

ABRAHAMIC FAITHS PEACEMAKING INITIATIVE

American Clergy And Religious Activists Who Advocate Peacemaking

Peacemaking from the Heart of Christianity

Jesus of Nazareth was a radically inclusive and resolute peacemaker who called disciples to be instruments of peace and community-making in his name. Making peace through justice, compassion and healing forms the core of Jesus' preaching and ministry, stemming from his conviction that the Reign of God is powerfully active in the present. In and through Jesus' resurrection, God validates Jesus' message that community-making nonviolence is the path for humankind to follow. All those who seek to live in faithful discipleship, listening to Jesus, are called to practice his way of peacemaking love.

Redefining the Neighbor

False and violence-making boundaries are overcome by Jesus' vision of community. Under the corrupt imperial honor code, "neighbor" had been defined only as a peer – someone in one's own clan, village, region, economic class or political faction; there was no imperative to include outsiders or people of lesser status. Jesus speaks of "sheep who don't belong to this fold" (Jn 10:16) – people outside of one's own tribe who nevertheless carry God's full blessing. The parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:30-37) redefines the neighbor as anyone in need, especially the outsider. This is Jesus' vision of God's true community of compassion. In contemporary life, followers of Jesus understand that the living Christ calls people to meet God in the lives of the marginalized – those in need of justice and healing care – whoever they are. Whole nations are ultimately judged by the manner in which they respond collectively to the estranged and the poor:

At the appointed time, the Promised One will come in glory, escorted by all the angels of heaven, and will sit upon the royal throne, with all the

nations assembled below. Then the Promised One will separate them from one another, as a shepherd divides the sheep from the goats. The sheep will be placed on the right hand, the goats on the left. The ruler will say to those on the right, "Come, you blessed of my Abba God! Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world! For I was hungry and you fed me; I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me; naked and you clothed me. I was ill and you comforted me; in prison and you came to visit me." Then these just will ask, "When did we see you hungry and feed you, or see you thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you as a stranger and invite you in, or clothe you in your nakedness? When did we see you ill or in prison and come to visit you?" The ruler will answer them, "The truth is, every time you did this for the least of my sisters and brothers, you did it for me (Mt 25:31-40).

The refusal to see that an enemy is actually a neighbor in God's eyes leads us to base foreign policy on the lie that an American life is more precious than any other. Jesus rejected such discriminatory ways of regarding others, insisting that whoever is in need is one's neighbor and whenever we extend compassion "*to the least of these, you have done it unto me*" (Mt 25:40).

Peace Achieved Through Justice Is the Central Theme of Jesus' Life and Public Witness

The imperial Roman world Jesus entered was rife with systems perpetuating discrimination, violence, torture and injustice. Augustus, Tiberius, Herod and their various clients had achieved an unstable peace by means of fear and domination. "They made a desert and called it peace," in the phraseology of Tacitus, the Roman Empire's primary historian. But counter to the Empire's reign of terror, Jesus invoked a different kind of reign – God's Reign of *Shalom*, or just peace. Jesus taught that this could be achieved in large and small ways in the present, through the pursuit of justice or through relations aligned with God's love. Where the Empire sought peace through military victory, Jesus sought peace through justice. Jesus' strategy revered the sacredness of all life rather than military domination.

In words and actions, the Gospels describe Jesus as the embodiment of God's strategy of peacemaking. At Jesus' birth, the angels herald the news:

Suddenly, there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in high heaven! And peace on earth, to those on whom God's favor rests" (Lk 2:13-14).

As in the beginning, so at the end of the story: in the post-resurrection appearances, Jesus salutes his band of followers with the greeting of peace:

In the evening of that same day, the first day of the week, the doors were locked in the room where the disciples were... Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Having said this, the savior showed them the marks of crucifixion. The disciples were filled with joy when they saw Jesus, who said to them again, "Peace be with you" (Jn 20:19abc, 20, 21ab; see also Lk 24:36).

