

I. Advanced Organizer

- A. An “Apeirogon” is the name of a paradoxical shape. In geometry, the word is used to describe a **shape with a countably infinite number of sides**. Which makes it a pretty complex figure.
1. **Apeirogon is also the name of a novel that I read recently by author Colum McCann.** McCann draws inspiration from the idea of this infinite polygon to tell a complex story. While the book is written in novel form, it tells the very true story of an unlikely friendship: two fathers who become allies, friends, and even chosen “brothers” across the dividing lines of a seemingly intractable conflict. Basaam Aramin is Palestinian. Rami Elhannan is Israeli. While in many ways their lives have been very different, though living in close proximity to one another, their friendship was forged in the wake of shared tragedy. Both fathers suffered the grief of losing their young daughters to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. In 1997, Rami’s fourteen year-old daughter Smadar was killed by a Palestinian suicide bomber as she shopped for school books. Ten years later, Basaam’s ten year old daughter Amir was shot and killed in the back of the head by an Israeli soldier as she crossed the street during school recess to buy some candy.
 2. In his novel, McCann relays the tale of how, in the wake of these horrific traumas, these **two friends on opposite sides of the conflict found solace in their relationship**, and shared commitment to working together to end the circumstances that cost both of their daughters lives. The two fathers began to tell their story and to travel internationally, anywhere they were invited to speak out for peace in their region and to call for the end of what they both saw as the unjust occupation of the Palestinian Territories by the Nation of Israel. For years they served as directors of the Parents Circle, an organization that unites over 600 families, both Palestinian and Israeli, who all share the same tragic fate of having lost children to violence between their peoples, and advocates for a just and sustainable peace.
 3. The book is arranged like one might imagine that shape - offering one facet, and then turning to another, and then another, and then another. But as one examines more of the facets, one feels like the bigger shape is coming together. Still, even as the overall shape emerges, **the complexity of the many facets can, at times, feel a bit dizzying.**
- B. Well, I start with this story of an Apeirogon - both the shape and the way the novelist uses it to describe a complex story- because **we are in the midst of a teaching series on finding our way through complicated realities**. On Easter I started this series I’m calling “Navigating the Maze, Finding God in the Midst of Complexity”. Like the Apeirogon - I’m using the maze as another metaphor to describe the challenges of wrestling with complex questions. And the truth is, when it comes to the current conflict in Israel and Palestine, as well as other geo-political conflicts, we have some real mazes to navigate trying to know how, as people of faith, we might most helpfully think, pray and act.
- C. For those of you who’ve been with us, I’ve started this year with a few teachings connected to a theme that’s been on my heart as I’ve prayed about 2024, and felt called to ponder Jesus words found in Matthew, **“blessed are the peacemakers”** as an invitation to us this year. We’ve been considering in different ways what it might look like to engage in this work of peacemaking in our contexts today. Certainly making peace for most of us is likely connected to thinking about our interpersonal relationships. But how does a desire to follow Jesus in the peacemaking way impact our understanding of conflicts much bigger than us? How do we make peace in a world of war? How have other followers of Jesus thought about that before? How might we think about it now?

