

THE LIFE AND RELIGIOUS MESSAGE OF RACHEL CORRIE

By David Herndon

Memorial Sunday

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I.

Today we observe Memorial Sunday, a time generally set aside for remembering the deaths of soldiers killed in battle. This morning, however, I would invite your attention to the life and religious message of a courageous individual whose life was tragically taken while she was working for peace and justice.

Rachel Corrie was born on April 10, 1979, in Olympia, Washington. She was the youngest child of Cindy and Craig Corrie. Although Rachel had a normal childhood, something of her sense of justice and compassion shines through in these words, which she wrote when she was twelve years old: “In second grade there were classroom rules hanging from the ceiling. The only one I can remember now seems like it would be a good rule for life. ‘Everyone must feel safe.’ Safe to be themselves, physically safe, safe to say what they think, just safe. That’s the best rule I can think of.”¹

In high school, Rachel had an opportunity to travel to Russia. This was a turning point, an awakening. She wrote: “I looked backwards across the Pacific Ocean and from that distance some things back here in Olympia, Washington, USA, seemed a little weird and disconcerting. But I was awake in Russia. I was awake for the first time with bug-eyes and a grin. On the flight home from Anchorage to Seattle everything was dark. Then the sun began to rise, the water was shining, and I realized we were flying over Puget Sound. Soon we could see islands in that water, evergreen trees on those islands.”

After high school, Rachel enrolled in Evergreen State College, in Olympia, her hometown. Whatever spark of awakening she had experienced on her trip to Russia grew even stronger. She wrote: “Maybe it was finally the trees who told me to stay. Or maybe going to school in my hometown was just the path of least resistance. Maybe going to Evergreen State College was just the best way to be different from my Economics-major-high-achiever-khaki-and-high-heels . . . corporate sister and brother. I

¹ Rachel Corrie, My Name Is Rachel Corrie, edited by Alan Rickman and Katherine Vinet (London: Nick Hern Books Limited in association with the Royal Court Theatre, 2005), p. 5.

don't know why I stayed. But one day I knew I had to. I was the same day I decided to be an artist and a writer and I didn't [care] if I was mediocre and I didn't [care] if I starved to death and I didn't [care] if my whole [doggone] high school turned and pointed and laughed in my face. I was finally awake, forever and ever."²

At Evergreen State College, Rachel's newfound awakening led her to advocate for social justice. She wrote: "I'm still pretty shell-shocked by this semester. I spoke to a room of about forty international students. I've helped in the planning of two conferences, facilitated meetings, danced down the street with forty people from the ages of seven to seventy, dressed as doves. I spent a lot of time with the homeless group. I went with them to the city council. I went to the community conversation. I slept out overnight on Mayday."³

Eventually, in accord with her commitment to fairness and compassion, Rachel Corrie decided to work for justice and peace in Israel-Palestine. At the invitation of a friend, she traveled to the Occupied Territories to work with the International Solidarity Movement, a non-violent Palestinian-led organization dedicated to justice and human rights. Before leaving, she had this message for her mother: "I'm going to give [the local newspaper] your [telephone] number. Please think about your language when you talk to them. . . . if you talk about the cycle of violence, or 'an eye for an eye', you could be perpetuating the idea that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a balanced conflict, instead of a largely unarmed people against the fourth most powerful military in the world."⁴ She arrived in Jerusalem on January 25, 2003. Reflecting on her mission, she wrote, with both courage and clarity: "The scariest thing for non-Jewish Americans in talking about Palestinian self-determination is the fear of being or sounding anti-Semitic. The people of Israel are suffering and Jewish people have a long history of oppression. We still have some responsibility for that, but I think it's important to draw a firm distinction between the policies of Israel as a state, and Jewish people. That's kind of a no-brainer, but there is very strong pressure to conflate the two. I try to ask myself, whose interest does it serve to identify Israeli policy with all Jewish people?"⁵ Two days later, she wrote: "I am relatively sheltered here. Walking around with Palestinians I wait while they are stopped to show ID. Blue stars of David are spray-painted on doors in the Arab section of the old city. I have never seen that symbol used in quite that way. I am used to seeing the cross used in a colonialist way. . . . The reality of curfew, of the checkpoints. I'm sort of embarrassed about how long it takes me to realize in my gut that people live like this."⁶ That same night, while she was sleeping, a bullet grazed her tent.

