

March 30, 2025
IV Lent Psalm 23; John 9:1-41
Sermon: What Do We See?

Today, we hear a story of a man who was born blind. As they pass by him, the disciples of Jesus ask, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that we was born blind?"

"There is so much wrong with this one verse, writes Michael Piazza, that preachers can preach an entire sermon without moving beyond this one verse. Not the least of the problems is that the instinct of these disciples was not to heal or help the poor man but to engage Jesus in a theological decision; it seemed more important to the disciples to affix blame rather than address the problem of human suffering; affix blame rather than fix a problem."

In today's polarized world, it's so much easier to blame, rather than get involved with alleviating the pain and suffering of the stranger. For the blind man, there was no other way to live. This is true for so many scraping by in our society. Yet, Jesus wasn't concerned with affixing blame, but with fixing/healing people.

In what way are we, followers of this teacher, spiritually blind?

When it comes to alleviating the suffering of others - or healing our planet, or choosing de-escalation, a peaceful path - in what ways are we blind? How are you & I blind to the plight of those who are hurt, even erased because of their disability, nationality, even skin color, or sex? As we walk with Jesus, toward Jerusalem, it is good, in this 4th Sunday of Lent, to ponder the logic of his senseless suffering; and to reflect on the role we - given our own blindness based on our own bias - the role we play in perpetuating the suffering of others. How might our deeply engrained attitudes get in the way of the love to which we are called to enact? What might we learn about ourselves - today, on our Lenten journey to Jerusalem - from our spiritual master, Jesus?

25 years ago, I was blessed to lead members of the church to the Holyland: Israel, Jordan, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, many historical sites; a Kibbutz, a Palestinian refugee camp, etc... One highlight was a visit with a Palestinian Christian, teacher, peacemaker, Elias Chacour.

I thought of him this week, a true visionary, and disciple. I googled his name. He's still alive and teaching; still speaking out against those who blame, rather than heal and fix. His story, told in an autobiography Blood Brothers, is worth re-telling as we, ourselves, try and live as close as possible to the teachings of Jesus, as close to the truth, as we can, and as we struggle to be peacemakers amidst the depressing levels of human suffering all around us these days.

What do we see when we hear the word Palestinian? A terrorist? A shiftless day-laborer? Or one who shares the struggles and joys of a common life, and who strives to be human in a world too often inhumane? The story of Elias Chaour, and his witness for peace, undercuts the dominant view so many Americans have of Palestinians. His family lived in a close-knit Galilean village, surrounded by groves of fig trees, for generations, prior to the end of the war. Elias' parents earned a living as farmers, tending to an orchard and selling its produce. The family lived and worked the land for generations. It was the only life they knew.

However, life in Palestine changed immediately after WWII, and has never been the same. In 1947, Zionist soldiers cleared the region where the Chacour family lived of its inhabitants. Neighbors and friends, living in a nearby village of Gish, were murdered and buried in a shallow grave, which was discovered by Elias when he was a child. Even the judgement of the Israeli Supreme Court to return the land to its rightful owners did little to restrain the efforts of a paramilitary organization, known as the Haganah...an unstoppable force, made more so by the fact that Israel found unconditional support and weapons western allies.

After WWII, the nation of Israel began (United Nations) and thousands of traumatized Jews, seeking security from the horrors of the holocaust, flooded to this newly formed nation. A new chapter to a deeply Biblical story, found resonance with these post-war survivors and settlers from Europe. In the Holyland, during the post-war years, thousands of Palestinian families were displaced by a new and powerful occupiers. (My cousin married a Palestinian Christian. Sandy raised her family in Kuwait. They still have the key to the home from which her husband's parents were evicted. Never was there any compensation paid to the displaced Palestinians.)