1. Today we're gonna take some time thinking **big picture about some of the main ways Christians have engaged questions around war and peace throughout the last couple thousand years**. This will be less of a traditional sermon focused on one passage, and more of an overview history and ethics conversation. I'm engaging it with a bit of trepidation, naming clearly at the outset that I am not any kind of expert in this area, but I have been doing my own research and learning on this topic in recent months. So today I want to share some of that with you, hoping not to bore any of us, but to help inform our navigation of the maze by looking at the ways some of our predecessors have traversed it, and consider together what we might learn from their discoveries for good and for bad.
- II. Now some of us might want to start in thinking about the questions of how we navigate war and peace by looking at the Bible. **What does the Bible have to say about how, when or why to engage in war?** While that is a very reasonable question, the reality is, **even answering that question is complicated**.
 - A. Remember the Bible is really best understood as a **library of ancient texts** that in different ways give voice to different folks limited understandings of or experiences with the Divine, and like any other set of texts, the various texts in the Bible reflect the cultures and historical periods they emerge from. All of those time periods dealt with war as a part of their lived reality. Still, different texts seem to take different perspectives at different times on issues connected to armed conflict. In some of the oldest texts in the Hebrew Bible, from a certain point of view, God seems to be portrayed as partnering with the Hebrew people in waging war, whether that's through freeing the Hebrew people from the grasp of Pharaoh's army as they are liberated from slavery, or blessing their conquest of their supposed Promised Land.
 - B. The context for the **stories of Jesus are different** - the Jewish people are no longer a sovereign nation, they are an occupied territory of the Roman Empire. From that context, **Jesus seems to preach a kind of non-violent resistance**, inviting his followers to be peacemakers. But even his instructions, can feel a bit complex. While most of the time he appears to be on the side of non-violence, there are also moments where he makes puzzling remarks like saying he did not come to bring peace but a sword, or telling his followers to sell their cloak and buy a sword if they didn't have one.
 - C. I share all of this just as some background to acknowledge that part of the reason that Christians have not had one consistent ethic on war throughout history, is at least in part because **the Biblical texts can be interpreted in different ways on this**, and they have been by folks throughout history. So let's see how that's played out.
- III. By and large, Christians have navigated the maze of this issue over time through what I'll call **four pathways**, or four different approaches to thinking about war.
 - A. The first that seemed to emerge in the wake of Jesus' death and resurrection was **Pacifism**.
 1. Pacifism, as you may know, means a **total commitment to nonviolence**.
 2. From what we can tell, this was by and large, the approach of the early church for the first 300 years. There is quite a bit of evidence to show that many of the earliest followers of Jesus understood following Jesus to mean commitment to resisting oppression and responding to armed conflict through non-violent resistance, even to the point of death, as they had seen their leader do.
 3. These early Christians took the preaching of Jesus seriously. They were moved by the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount - and tried to live accordingly. These include teachings like these:
 - a) ***"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'***
39 But I say to you, do not resist the evildoer. But whoever strikes you on the

right cheek, turn the other to him as well...⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor’ and ‘hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I say to you, love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be like your Father in heaven, since he causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”

- b) And so in the earliest centuries after Jesus, many Christians living within the Roman Empire **withdrew from military service**, due to this commitment to nonviolence.
4. I think it’s worth noting that during this period of the first three centuries, when Christianity was emerging as a pacifist faith, **it was also a minority religion** - it was not in any way a faith endorsed by the state. (At some points, it was even illegal.) Rome had its own religious commitments that were often used to bolster its political power. The early pacifist Christians could offer **prophetic critiques of the state and its state religion in a unique way, and this included its use of military force**.
5. And of course pacifism within the Christian tradition **isn’t limited to the first three centuries of the faith**. Even while other paths emerged from the fourth century on, it’s important to note that within the Christian ethical tradition, pacifism has remained an important, often prophetic strain. Throughout history a commitment to pacifism has defined a number of Christian thinkers and activists.
 - a) This includes groups like the **Franciscans** within Catholicism, various Eastern Orthodox groups, as well as whole movements of churches in Protestantism like **Mennonites, Quakers**, and more.
 - b) A Jesus-inspired commitment to pacifism has also expressed itself through more modern justice movements, like the Catholic worker movement led by **Dorothy Day**, as well as the work of **Dr. King** and the Civil Rights movement’s commitment to nonviolence.
 - c) All of these Christians have affirmed that **Jesus was committed to building an alternative way of being together - a different kind of Kingdom**, not marked by violent power over another, but by inclusive love and commitment to justice and mutual flourishing - the Beloved Community. They saw in Jesus a consistent ethic from the Sermon on the Mount to his death on the cross and felt called to embody that same ethic in a non-violent way. It’s a compelling path.
6. Still there have been those throughout history who, even while agreeing with the aims and ideals of pacifism have **wondered about its limitations**, particularly when it comes to the level not of the individual, but **of the state**. Can a nation-state reasonably be completely pacifist, or to do so, **is it abandoning its responsibility to protect its citizens?**
- B. This concern with the potential limitations of pacifism alone led to the second pathway in Christian war thinking - the pathway of the **Just-War Theory**.
 1. In the early fourth century the Roman Emperor **Constantine converted to Christianity** and issued an edict making Christianity legal throughout Rome. Eventually, it would become the established religion of the empire. With this change brought a challenge to Christian thinkers.
 2. Biblical texts centering the power of the state came more into the conversation, like these words of Paul:
 - a) **“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except by God’s appointment, and the authorities that exist have been instituted by God.”** - Romans 13:1