Soon, Rachel and a small group of fellow peace activists were deployed in Rafah, a town at the southern end of Gaza, near the border with Egypt. On February 28, she described her work and her resolve in this way: "Of course, we burn out. Of course, it is overwhelming. Whenever I organize or participate in public protest I get really worried that it will . . . be really small, embarrassing, and the media will laugh at us. Oftentimes it is really small and most of the time the media does laugh at us and of course it doesn't

² Ibid., pp. 7-8.

³ Ibid., p. 11.

⁴ Ibid., p. 12.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 21-22.

⁶ Ibid., p. 22.

get coverage all over the world . . . If the international media and our government are not going to tell us that we are effective, valuable, we have to do that for each other, and one way we can do that is by continuing our work visibly. I look forward to seeing more and more people willing to resist the direction the world is moving in: a direction where our personal experiences are irrelevant, that we are defective, that our communities are not important, that we are powerless, that the future is determined, and that the highest level of humanity is expressed through what we choose to buy at the mall.”⁷

On March 16, 2003, Rachel Corrie was brutally and tragically killed when she was crushed by an Israeli bulldozer. Unarmed, wearing a highly visible bright orange jacket, she was non-violently protesting the demolition of the home of a Palestinian pharmacist and his family. This home was being demolished to make way for the Apartheid Wall being constructed by the Israeli government, a wall declared illegal by the International Court of Justice.

* * *

For the next few moments, I am going to put my sermon on hold while I share with you four readings. Please be forewarned that these readings are not particularly pleasant or easy to hear. The first of these four readings comes from Rachel Corrie herself, words that she wrote just a couple of days before her death.

From My Name Is Rachel Corrie
Email message by Rachel Corrie

Mom.

I have bad nightmares about tanks and bulldozers inside our house, and you and me inside. Sometimes the adrenaline acts as an anesthetic for weeks—and then at night it just hits me again a little bit of the reality of the situation. I am really scared for the people here. Yesterday I watched a father lead his two tiny children holding his hand into the sight of tanks and a sniper tower and bulldozers because he thought his house was going to be exploded.

It was our mistake in translation that made him think this, although I’m sure it is only a matter of time. In fact the Israeli army was in the process of detonating an explosive in the ground nearby. This is the area where Sunday about 150 men were rounded up outside the settlement with gunfire over their heads, while tanks and bulldozers destroyed twenty-five greenhouses—the livelihoods of three hundred people. To think that this man felt it was less of a risk to walk out in view of the tanks with his kids than to stay in his house. I was really scared that they were all going to be shot, and I tried to stand between them and the tank. This happens every day, but this father walking out with his two little kids just looking very sad, happened to get my attention more at this particular moment, probably because I felt like it was our translation problems that made him leave.

I thought a lot about what you said about Palestinian violence not helping the situation. 60,000 people from Rafah worked in Israel two years ago. Now only 600 can

⁷ Ibid., p. 35.

get jobs. Of these 600, many have moved, because the three checkpoints make a 40-minute drive into a 12-hour or impassable journey.

Sources of economic growth are all completely destroyed—the airport (runways demolished, totally closed); the border for trade with Egypt (now with a sniper tower in the middle of the crossing); access to the ocean (completely cut off in the last two years).

There used to be a middle class here—recently. We get reports that in the past, Gazan flower shipments to Europe were delayed for two weeks for security inspections. You can imagine the value of two-week-old cut flowers, so that market dried up. And then the bulldozers come and take out vegetable farms and gardens. What is left for people? Tell me if you can think of anything. I can't.