The Gospel of Luke powerfully underscores the fact that Jesus enters into the Empire's reign of violence and oppression *in order to put an end* to this reign (Lk 20:42). At the very start of ministry, Jesus visits his home synagogue in Nazareth, takes the scroll, and reads the jubilee passage from Isaiah 61: "...the Most High has sent me to bring Good News to those who are poor...to proclaim the year of our God's favor" (Lk 4:18-19). Then Jesus tells the amazed onlookers, "Today, in your hearing, this scripture passage is fulfilled" (Lk 4:21b). Later, toward the end of three years of ministry, Jesus causes a scandal in the Jerusalem temple by driving those who exploit the poor away from the temple courtyard (Lk 19:45-46). Jesus quotes the Prophet Jeremiah: "Scripture says, 'My Temple will be a house of prayer' – but you have made it a den of thieves!" (Jer.7:11).

At the heart of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7), a collection of sayings relating the central expression of Jesus' vision, lies this remarkable teaching: "Blessed are those who work for peace: they will be called children of God" (Mt 5:9). Jesus then takes up the deep roots of

violence – self-promotion, greed and the impulse to judge others without looking inward – and rejects these as unworthy representations of God on earth. Jesus teaches that one aligns oneself with God, not by loving those who can or will return love, but by loving and praying for actual enemies, even when one has been abused by them.

“If you love those who love you, what merit is there in that? Don’t tax collectors do as much? And if you greet only your sisters and brothers, what is so praiseworthy about that? Don’t the Gentiles do as much? Therefore be perfect, as Abba God in heaven is perfect” (Mt 5:46-48; see also Lk 6:36).

Jesus’ Death and Resurrection as a Testament and Vindication of Nonviolence

The customary understanding of Jesus’ crucifixion adheres to a doctrine of substitutionary atonement: the belief that God’s wrath in reaction to human sin must be placated by God’s sacrifice of Jesus on the cross as a substitute for sacrificing sinful humans. This lens has led many American Christians to validate, and even valorize, the notion of redemptive violence – a violence that purifies. In this view, redemption through torture and death becomes the central message of the crucifixion. Theologically, this belief means that Jesus’ resurrection is unnecessary; the cross becomes all that is needed for redemption. Historically, this view has led to untold horrors committed in the name of Christianity – frequently blessed by the institutional Church in cooperation with lay Christian political leaders – through long, bloody centuries. Christian violence against Jews and Muslims stands out as the most egregious example of the belief that brute force and torture can produce redemptive ends.

The religion of the salvific power of sacrificing others’ lives (scapegoating) is not even rooted in ancient theology, but is instead derived from the 12th century thinking of St. Anselm of Canterbury. This lens for the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus does not reflect Jesus’ own teachings about love

and peace, compassion and justice. In the parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32), for example, Jesus teaches that God's compassion does not include punishment, but offers reconciliation without precondition or payment of penalty.

The crucifixion of Jesus is a story of love overcoming hate, of compassion transforming vengeance. It is not a story about passivity. Jesus' death bears witness to the fact that God's response to violence is active nonviolence. Jesus refused to retaliate, but spoke words of compassion and forgiveness to the very persons who crucified him: "Abba forgive them. They don't know what they are doing" (Lk 23:24).

This also is not a story of sin-cleansing sacrifice. It is not the violence Jesus suffered which redeems and liberates us; rather, we are liberated and saved by Jesus' rootedness in God's love and his refusal to embrace vengeance or hate, even in the face of his own death. It is his compassion toward the abusers that liberates even them and overcomes their violent choices. God provides in Jesus' death our strategy for how to behave towards those who wrong us and others and how to break the cycle of violence by engaging in active, transformative nonviolence. Jesus reveals God's way of nonviolence in the crucifixion, and God validates Jesus' nonviolence and peace in the resurrection. "Go and learn the meaning of these words," Jesus says to disciples then and now, "I desire compassion, not sacrifice" (Mt 9:13).

