

“Any commandment can be summed up in this word, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ For those of you who don’t love Paul, Jesus says the whole thing boils down to “Love God, and love your neighbor.” Our entire theological conception of the universe comes down to God Incarnate saying that loving our neighbors matters. Or, as Archbishop Desmond TuTu put it: “I am human because you are human. My humanity is caught up in yours. And if you are dehumanized, I am dehumanized.” When asked to define the term “neighbor,” Jesus told the Parable of the Good Samaritan, identifying the neighbor as “the one who showed mercy,” and he instructed us to “go and do likewise.” So likewise we’ll go and do, right?

Well, some Christian groups now’ve replaced neighborly mercy with the condemnation of entire swaths of humanity. In the US especially, they represent a large chunk of Christianity, and that chunk’s quick to dehumanize minority groups whose simple existence is enough to bring about their abuse. This is theologically strange. Simple existence is a gift from God, the direct consequence of Creation. Every human being’s rooted in that story. In the beginning, God loved what God created and continues to love in spite of what we as beloved, created things do to other beloved, created things. I never imagined there would be a list of groups in this country I was supposed to hate or look away from when light revealed their plights. That’s not the America I was taught about.

See, I was taught to “love my neighbor,” that “all men are created equal,” and “there but by the grace of God go I.” I was also taught about the religious extremism in our colonial DNA, the racism that counted some as a mere fraction of a human being, the series of betrayals against indigenous people. But the high-minded claims of our founding were still alive, while all that lived reality remained in the past. And so, the present was insulated by fights already won and ended, like Civil Rights, and the nation convinced us that those fights were ancient and unrepeatable history. Who was my neighbor? In theory, everyone; in practice, everyone that looked like me, believed like me, and swept under the rug what I was taught to like me. But y’all, that’s not how the world works. Lived reality doesn’t remain in the past, and conversations about supposedly unrepeatable history’ve got to include the shameful stuff, too. And now, that shameful stuff we gotta talk about includes the sliver of land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.

The National Security Minister of Israel said, “we need to do targeted strikes in Gaza every night, take out 30, 40 - not just those who endanger us... there are people who are worthy of life; they [Gazans] shouldn’t be alive; they aren’t people.” You understand what he’s saying, right? He’s saying people are worthy of life, but Gazans aren’t people, so they should die. It’s astounding that the word ‘targeted’ is used in reference to civilians, but also do you hear the irony in that “unrepeatable” history? The systematic erasure of Jewish people was justified because *they* weren’t people. They were “bedbugs and rats” (that’s Himmler), “objects of disgust” (that’s Goebbels), and “maggots” (that one’s Hitler).

And now their descendants call for lebensraum and use their brutal past to justify brutality against another people, as though their past suffering exempts them from accountability. Or, to quote an impassioned Mandy Patinkin, “How could it be done to you and your ancestors and you turn around and you do it to someone else?” (A sidebar, once again: Critiquing the government of Israel is not antisemitism. Failing to make that distinction is, however, as it presents global Judaism as monolithic and inextricably links an abusive military force to practitioners of that religion.) Now, I’m not endorsing Hamas, but I will say, I understand how they came to be. The government of Israel continues to strike, to massacre, to poke and poke and poke until something gives and when it does and a Palestinian fights back, the weight of Israel with our country’s backing

falls on them from above. Their children are used as target practice, international members of the press're picked off, ambulances get targeted, food deliveries're used as bait.

I understand some support what's happening to the Palestinians. While that's your right, I'd argue -- at the very least -- that it means you need to reread Exodus. You've heard the Passover story. God freed the Hebrews from slavery, passed over their homes, slaughtered the first-born sons of Egypt. You're a good person, so while you appreciate freedom, you scrunch up your nose at all those killed. But also, you understand Egypt was the oppressor. They enslaved the Hebrew people and killed their share first! Maybe your distaste for this brutal story points at God, maybe at those who imprisoned, tortured, enslaved, and committed genocide. Either way, the Hebrew people got their freedom and the Egyptians got what they deserved. But here's the rub: if you side with the Israeli government today, you've sided with Pharaoh; Israel's taken up Pharaoh's mantle imprisoning, torturing, enslaving, and committing genocide now. But if you embrace the liberation of the Hebrew people then, you must embrace the liberation of Palestinian people now. It's not about which people. It's about liberating all people. It takes delicate, stubborn, faithful work to resist the cycle of vengeance that leads the once oppressed to oppress. It's easy to seek revenge. It's hard to set it aside. But one of the consistent refrains of scripture is that, because we once were slaves, we must treat others well for the rest of time.

I want to point y'all to a group of Israeli military veterans called Breaking the Silence. They collect stories detailing the atrocities they committed, so far from more than 1,400 soldiers (breakingthesilence.org.il). People who saw what really happens identify themselves with Pharaoh. They call themselves the bad guys, regret what they did and what's done on their behalf, beg the world and their government to make it stop. And they know better than any of us what's real. They know their history. They know what they did. They know they want to be on the side of the Ancient Hebrews rather than the Ancient Egyptians, but they know they can't claim that place with integrity now. So, who is my neighbor? Ask the Palestinians with bulldozed homes. Ask the invading mobs slaughtering behind the name of "settler." Ask the abused prisoners; the women made widows; the children with distended bellies; the ones planting bombs disguised as soccer balls, water bottles, and teddy bears.

"Love does no wrong to a neighbor," Paul says. We need to take an honest look at what we believe. The odds're good that we're not always consistent; that's just how people are sometimes, but in this case, consistency's gravely important. We can't choose the oppressor today simply because we fought for them when they were oppressed.

If we're following Jesus' model -- no, ya know what, no. It's not just Jesus' model. We can't claim that as just ours. If we claim *God's* model -- again, no, we can't claim this as just belonging to people of faith. If we claim to be *human beings* who recognize all human beings as human beings, we owe every one of the eight billion of us on this planet the justice that demands their humanity be recognized, their safety ensured, their needs met, their illnesses cured, their despair replaced by hope, and their love rewarded with more love. We owe every one of 'em our willingness to see where we've been wrong and improve. We owe every one of 'em the hard work of making good. We owe every one of 'em nothing less than to love one another. 'Cause every one of 'em is human and every one our neighbor.