So when someone says that any act of Palestinian violence justifies Israel's actions not only do I question that logic in light of international law and the right of people to legitimate armed struggle in defence of their land and their families; not only do I question that logic in light of the fourth Geneva Convention which prohibits collective punishment, prohibits the transfer of an occupying country's population into an occupied area, prohibits the expropriation of water resources and the destruction of civilian infrastructure such as farms; not only do I question that logic in light of the notion that fifty-year-old Russian guns and homemade explosives can have any impact on one of the world's largest militaries, backed by the world's only superpower, I also question that logic on the basis of common sense.

[For if] any of us had our lives and welfare completely strangled and lived with children in a shrinking place where we know that soldiers and tanks and bulldozers could come for us at any moment, with no means of economic survival and our houses demolished; if they came and destroyed all the greenhouses that we'd been cultivating for the last however long do you not think, in a similar situation, most people would defend themselves as best they could?

You asked me about non-violent resistance, and I mentioned the first intifada. The vast majority of Palestinians right now, as far as I can tell, are engaging in Gandhian non-violent resistance. Who do you think I'm staying with, in houses that are going to be demolished amid gunfire? Who do you think are staffing the human-rights centers? What do you think this Palestinian-led movement is that I joined that engages in non-violent direct action? Who do you think these families are that I tell you about, who won't take any money from us even though they are very, very poor, and who say to us: "We are not a hotel. We help you because we think maybe you will go and tell people in your country that you lived with Muslims. We think they will know that we are good people. We are quiet people. We just want peace."? Do you think I'm hanging out with Hamas fighters? These people are being shot at every day and they continue to go about their business as best they can in the sights of machine guns and rocket launchers. Isn't that basically the epitome of non-violent resistance?

When that explosive detonated yesterday it broke all the windows in the family's house. I was in the process of being served tea and playing with the two small babies.

I'm having a hard time right now. Just feel sick to my stomach from being doted on very sweetly, by people who are facing doom. I know that from the United States it all sounds like hyperbole. A lot of the time, the kindness of the people here, coupled with the willful destruction of their lives, makes it seem unreal to me. I can't believe that

something like this can happen in the world without a bigger outcry. It hurts me, again, like it has hurt me in the past, to witness how awful we can allow the world to be. . . .

It is my own selfishness and will to optimism that wants to believe that even people with a great deal of privilege don't just idly sit by and watch. What we are paying for here is truly evil. Maybe the general growing class imbalance in the world and consequent devastation of working people's lives is a bigger evil. Being here should make me more aware of what it means to be a farmer in Colombia, for example. Anyway, I'm rambling. Just want to tell my mom that I'm really scared, and questioning my fundamental belief in the goodness of human nature. This has to stop. I think it is a good idea for us all to drop everything and devote our lives to making this stop. I don't think it's an extremist thing to do any more. I still really want to dance around to Pat Benatar and have boyfriends and make comics for my co-workers. But I also want this to stop. Disbelief and horror is what I feel. Disappointment. I am disappointed that this is the base reality of our world and that we, in fact, participate in it. This is not at all what I asked for when I came into the world. This is not at all what the people here asked for when they came into this world. This is not what they are asking for now. This is not the world you and Dad wanted me to come into when you decided to have me. This is not what I meant when I was two and looked at Capitol Lake and said, "This is the wide world and I'm coming to it."

When I come back from Palestine I probably will have nightmares and constantly feel guilty for not being here, but I can channel that into more work. Coming here is one of the better things I've ever done.

I love you and Dad. Sorry for the diatribe.

The second reading is an eyewitness account of Rachel Corrie's last moments.

From My Name Is Rachel Corrie
Statement by Tom Dale

Rachel walked to place herself in between the home and the bulldozer. As the bulldozer turned towards them, it had about 20 metres or 10 seconds clear time directly with her in its view to see where she was. It continued toward her at some pace with a mound of earth building up in front of it. And as the mound of earth reached Rachel she obviously felt that in order to keep her balance, to keep her footing she had to climb on to this mound of earth to prevent being overwhelmed by it. When she did this it put her head and shoulders clearly above the top of the bulldozer blade and therefore clearly in the view of the bulldozer driver, so he knew absolutely that she was there.