Jesus demonstrates that God's unconditional love is not passive; rather, it interrupts the spiral of vengeance and is even transformative. Jesus never wavers from the path of peace through justice and reconciliation, and he sends disciples out to do the same.

Jesus anticipated the violence that his message would provoke, and did all he could to prevent it. When armed Roman soldiers arrested Jesus, one of the disciples struck back with a sword. But "Jesus said, 'Put your sword back where it belongs. Those who live by the sword die by the sword'"

(Mt 26:52). Although clubs and swords were used against Jesus and his companions, no weapons were to be used by Jesus' faithful followers in retaliation. Contemporary Christians committed to the present and future reign of God also follow Jesus' non-violent example.

How, then, to understand such teachings as "Don't suppose that I came to bring peace on earth. I came not to bring peace, but a sword" (Mt 10:34)? Placing this teaching in the context of Jesus' entire message, as well as in its immediate context, lends understanding.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus stresses two concepts. The first of these is non-violence:

To you who hear me, I say: love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who mistreat you. When they slap you on one cheek, turn and give them the other; when they take your coat, let them have your shirt as well (Lk 6:27-29).

The second is God's special care for the weak, the powerless and the oppressed among God's children: "You who are poor are blessed, for the reign of God is yours" (Lk 6:20).

Jesus' consistent message of nonviolence and service to the outsider *elicited* violence and resistance. Jesus expected that this revolutionary vision would be met with opposition, such that even families would be split between those accepting and rejecting it. This is the immediate context of Matthew 10:34-36: "I have come to turn a son against his father, a daughter against her mother, in-law against in-law. One's enemies will be the members of one's own household."

The *sword* used against Jesus and early Christians fell upon them because they directly challenged the brutality of the Roman Empire through an unwavering commitment to nonviolence. First-century Roman historians make it clear that Christians were despised primarily because of their absolute insistence on human equality. Local religious authorities tied to the Roman Empire were also threatened by Jesus' call for justice, nonviolence and peace. The powerful in Jesus' time – as well as the powerful throughout history – used slander, intimidation and force in an attempt to invalidate

such teaching. Jesus understood the transformational power of God's peace, yet also anticipated the oppressive reaction of those who refused the values of God's Reign. To infer however, as some do, from a reading of the passages above that Jesus *endorsed* violence amounts to a tragic misinterpretation of Matthew 10:34 and its context.

At the very end, in Jesus' arrest and death, he holds fast to the way of compassion, reconciliation, and peace through love and justice. When Jesus forgives his tormentors, a Roman soldier and executioner is moved to confess, "Clearly, this was God's Own!" (Mk 15:39)

Violence and War in Christian Perspective

For three centuries, Christians were marked as disciples of Jesus by their lives of nonviolent love. Origin said that Christians "do not go forth as soldiers." Tertullian wrote, "Only without the sword can the Christian wage war, for the Lord has abolished the sword." Then there are these stark words of Clement of Alexandria: "He who holds the sword must cast it away and that if one of the faithful becomes a soldier he must be rejected by the church for he has scorned God." But this mandate to be peacemakers was short lived.

By the fourth century, the Christian Church had all but abandoned Jesus' original vision of nonviolence. Emperor Constantine adopted a form of Christianity that introduced the conquering cross as its symbol for the first time in church history. Constantine fashioned this cross from two swords, and then made it the authorized symbol for the expression of Christianity as the official religion of the Empire. With the cross in hand, Constantine proclaimed, "In this sign, conquer." The church had allowed its very heart to be colonized by Roman imperial values. Yet this sad history of the betrayal of Jesus' vision of nonviolence in no way invalidates the vision itself.