3. Augustine was one of the first Church thinkers to wrestle with the **implications of how the Christian faith might shape the work of governing authorities** when it came to warfare. Augustine believed in pacifism as an individual - when it came to personal self-defense of life or property, he thought there was never a justification for killing another person. But **when it came to the state, Augustine saw it differently**. He and other Catholic theologians after him like Thomas Aquinas started to lay out parameters for how a government might appropriately use military force. The theory that began at that time has gone on to shape international philosophy and law in the West in many ways ever since.
4. It's important to name that for the early Christian thinkers who began to articulate the Just-War theory, **the intention was never to justify war**. For all of them, **peace was the ideal. Pacifism and non-violent solutions were the preference**. But these thinkers also believed that at times, unfortunately war would be necessary. So they were attempting not to justify warfare but to **bring warfare under the authority of justice**. Their hope was to say essentially, "if at times, we regrettably have to fight, let us fight in the most just way possible".
5. So how did they do this?
 - a) These thinkers worked to develop a framework of circumstances under which the use of military force could theoretically be considered morally justifiable. The major components generally were something like this -
 - (1) The first set of criteria was in evaluating Justice in Going to War (*jus ad bellum* in the Latin that was used at that time). These include:
 - (a) **Just cause** - a good reason, generally self defense.
 - (b) **Legitimate authority** - only the state could declare war, not just anyone
 - (c) **Just intention** - examining the motives of the military action. The purpose of war should be justice not self-interest
 - (d) **Last resort** - all other options to resolve the conflict should be exhausted.
 - (e) **Probability of success**
 - (2) Just War theory also called for attending to Justice in War (*jus in bello*) - how you behaved during the armed conflict. These principles include:
 - (a) **Proportionality** - you can only respond with a proportional level of violence
 - (b) **Non-combatant immunity** - only military targets are considered legitimate - civilians should be safe or immune from fighting
 - (3) I'm guessing hearing these principles, at least some of them likely seem familiar to you. This philosophy has had a lot of impact over the last sixteen hundred years or so.
6. But it also must be acknowledged that **the world has continued to struggle with armed combat**, even with the development of Just War theory. While the framework might have some theoretical strengths, there are also real limitations that have brought a lot of harm.
 - a) Perhaps the biggest limitation is the capacity to evaluate actually what a just cause is, or a just intention. **Just from whose perspective, exactly?** While I believe that Jesus called all of us to attend to our own motives, to look to the logs in our own eyes and seek self-awareness, historically our monarchs and other leaders with extreme political power have not been good models of that kind of righteous discernment and self-control. Inevitably, **rather than bringing the need for war under justice, just law has been used again and again as a way to justify the use of violent conflict**. At times it seems that leaders of a country decide they need to go to war for perhaps morally

ambiguous reasons, but then use the just war criteria to try to argue that their fight is necessary and “just”. I think of the response by the United States after 9/11 as Just War arguments were made to advocate for war in Iraq, and we are right to be concerned about similar actions in today’s conflicts as well.