She falls down the mound of earth and out of sight of the driver; so he has essentially pushed her forward down the mound of earth. And then she starts to slide and then you see one then both of her feet disappear and he simply continued until she was, or the place where she had been, was directly beneath the cockpit of the bulldozer. They waited a few seconds then withdrew leaving his scoop on the ground. Only later when it was much clear of her body did it raise its scoop.

I ran for an ambulance, she was gasping and her face was covered in blood from a gash cutting her face from lip to cheek. She was showing signs of brain haemorrhaging. She died in the ambulance a few minutes later.

The third reading is a poem reflecting on the state of mind of the Israeli soldier who was driving the bulldozer that crushed Rachel Corrie.

II. his heart
By Edward Mast

What part of him gave the order?
A voice in his ear? A voice in his brain?
Or some lack of voice altogether?
Did he close his eyes?
Did his mouth get dry?
Did his stomach contract or turn over?
When she pulled herself up to the cab, did he turn his head?
Did he look at her face?
Was her voice drowned out by the treads and the blade?
Was her voice drowned out by other voices from days before and
years before?
Did his jaw clench?
Did he find himself not breathing?
Did time slow down or stop?
Or was he relieved when he backed away
and the bullhorn was silent at last?
Was he happy, or surprised, or unhappy the dialogue had ended?
Did he think he had won?
Had he been afraid? Was he now?
Was it hard to figure out what to do next?
Was it hard to think for a minute or two?
When he saw her, what did he see?
A creature infected, or just the infection itself?
A weapon in someone's hands?
Did he shake his head for a poor silly kid
or did he feel safer by just that much?
Did he pray for her? Did he pray for himself?
Did he ask forgiveness from God somewhere?
Was he sad in his heart for a world in which he was forced to do
such things?
Did he pray for peace and hope in his heart that no more bodies
would stand in the way?
Did he retch, did he vomit, did he sob, did he shout?
Or did he add one more notch to a mental rod of justice?
Did he turn to steel? Was he only a tool in the hand of truth?
Did he choose, or was he chosen?
Does he see her face in the future?
Will he touch her whenever he touches his daughter?
His lover, his sister, his mother, his wife?

Did her spirit rise out of her broken body and enter his?
Does her vanquished spirit glitter behind his eyes
and make him hungry to vanquish more?
Is he dancing a hunter's victory dance?
Does she give him rage? Does she give him sorrow?
Does she make him hate the dark?
Does she haunt him, or is she his angel?
Does her scolding loving face urge him to change?
Or does she forgive him without scolding?
Does she feed and care for his loving heart?
Or does he refuse to hear?
Has her blood entered his heart like a balm
to heal the gashes of fear?
Is her body alive in his heart like a bell,
to bring him awake, to bring him awake?
Or is her blood just a layer of crust
on a heart that is crusted shut already?
Is the instrument home retooling right now?
Or back at work, oiled and grinding?
He did not retreat. Did he think she would?
Or did something shut, did something close
and close behind it something that did not
know, or care, or know, or care?
Does that give him strength?
And does there still, behind that shut of steel,
exist at least some small pavilion, some space,
some hidden treasure that can be found,
that can be reached, that can be opened
to spread its jewels in the light?

Finally, the fourth reading is a series of excerpts from three public statements released by Rachel's parents, Cindy and Craig Corrie.

Statement
By Cindy and Craig Corrie

March 20, 2003

Our daughter Rachel, a volunteer with the International Solidarity Movement in the Occupied Territories, died Sunday in the Gaza Strip while courageously trying to prevent the demolition of a Palestinian home. Our loss is immense, but we are buoyed by the outpouring of support and love that we've received from around the world. We understand that Rachel is being remembered in many places in many beautiful ways, and we are grateful. We are comforted and heartened by the compassionate expressions of love that we have received from both Palestinian and Israeli people. We will forever

remember and be thankful for Rachel's ISM [International Solidarity Movement] and Palestinian friends who cared for her and who held her for us as she died. . . .

We are greatly concerned for the non-violent internationals volunteering in the Occupied Territories. We ask that members of Congress call upon the Israeli government to cease harassment of these individuals and, specifically, to cease firing upon them when they are engaged in protecting the Palestinian water supply, protecting Palestinian homes from illegal demolitions, and retrieving bodies of murdered Palestinians for return to their families – all events Rachel witnessed. . . .

