. I've never cried harder than I did at graduations there. I got so close to so many people in such a short time, and then they all scattered to the far ends of Creation, possibly never to be seen again. But for the Israeli and Palestinian roommates, it was worse. Because they went home to the same corner of the world. And neither knew what would come of their friendship, but they both knew that required military service waited for one of them.

I've been trying desperately not to preach about this. I suppose I've been hoping beyond hope that things would change enough before I got around to saying something up here that I wouldn't need to say anything up here. But, that's just not the case. As Father Steve would say, I am very full of feelings. I'm angry. And I'm scared. And I'm heartbroken. I'm not confused, but I feel like I have to tell people I am. And I'm about as certain as I can be that I know what Jesus would say, but I'm wary about that confidence, and I'm trying to be extra careful about stepping on theological toes. I don't know if I'm any good at that, but I'm trying. If you're anything like me, you've seen horrendous pictures that you can't remove from your mind. You imagine what you would do if you were in that situation. You thank God you aren't. Your heart breaks and you wish there was something you could do. And your heart breaks again when you realize there's not much you can do. When governments go to battle, it's the regular people who suffer, always. It's not incidental collateral damage. It's whatever the governments involved have deemed an acceptable level of loss of human life. People in power know their citizenry is vulnerable and still, the world goes to war. News about Israel and Palestine is on my mind constantly. Even if you try to escape it, the news won't let you. Social media won't let you. And, my apologies, but this morning's preacher won't let you, either. It's actually because the stream of information, commentary, visuals, and opinions floods our lives that I feel compelled to say something, so please, bear with me.

I am not Jewish, neither by faith nor by family. I am not Muslim, and I am not Arab. I am American, and I am Christian. And that means there's a lot of my own stuff that doesn't apply. What Christian scripture says *we* should do doesn't apply to people that aren't Christian. So right away, my judgments about the situation argued from a Christian framework aren't all that helpful. And, I'm American. I have Opinions. This shouldn't surprise anyone. I have thoughts on how the world should be, but I've never lived in a context anything like the Middle East. I did visit Jerusalem, Palestine, and a whole bunch of the Israeli countryside on pilgrimage ten years ago, but I only experienced a sliver. And what I witnessed was a combination of beautiful and abysmal. But, there are some things I do know, in spite of all those caveats. I know, for example, that The People of God, regardless of which People of God we're talking about, The People of God are always held to a higher standard by their religion. Muslims say God is fundamentally kind and loving. Jews say the greatest commandments are love God and love your neighbor. We say God is love. At that level there's not much difference. Everything else is detail. Or it should be.

This conflict is both new and old at the same time. It goes back a year, 50 years, 75 years, a milenia or three. Just depends on when you start keeping count. It goes all the way back to Abraham and a miraculous promise with a terrible spat of intrafamily jealousy. It goes back to so many offspring that the stars pale in comparison. But the problem isn't just age-old fights. You know this. There's plenty of new developments, plenty of new jealousies and miracles and battles. To make it all worse, the entirety of the planet seems to be an expert. We each know exactly what Israel should do or the Palestinians or whoever pulls strings behind the scenes or not so behind the scenes. And the other side isn't just wrong, they're evil. And if you agree with them, then you must be evil, too. But that's just not so. There's an immense amount of terrible things happening, and it's happening and has happened from just about every direction. I am deeply suspicious of any reporting that puts all the blame or excuses all the actions of one side. If we could, and I know that's a big if, but if we could imagine the same things unfolding between two different peoples, maybe it'd be easier to sort out. It seems we're all suddenly way more invested than we've ever been before. Some of that, I think, has to do with the images we're seeing. War is horrifying, and it's difficult to process even so called "just" war. But, as a dingy bumper sticker I got from a trust-fund hippie in my college days says, "War is not Christ's way."

Like I said before, for people that don't follow Christ, that has no bearing on how they live. But we do, so it does. War is not Christ's way. Y'all know about "Turn the other cheek" and "thou shalt not kill." But expand that further. Injustice in this world doesn't have to end in killing. It often does, but it doesn't have to. Look to the unraveling of Apartheid in South Africa for how it can be done through Christ. Look at the reconciliation projects in Rwanda between people whose family members were killed and the men that killed them. Look to the Christmas Truce of 1914 European trenches. Peace can find a way to break through and wither horrific, cyclical, and systematic violence. You know, the primary mission of the Anglican Cathedral of Jerusalem, the primary mission is not to convert folks. It's to step into the breach and work for reconciliation. It's an extraordinary and dangerous mission, but they're committed regardless of what it costs them. We're immensely fortunate to live here. I was born in a weird part of Arkansas, but I wasn't born into war. I was born in a country that I love and that breaks my heart, but I wasn't born for war. I was born into division and hatred, but I wasn't born for slaughter. I don't even know if I can say "Thank God for that." Saying that says something I can't sign up for about folks that were born elsewhere. But I can express my relief and my sadness and my disgust, and God will listen.