St. Augustine was a fourth-century Christian. He believed that the only reason to go to war was the desire for peace. He writes, “We do not seek peace in order to be at war, but we go to war that we may have peace. Be peaceful, therefore, in warring, so that you may vanquish those whom you war against, and bring them to the prosperity of peace.” Augustine tried to reconcile Christian nonviolence with the world as it actually was, to bring together the nonviolent teachings of Jesus with the obligations of Roman citizens, including Christians. Augustine’s ethical position on violent conflict became the foundation of the Just War theory.

Thomas Aquinas, in his thirteenth-century *Summa Theologica*, provides the criteria for the Just War theory by taking Augustine’s ethical position and developing various specific conditions that must be met if war is to be waged justly: just cause, proper authority, right intention, probability of success, the last resort, proportionality and the protection of non-combatants.

For 1,700 years, the vision of the nonviolent Jesus who called us to be peacemakers and to love those who abuse us has been abandoned. Nations claiming to fight just wars have gravely violated most of the just war principles. Modern war, with its indiscriminate killing and potential for nuclear lethality, cannot be called just and congruent with the life and spirit of the nonviolent Christ. Modern warfare, which includes the firebombing of Dresden, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the Iraq War – based on lies and distortions, destroying a country and killing 1.2 million Iraqi civilians – this warfare cannot be called just. The only way to describe such a war is as a brutal violation of the central truths of the Christian story.

Liberation from Obsessive Self-Interest and Fear: A Key Test of Faith

Many U.S. citizens order their lives according to an ethic of acquisitive individualism. This unbiblical, unmindful ethic ignores ways in which the global production system and the international

weapons business support over-consumption and domination of others, while perpetuating misery, injustice and violence. Today's worldwide U.S. military dominance, rather than defending from outside enemies, functions to ensure the United States' continuing ability to consume a disproportionate share of world resources. As long as we remain captive to the dominant script of a violence-prone society, "We grope, like the blind along a wall, feeling our way like blind people..." – a place where "justice is shuffled aside, and integrity stands a long way off; truth stumbles in the streets, and honesty is consigned to the alleys" (Isa 59:10, 14).

Jesus does not despise or reject the wealthy, fearful and self-preoccupied. Instead, Jesus invites all to a richer life of compassionate solidarity with the poor, laying down the burden of fear-based self-absorption. This is the point of Jesus' dialogue with the rich young ruler (Mt 19:16-24). It is also the basis for urging a wealthy host to invite the marginal and despised to a banquet, rather than the usual friends and colleagues (Lk 14: 12-14). Time and again, Jesus' heart breaks for those who refuse to practice inclusive generosity.

Jesus tells the story of a wealthy person who is unsympathetic to the plight of a starving, sick Lazarus, lying at the gate. The rich one ends in eternal torment, whereas Lazarus is received into "the arms of Sarah and Abraham" (Lk 16:19-31). The gulf between the two in eternity mirrors the economic gulf that the uncaring wealthy man perpetuated in earthly life. This story speaks not only of personal indifference to suffering at our doorsteps, but also to the ordering of institutional and political life – even to the level of national budgets focused on military priorities that neglect those without health care, education and jobs. In this manner, both personal and U.S. national priorities come under moral scrutiny.

Our willingness to be liberated from preoccupation with self-preservation becomes a key test of faith. This is the case with both personal and national security. Jesus teaches, "That's why I tell

you not to worry about your livelihood, what you are to eat or drink or use for clothing. Isn't life more than just food? Isn't the body more than just clothes?" (Mt 6:25) Those who fear scarcity are, in their isolation, failing to trust God's generosity available through true community. How many believe that God will provide for humanity as God provides for the birds in the sky or the lilies of the field? (Mt 6:26-30) How many trust Jesus' promise of shared abundance in feeding a vast crowd by blessing a few loaves and fishes? (Mt 14:15-21) How many, like the disciples in that story, are more apt to send the multitudes home, for fear that there will not be enough for all? As the Apostle James teaches:

Where do these conflicts and battles among you first start? Isn't it that they come from the desires that battle within you? You want something and don't get it, so you're prepared to kill to get it. You have ambitions that you can't satisfy, so you fight to get your way by force. (Jas 4:1-2)

U.S. Christians who imagine that God is only concerned about individual salvation view a different concern when looking at biblical texts; these show that God's primary concern is the destructive power to the human family of individuals and nations amassing wealth through force instead of cooperation and diplomacy.