We are asking members of Congress to bring the U.S. government's attention back to the Israeli-Palestinian crisis and to recognize that the occupation of the Palestinian territories is an overwhelming and continuous act of collective violence against the Palestinian people. We ask that military aid to Israel be commensurate with its efforts to end its occupation of the Palestinian Territories and to adhere to the rules of international law.

Rachel would not want her death to overshadow that of others. In barely glancing at headlines since word came of Rachel's death, I note that many have died this week in the Occupied Territories – one a four-year-old child. I would like to be able to hold the mother of that child and to have her hold me.

Yesterday, I looked at a publication entitled "Who Will Save the Children?" with photos of children who have died since September 2000 in Israel and in the Occupied Territories. I understand that the next publication will be dedicated to Rachel and will include her photograph.

I want the mothers of these children to know that I have looked at the beaming faces of each of their babies and that I know how much the world has lost with the passing of each one of them. . . .

Rachel's brutal death illustrates dramatically the madness of war.

March 18, 2005

A year ago this week, my daughter Rachel Corrie was killed in Rafah in the Gaza Strip. She was run over by an Israeli bulldozer manned by two soldiers. The Israeli government exonerated the soldiers, closed the case, and refuses to release to the US government the complete report on the military police investigation into Rachel's killing.

Only the "conclusions" of the report have been released. In them, the soldiers are identified by their initials: Sergeant Y.F. and Sergeant E.V. Their initials are nearly all we know of them. I wonder about Y.F. and E.V. I wonder whether they will pause this week and remember.

Rachel was an unarmed peace activist trying to prevent the demolition of the home of a Palestinian pharmacist, his wife, and three children. She believed that nonviolent direct action against the Israeli occupation would make Palestinians, and also Israelis and Americans, more secure. Rachel stood there to protect a home and family in Gaza because the United States and Israel rejected a UN proposal to send international human rights monitors there. International activists went instead. Rachel stood there protesting illegal home demolitions that the United States opposes on the record yet fails to stop -- destruction that we support with billions in annual military aid to Israel for bulldozers, Apache helicopters, F-16s, and more. . . .

Our family continues to call for a US investigation into Rachel's death. As we wait, I still wonder about Y.F. and E.V. I wonder whether they, too, see images of Rachel lying before the bulldozer. I wonder whether they, too, are suffering, or whether March 16, 2003, was for them just another day on the job. I wonder.

October 11, 2005

When our daughter Rachel Corrie was killed by an Israeli bulldozer in the Gaza strip on March 16 2003, an immediate impulse was to get her words out to the world. She had been working in Rafah with a nonviolent resistance organisation, the International Solidarity Movement, trying to stop the demolition of Palestinian homes and wells. Her emails home had had a powerful impact on our family, making us think about the situation in the Middle East in ways we had never done before. Without a direct connection to Israel and Palestine, we had not understood the devastating nature of the Palestinians' situation. Coming from the US, our allegiance and empathy had always been with the people of Israel.

After Rachel died we realised that her words were having a similar effect on others whose lives were being changed, as ours have been - not just by Rachel's death, but by the window her writing provided on the Palestinian experience and by her call to action.

Earlier this year, when a play created entirely from Rachel's emails and journals first opened in London, we saw in a very immediate way the impact that Rachel's words can have on others. Theatre can reach people in a different and deeper place than reading a news article or listening to a speech: there is an emotional aspect that for some people can be more long-lasting and motivating. . . .

The play, My Name Is Rachel Corrie, is not just about how Rachel died, even if that is why she is known and remembered. It also illuminates her humanity, tracing her evolution from typical teenage self-exploration through to her search for a political voice. The play includes some of her writing that might be considered uncomplimentary to us, and even to her. Far better that, though, than being a symbol of one dimension.