I've heard "render unto Caesar" my whole life. The Pharisees try to trick Jesus and he turns their trick into a theological opportunity. What's God's is God's and what's Caesar's is Caesar's. I've always kinda taken that to mean you should pay your taxes and do earthly things that don't amount to much 'cause in the scheme of things God's got bigger fish to fry. I'm not saying that's wrong, but I do wonder. Sure, taxes, we all need to pay our own share. It's the cost of living in a society. But what else do we render unto Caesar? Loyalty? We're sometimes too good at that. Patriotism? Sometimes patriotism means blindly following the will of the state, and that's no good. But sometimes patriotism means calling out Caesar's faults so the state can become the best version of itself, "a more perfect union" as the founders said. At the same time, I also deeply value the separation of church and state. I don't want Christian Rule. Far too often, Christian Rule means a particular kind of Christian, and history has shown the horrific things a political machine masquerading as Christianity puts into and onto this world. No, I want a nation that makes space for my religion as well as anyone else's because that arrangement assures everyone has a place. But, the hard truth is that, while we profess the separation of church and state, we do a pretty poor job of putting it into practice. Instead, whoever's in charge has a lot of space to keep every other religion separated from the state while promoting the interest of their own. The result is that, while we say there's a separation, our country is run primarily by Christians rendering a whole lot to

Caesar and not enough to God. Maybe there's a way to use that position, delicately, by reminding our Christ-professing siblings what Christ wanted done.

I've taken the liberty of compiling a totally incomplete list of relevant Biblical passages. I suspect these will be lovely to hear and also exceedingly difficult to enact. And also, maybe they're easy to hear in relation to most everything but exceedingly difficult to believe in relation to Israel and Palestine.

Leviticus - "I will grant peace in the land," God says.

Numbers - "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace."

Psalms - There's a bunch in Psalms, so we'll just do a few: "In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety." and "The Lord gives strength to his people; the Lord blesses his people with peace." and "Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it." and "the meek will inherit the land and enjoy peace and prosperity." and "Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other."

Proverbs - "those who promote peace have joy."

Matthew - "Blessed are the peacemakers."

John - "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you."

Romans - "Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ... Let us make every effort to do what leads to peace"

Galatians - "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."

Ephesians - "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love."

Colossians - "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another ... And over all these virtues put on love."

First Thessalonians - "Live in peace with each other."

James - "the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness."

Jesus knew, the writers of scripture knew that what they were saying was crazy. It makes no sense at all given the way our world works. Arguments get settled with fights, governments go to battle, and eventually new borders get drawn and the history books say everyone lived happily ever after. But they don't. Resentment festers, old wounds rankle, and the cycle begins again. But the Ghandis, the TuTus, the Mandelas of this world insist there is a better way than our knee jerk brutality. And that better way is peace, and the promotion of peace is pacifism. And pacifism is the way of Christ. I want to make a distinction clear. There are two words that sound very much alike that are very different. Passivism, that's with esses and a v, passivism means inactivity. The world spins and we let it happen. But pacifism, that's with a c and an f, pacifism comes from the word "pace," it means actively promoting peace. And actively promoting peace was Christ's way. And it's our way. It is work, and it is beauty. The painful movie Hacksaw Ridge explores Christ's peace in the impossible time of war. It's heroic and idiotic and just plain crazy. And that's exactly, exactly what we're called to do. Render unto Caesar, but do not render him your hatred or your desire for revenge or your deep sense of injustice. Render those to God, and then work through Christ to turn that deserved vitriol to the true and active pursuit of peace. Throughout history, there is nothing, absolutely nothing that neutralizes hate more deeply than love.

I have absolutely no clue what little ol' me in little ol' Hamilton can do about Israel and Palestine, Russia and Ukraine, Syria or Afghanistan or any other place rife with the hot terror of war. But I do know how God expects me to respond. And that's with love, with hope, and with peace. As the final line of Morning Prayer puts it, and as we've all heard before, "the glory of God working in us does infinitely more than we can ask or imagine." I don't pretend to know how it works, but I know it does work. And I hope against hope, trust against trust, pray unceasingly that peace will prevail.