- C. But perhaps the **most disturbing and problematic expression of Just War thinking came during the Middle Ages**, as Just War evolved into the **third pathway** Christians have historically embodied in connection to war, a model that would eventually be roundly rejected, but only after causing irreparable harm. This was the development of the **Holy War**.
1. The Crusades and other violent acts like the Inquisition are some of the bleakest part of our history, as Christians came to believe that not only did God at times permit acts of violence, but that **violence could actually be in service to God; in other words war as worship**.
 - a) **In 1095 Pope Urban II proclaimed the first crusade** as he encouraged those in Western Europe to conquer the Holy Lands and take them back from Muslim rule. Christians at the time believed they had legitimate authority and legitimate cause, that God himself was behind their efforts, and that their fighting could be understood as an act of devotion.
 - b) This terrible tradition drew support from **parts of the Hebrew Bible like Joshua**, which Christians interpreted as God battling through God’s people on behalf of righteousness - a kind of physical warfare that was an extension and an earthly embodiment of what they also believed was happening in the heavenly realms, as a spiritual battle was waged.
 - c) Thankfully after the roughly two centuries of the Crusades ended, Christians have generally recognized **how faulty this thinking was** and this pathway has been rejected by ethicists as any kind of appropriate defense of conflict. International Just-War law has developed to name explicitly that **religious conflict is not permitted** as a just cause for war.
 - d) Still, we might notice remaining echoes of the **Holy War Mentality throughout history**, whether it be in the project of Christian missionary colonialism, or in more contemporary forms like Right Wing Nationalists in the US and abroad describing their aims with increasingly violent words and actions. I think about what we saw on **January 6th at the Capitol**, as numerous rioters engaged in the violent mob activity emblazoned with crosses or praying to God for support in their efforts. Many conservative Christians today frame their support for Trump with a similar ideology as those crusaders did centuries ago, confident that their political aims are blessed by God, and even that God would bless them to use violence to secure them, if needed.
- D. **So where does all this bring us, as we seek to navigate the maze of making peace in a world of conflict?** We have one pathway, Holy War, that I think is fair to roundly reject, even as we keep our eyes open for where in our time it may manifest, so that we might clearly resist it. We have two other historic paths - pacifism and just war - that Christians of conscience have held for many centuries, and whose ideas have impacted thinkers of other faiths and secular ethics, as well. **Each of these has some potential strengths in their ideals, but also challenges or limitations in some of their applications.** They also may struggle to be adaptable to a world in which warfare has become more complicated through the development of more dangerous technology, including nuclear weapons, and the emergence of combat with non-state groups. And so **in recent decades, since at least the 1980s, another ethic has been emerging** that seeks to draw upon some of the best of

pacifist and just war thinking, and develop it further - helping us to move to a more expansive, enduring vision of shared human flourishing. This goes by a few different names - "**Just Peacemaking**", "Peacebuilding", or simply "Just Peace".

1. This model has been developed by a diverse set of Christian thinkers, one of the most notable being the late Glen Stassen. It seeks to recenter the original aim of pacifism, asserting that the use of violence always creates a moral dilemma. While Just peace acknowledges that at times for security, force might be necessary, it is always morally problematic. Just peacemaking calls not just pacifist-leaning individuals, but communities, nations, and international groups to work collaboratively to **minimize the circumstances from which war arises**. It shifts the focus from debating whether particular wars are justifiable to **preventing them in the first place**.
2. You see, with the Just Peacemaking ethic, the focus is broader than any particular conflict; it invites us to focus on **the forces that contribute to war**. Often violent conflict is rooted in a cycle of violence that repeats, or a deep underlying injustice in how a social systems is set up, or both.
3. Just Peace invites thinkers to **move beyond attending to the just-war categories of how war is engaged as it starts and while it's happening**. It also considers **Justice after war** (*jus post bellum*), recognizing that our actions after a conflict matter as much if not more than the actions during it. **What steps can we take to repair the harm and to tell the truth about what has happened?** How do we move toward cooperative reconciliation? Without this transformative work, **peace can never be sustainable as the cycle of violence repeats and repeats**. As I've been thinking about this issue this week, the Scripture passage this week that comes to mind for me are the prophetic words Jesus spoke in Matthew as he was being arrested:
 - a) ***Then the men stepped forward, seized Jesus and arrested him. 51 With that, one of Jesus' companions reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear. 52 "Put your sword back in its place," Jesus said to him, "for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. 53 Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? 54 But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?"*** (Matthew 26: 50b-54, NET)
 - b) All who draw the sword, will die by the sword. Violence begets violence. Violently punishing aggressors doesn't make us safer, it only fuels the need for violent revenge. Jesus makes clear that if the Divine wanted to win their battle in a bloody way, God could do that. But **this is not the way of the Divine**. Jesus was coming to break the cycle of violence; to transform communities of conflict to communities of care.
4. In the novel telling their true story it is clear that **it was not shared loss alone that built a brotherhood between Basaam Aramin and Rami Elhannan**. Each of the men had to take **their own journey through anger, through grief, and through the socialization** they were immersed in that told them that the person on the other side of their conflict was somehow less than a full person, somehow less deserving of their empathy and care than the people in their communities. It was only after a journey of discovery, of willingness to listen, to discover the humanity in those they had been taught from infancy to fear and despise, that they were able to share one another's grief and join together in the joint effort of securing justice and peace for all. **That work of personal transformation fuels the advocacy they now engage in**; speaking to members of their own community, lobbying their own political leaders, often under great hostility, and telling