It is disconcerting, but also comforting, to watch an actor who looks much like Rachel - Megan Dodds - play our daughter on stage. In the opening scene, when Rachel awakens in her messy bedroom, the resemblance is almost too much. But Megan lives Rachel's words in ways that are sometimes familiar but also sometimes surprising, so that we learn from her what Rachel may have been thinking. At several points in the play, Megan enacts receiving emails from us - real emails that we actually sent to Rachel. We had never before imagined our daughter's reactions to receiving our messages until we saw them on stage. . . .

We recently spent time in the US with members of the family who were behind the wall of the home Rachel stood to protect. For a month we ate, played and travelled with 15-month-old Sama. What future does she have, living in what now amounts to a mass prison in Gaza?

The recent disengagement may provide some relief for Gazans at the most obvious level. But it is hard not to contrast the media coverage afforded to the Israeli settlers' leaving, with that given to the many Palestinian families who have lost their homes to demolition in Gaza. What has been happening in the West Bank under cover of

the disengagement - the building of the wall and the expansion of settlements - is also very worrying.

And when the Israeli prime minister's close aide Dov Weisglass said that the real intent of the Gaza disengagement was to place the peace process in formaldehyde, we have to take him at his word. We must keep insisting on a peace process and work towards a viable Palestinian state that will benefit Palestinians, Israelis and the rest of the world. . . .

II.

Only twice have I ever called a foreign embassy here in the United States. The first time, in 2003, I called the French Embassy to offer a little reassurance that not all Americans wanted to replace the term "French Fries" with "Freedom Fries," and that not all Americans objected to the French opposition to the American invasion of Iraq. The second time, also in 2003, I called the Israeli Embassy to express my disappointment, shock, anger, and horror that the Israeli military had murdered Rachel Corrie, an unarmed civilian engaged in non-violent civil protest.

I have been wanting to say something more public about Rachel Corrie ever since, but, given the sensitivity of the situation, it has taken me some time to find my voice. Rachel Corrie spoke for many people when she wrote: "The scariest thing for non-Jewish Americans in talking about Palestinian self-determination is the fear of being or sounding anti-Semitic." Similarly, the well-regarded theologian and social ethicist Robert McAfee Brown wrote, in 1990: "For the last twenty years I have been trying to see the world through the eyes of victims—particularly of Jews as victims of genocide in World War II, the violence emanating from centers of power in a so-called 'Christian culture,' and also of third world peoples as victims of capitalist imperialism, most of the violence emanating from centers of power in my own country. The Holocaust has focused my vision in relation to the Jewish people, liberation theology in relation to third world peoples. . . . But because of my own starting point, there has been a tilt in [my] relation to Middle East questions that made me reluctant to be publicly critical of the state of Israel. . . . The shortcoming of this approach is that it fails to take with equal moral seriousness the rights of Palestinians, their displacement from land they had held for centuries, and the oppressive conditions under which they have been forced to live ever since."⁸ Rosemary Radford Ruether, another well-regarded theologian and social ethicist, presents a similar outlook with these words: "The Christian churches in America have been particularly silent on [the Israel-Palestine] issue. They have not taken the role of moral leadership that they have taken in other areas of international injustice, such as Central America and South Africa. The reasons for this have been a combination of ignorance and misinformation about the actual situation, guilt for Christianity's evil history of abuse of the Jewish people, and an identification with Israel on grounds of a

⁸ Robert McAfee Brown, "Christians in the West Must Confront the Middle East," in Beyond Occupation: American Jewish, Christian, and Palestinian Voices for Peace, edited by Rosemary Radford Ruether and Marc H. Ellis (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), pp. 138-140.

shared biblical and Western culture.”⁹ Finally, even Arthur Hertzberg, former president of the World Jewish Congress, has written: “The most effective device of [Israeli] hard-liners has been to suggest that any criticism of their position is a self-hating assault on the state when such criticism is uttered by Jews, and that it is a form of anti-Semitism when it is spoken by non-Jews. . . . We show the truest love of Israel and the Jewish people when we remind ourselves that, in strength or in weakness, we survive not by prudence and power, but through justice.”¹⁰