Fearful alienation from God's generosity given in community leads to an ethic of self-inflation and the callous indifference toward and domination of others. There is a similar spiritual and national cancer in a "God Bless America" mentality. Jesus refuses to sanction tribal exceptionalism. The parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:30-37) is instructive in this instance. Of the three persons who pass by the victim, only one aligns with God's way – the foreigner, or Samaritan. In some of the healing stories (e.g., the servant of the Roman centurion in Lk 7:2-10, the daughter of the Canaanite woman in Mk 7:25-30 and Mt 15:21-28), the one with authentic faith and ethical clarity is the outsider. The founding national myth in the United States holds that the U.S. enjoys God's special blessing, that

the U.S. is anointed to teach morality and bring peace to the rest of the world. But that myth is falsified each time this nation uses war, torture and other violent means to oppress others' dignity, self-determination, well-being and safety. No nation has a special claim on grace, let alone a nation that arms itself at a level greater than all other nations combined, while depriving its neediest members of basic health care and education. From the new definition of neighbor, and from renouncing old ways of fear-based self-promotion, flows a new, inclusive ethic in which every child of God is valued, welcomed and embraced, and all are able to share in God's blessing of peace.

Peacemaking and the Persistence of Hope

The main peacemaking challenge today is to awaken to both suffering and hope. This will involve divesting from indifference to the impact that this country's way of life and recourse to violence has had upon the whole world. It will require seeking liberation from misplaced values for all neighbors, as well as ourselves. At the very core of creation are love, compassion and forgiveness. When these qualities are expressed in a fractured and polarized world, the very power of creation is released within and around us.

God's grace is given for the healing transformation of this hurting world, and working for such transformation – no less achieving it – is an immeasurably difficult task. “Enter by the narrow gate. The wide gate puts you on the spacious road to damnation, and many take it” (Mt 7:13). Committing to live out a Christian life of peaceful conflict resolution and reconciliation, material moderation, mindful nonviolence and genuine social equity could not run more deeply counter to prevailing cultural norms in the United States. At the same time, such a life of collective creative resistance to injustice, discrimination, and conflict represents the most profound expression of Jesus' own teaching and example.

Jesus states clearly that neither more nor less than our own fervent commitment to peacemaking portends the Reign of God: there is no other choice but to heed this call and follow. Peacemaking lies at the heart of Jesus' vision: for Christians, peace through justice is not an option, but is the central mandate of Jesus' life and ministry. Desmond Tutu movingly expresses this call: "I am a Christian. I am constrained by my faith to hope against hope, placing my trust in things as yet unseen. Hope persists in the face of evidence to the contrary, undeterred by setbacks and disappointment. ... I insist that the hope in which I persist is not reducible to politics or identified with a people. It has a more encompassing shape. I like to call it 'God's dream.' God has a dream for all his children. It is about a day when all people enjoy fundamental security and live free of fear. It is about a day when all people have a hospitable land in which to establish a future. More than anything else, God's dream is about a day when all people are accorded equal dignity because they are human beings. In God's beautiful dream, no other reason is required. God's dream begins when we begin to know each other differently, as bearers of a common humanity, not as statistics to be counted, problems to be solved, enemies to be vanquished or animals to be caged. God's dream begins the moment one adversary looks another in the eye and sees himself reflected there."¹

¹ "Realizing God's Dream for the Holy Land." *The Boston Globe*. Oct. 26, 2007.