their story internationally. They've both come to believe that there can be no lasting solution for the Palestinian and Israeli conflict until **all the people involved are given basic human rights.**

- a) A few months after the terrible events of October 7th and all that has followed, these two leaders for peace were interviewed by CNN, asked to speak of the work they've been doing a long time and of their perspective on the current conflict. The reporter asked the Israeli Rami about his response to the horrific attacks that Hamas carried out on his people that day.
 - (1) "I was devastated. We had family in the area and it was horrible. But it didn't change my mind a beat....I was expecting it. You cannot put 2 million people in a box and close the cover and expect that nothing will happen. It blew up in our faces and it was expected."
 - (2) The deep conviction that Rami was naming was that **peace could never be possible or sustainable in an unjust situation.** Injustice will always lead to violence. The violence is never justified. It is always tragic and a moral wrong. But it is a wrong we share responsibility for when we participate directly or indirectly in sustaining injustice.
5. So what might it look like for us to engage in the transformative pathway of **Just Peacemaking** in this world of war? Well, Glen Stassen and other Just Peacemaking thinkers have identified ten practices that they believe are an important part of getting there. They state them like this:
 - a) **Supporting nonviolent direct action;**
 - b) **Taking independent initiatives to reduce threats;**
 - c) **Using cooperative conflict resolution;**
 - d) **Acknowledging responsibility for conflict and injustice (and seeking repentance and forgiveness);**
 - e) **Advancing democracy, human rights, and interdependence;**
 - f) **Fostering just and sustainable economic development;**
 - g) **Working with emerging cooperative forces in the international system;**
 - h) **Strengthening the United Nations and other international efforts for cooperation and human rights;**
 - i) **Reducing offensive weapons and the weapons trade;**
 - j) **Encouraging grassroots peacemaking groups and voluntary associations.**
6. For me when I see this list it clarifies for me that participating in the holistic way of peacemaking is a **complex work. It is a maze**, and so it's going to take a lot of different efforts all happening together. This goes beyond my decision to fight or not to fight or beyond my President's decision to decide a war is justified or not. If we are really to create a world where war is not a constant, then we need **a large scale collaborative effort** with many pathways concurrently weaving through the maze towards the establishment of more just systems. Building the beloved community of mutual flourishing **has to be a cooperative effort bringing together masses of people**, uniting with people of all faiths and consciences who long to build a safe, secure, and just world for all. Not all of the practices are for each of us to practice. I may not be the one to negotiate nuclear disarmament, but **there are things I can do.** There are practices on this list for each of us.
7. I don't have time to share all of the resources I've been gathering on amazing work being done by grassroots groups, including nonviolent direct actions that are being planned regularly around the globe, but I'm happy to share what I'm aware of, if you want to talk

later, as I think other folks in this space are. There are ways all of us can engage in the global work of peacemaking here in our communities.

8. So as we end, I want to invite us, before we go into conversation into a time of prayer and reflection around how and where **each of us might be called to engage in our own pathway toward peace**. What can we learn from the pathways that have been forged before us? What do we need to be aware of in our own time? And how might these practices call to us today to do our own part in making peace in a world of war? May the Spirit speak to us about the ways she is moving in our midst and she is empowering us to act, and may the one who has been called the Prince of Peace guide us along the way. Amen.

Questions for Conversation and Reflection

1. How have you observed the four pathways described in relation to war (Pacifism, Just-War, Holy War, and Just Peace)? What path(s) do you resonate with?
2. What parts of the Bible do you find most helpful (if any) for navigating these issues?
3. What Just Peacemaking practices might you feel called to engage with? What might you want to learn more about?