Commitment to justice, in fact, seems to me to be the most straightforward way to the heart of the challenge of Israel-Palestine. And the most helpful exploration of justice in relation to Israel-Palestine that I have encountered is a book entitled Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation by Naim Ateek. Naim Ateek is a Palestinian Christian theologian, and therefore he can contribute a perspective that avoids becoming ensnared in the present-day rancor between the Islamic peoples and the West. Ateek thus focuses on justice in Israel-Palestine with special clarity and emphasis. I would invite you to listen to part of his story to appreciate his personal experience of injustice. He writes: “I am a Palestinian. I had just turned eleven in 1948 when the Zionists occupied my hometown, Beisan. We had no army to protect us. There was no battle, no resistance, no killing; we were simply taken over, occupied, on May 12, 1948. . . . When the soldiers occupied our town in 1948, our simple and unpretentious life was disrupted. Some members of both the Muslim and the Christian communities fled their homes, horrified when news of what the Jewish soldiers had done in Deir Yasin reached them. Deir Yasin was a small town on the outskirts of Jerusalem. When the soldiers occupied it, they massacred 254 persons, including women and children and threw their bodies in a well. I remember the many friends and neighbors who came to store their valuables with us before leaving town. Some even left their house keys, asking us to look after their homes while they were gone. They expected to be away, staying with relatives in less dangerous areas, for a few days or weeks. . . . Our town was occupied on May 12, 1948. . . . We lived under occupation for fourteen days. On May 26, the military governor sent for the leading men of the town; at military headquarters, he informed them quite simply and coldly that Beisan must be evacuated of all of its inhabitants within a few hours. My father pleaded with him, ‘I have nowhere to go with my large family. Let us stay in our home.’ But the blunt answer came, ‘If you do not leave, we will have to kill you.’ . . . As people gathered at the center of town, the soldiers separated us into two groups, Muslim and Christian. The Muslims were sent across the Jordan River to the country of Transjordan (now Jordan). The Christians were taken on buses, driven to the outskirts of Nazareth, and dropped off there, since Nazareth had not yet been occupied by the Zionists. Within a few hours, our family had become refugees, driven out of Beisan forever. . . . Life in Nazareth during the ensuing months was difficult. Palestinians flooded the city—either fleeing or expelled from neighboring towns and villages. Church institutions had to open their doors to thousands of refugees. The rest stayed with relatives or friends or had to manage as best they could in miserable living conditions. . . . On July 19, the Jewish soldiers occupied Nazareth, again with no battle fought. My father hoped that we would be allowed to return to Beisan. But it became evident that

⁹ Ibid., p. 193.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 131.

our exile was permanent. . . . The wounds of that war were not only physical; the psychological agonies were at times greater. Borders were closed, and many families were divided on different sides of the armistice lines. People worried about their loved ones—a father or mother, brother or sister, aunt or uncle. Fear, uncertainty, anxiety, anger, bitterness—all these became part of the life of the humiliated and demoralized Palestinian community. . . . As second-class citizens of the new state, we lived under military law. We could not travel from one place to another without a military permit. . . . It was ten years later, on Israel's Independence Day in 1958, when Israeli Arabs were permitted on that day only to travel freely without a military permit, that my father took us all to Beisan. Some Israeli Jewish families were living in Palestinian homes. Some homes had been pulled down. Our little church was used as a storehouse. . . . The Beisan we knew was left to gradually become a ruin while a new Israeli Jewish town was sprouting on the edge of it. Our homes were still standing and several families were occupying them. I still remember that when we asked permission to go inside, just to take a look, our request was turned down. One occupant said very emphatically, 'This is not your house; it is ours.'"¹¹

A detailed presentation of Naim Ateek's book is beyond the scope of this sermon. For now, I will say only that from Ateek I have learned the importance of understanding the Israel-Palestine conflict as a justice issue. As Ateek writes, "The most basic and crucial issue of the Israel-Palestine conflict is that of justice."¹² Miriam Ward, yet another theologian and social ethicist, identifies this basic injustice in this way: "At the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a basic and simple fact that has been continuously overlooked, denied, or at least submerged in what is surely one of the most successful propaganda efforts in modern times. It can be summed up as follows: The creation of the state of Israel resulted in the dispossession and dispersion of another people, namely, the Palestinians. It is difficult to see how any theological consideration or the ethical imperative arising from such inquiry into the Palestinian-Israeli conflict can sidestep this indisputable fact."¹³ Thus, it now seems to me that the principal question to ask with regard to any proposed solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict is simply this: Is it just? Does it achieve justice?