The way Chacour remembers it, On Christmas day, 1947, the village of Biram was bulldozed to the ground; adult males were rounded up and the land was confiscated by an occupying army. Elias' father, after his short detainment, was able to return to his land. Ironically, he was hired to work on the land he owned a short time earlier. The family land was occupied by outsiders; strangers. (For the rest of his life, he considered himself fortunate to find work as a day laborer, tending to the trees of an orchard which he had previously owned. The land mass of the young state of Israel, in 1948, grew from single digits to more than 50% of land; land that was previously occupied by Palestinians.)

Still, despite the awful state of affairs, Elias remembered the teaching of his father, Michael Chacour, who spoke with concern for these new Jewish immigrants by telling them the horrific story of the holocaust. And, young Elias and his siblings, were instructed to welcome the Jews as "blood brothers" (the book's title) and to share life in Palestine as equal partners.

Elias Chacour NEVER forgot this teaching; God loves all people. Arab, Jew, Christian, Muslim could live together - are called to live - as one. He prepared for the priesthood in the Melkite Church in Paris and Elias became the first Palestinian graduate of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

Early in the book, he writes of his pastoral appointment to the impoverished village of Ibillin, in the Galilean highlands. When he arrived at this ransacked west bank village, filled with displaced families, Elias was met with indignant anger. The Melkite Christian community of Ibillin was a tangle of distrust and hatred, a church building in shambles, and a spirit of bitter resignation. Try as he might, Elias could make no breakthrough. It came to a head on a Palm Sunday, when the liturgy ended and before the benediction he walked to the door of the church and locked it from the inside. Everyone was locked in the chapel. And, Elias addressed the spiritual degradation of the community, calling on them to repent of their ugly hatreds. He instructed them, that the only path was a Christian one; to embrace the teachings of Jesus; to live in peace, as one family of God. The minutes dragged by, until one of the strongest opponents of Elias' ministry, a prominent village elder, stood to confess the sin of seething hatred for those who occupied their land. One persons confession was then followed by another. Miraculously, a dam broke and virtually everyone in that congregation confessed to feelings of blind hatred toward the Jews. By the time Elias Chacour unlocked the doors of the church, and released the villagers, the members of the Melkite Christian church, in Ibillin, had a change of heart; they resolved to face the reality differently and begin seeking peace through reconciliation. In the book, Elias Chacour writes, Easter came one week early that year. Christ arose from the tomb of blind rage, death and darkness on Palm Sunday.

Soon, the church folk found solace in the teachings of Jesus Christ. Attitudes began to shift. The church was repaired and the mission shifted to one of peace-making, truth-telling and reconciliation. In time, Elias engaged the help of some religious sisters to help with home visits and the teaching of homemaking skills. As news began to spread throughout upper Galilee, other Palestinian communities requested the presence of Chacour and the sisters. Their ministry then and, still today, is one of peace-making, education of people of all faiths and community-centered care. In the year 2000, I learned that Chacour was a close friend of Secretary of State, James Baker. His was a voice which diplomats and leaders listened to. I wonder if it still is.

Chacour has, for decades, been calling for fair treatment of all who live in Israel. And, it could be said that Chacour's mantra is: The absence of peace anywhere is the absence of peace everywhere.

The Holyland will only be that holy, peaceable Kingdom God envisions when Jew and Muslim live together. This, we know, will not be easy.

How do you view “the other” – someone who looks, worships different or behaves different? Do you affix blame? Do you pass by? Or, with interest, curiosity and compassion?

How are we to see the events in the Holyland, or Ukraine, or Sudan, or much closer to home? Are we to toss up our hands and accept that our world doomed by endless repetition of unresolvable conflict? What would Jesus have us do? Can we, with faith, bring understanding, sustain the witness for peace and healing? Isn't that our calling?

Elias Chacour is just one of many, overlooked Christian peace-makers whose witness for peace and human rights clears a space for God's holy spirit and holiness to enter into our troubled world.

He, too, is following the example of our teacher and savior, Jesus Christ. So may it be with us. Amen.