But Ateek goes beyond justice to seek reconciliation as well, a reconciliation that acknowledges shortcomings on all sides. On the Palestinian side, he writes: "The Palestinians need to become really conscious of and sensitive to the horror of the Holocaust, Nazi Germany's attempt to exterminate the Jews. Granted, the Holocaust was not a Middle Eastern phenomenon, and the Palestinians had nothing to do with it; nevertheless, we need to understand the extent of the trauma for the Jews. . . . We must understand the importance and significance of the Holocaust to the Jews, while insisting that the Jews understand the importance and significance of the tragedy of Palestine for the Palestinians. . . . The Palestinians can, therefore, look the Jews in the eye and say that the only justification that they can accept today for the presence of Israel is the

¹¹ Naim Stifan Ateek, Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1989), pp. 7-12.

¹² Ibid., p. 115.

¹³ Miriam Ward, "The Theological and Ethical Context for Peace" in Beyond Occupation, p. 172.

Holocaust. And with a new, magnanimous attitude they should say to the Jews, we will accept you and share the land with you. You have suffered for so long. Come share our land. This is God's land. We will live in it together as brothers and sisters."¹⁴

And, on the other side, he envisions the Israeli Jews saying this to the Palestinians: "We are sorry that we came to you with arrogance and a feeling of superiority. We came with good and not so good reasons. But we are now here in the land. Forgive us for the wrong and the injustice that we have caused you. We took part of your country. We ignored you. We pretended that you did not exist, or, even worse, that you did not matter. We stereotyped you, convincing others that you are all terrorists. We have refused to recognize that you have any rights, while we insisted that you should recognize and legitimate our right to your land. We have insisted, and convinced the United States and others to insist, that you recognize our claim to your land. . . . We have refused to negotiate with your representatives, rejecting them as terrorists. . . . We have done this and much more. We have wronged you. Now, we recognize that the healthiest solution to any conflict is the use of negotiation and compromise, as opposed to power, repression, and control. We are willing to negotiate with your representatives . . . and we choose to live in peace with you."¹⁵

For Naim Ateek, peace and reconciliation follows justice. He writes: "Peace is reached only through the door of justice. Once that door opens, peace lies inside. Where peace is, a meal is prepared; it is the feast of reconciliation ready to be celebrated. There is, however, no entrance except through the door of justice."¹⁶

I began this sermon speaking about Rachel Corrie and I would like to end it that way as well. I don't know why her story has moved me so deeply, prompting me to speak at such length this morning. Perhaps because Rachel Corrie's death crystallizes so much of what is so wrong in Israel-Palestine. Perhaps because I can picture my own young daughters responding as Rachel Corrie did to their own inward call to work for peace and justice. Perhaps because although she was not a Unitarian Universalist, Rachel Corrie exemplified everything that we as Unitarian Universalists would want to instill in our young people: idealism; courage; compassion; political awareness; informed action; a willingness to think for oneself, even when it means challenging conventional wisdom; and a commitment to justice and human rights that extends universally, not limited by national or sectarian loyalties.

I was disappointed and dismayed when I learned that the play My Name Is Rachel Corrie, which had enjoyed a very successful run in London, had been abruptly cancelled just before it was scheduled to open at a theatre in New York City. For her courage and her sacrifice, Rachel Corrie surely deserves better than that. Moreover, her message deserves to be widely heard, both her message about what is actually happening in Israel-Palestine and her message about the importance of taking personal responsibility for making the world more just and more peaceful.

As she was leaving Olympia to travel to Israel-Palestine, she wrote: "We are all born and someday we'll all die. Most likely to some degree alone. What if our aloneness

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 168-170.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 177.

isn't a tragedy? What if our aloneness is what allows us to speak the truth without being afraid? What if our aloneness is what allows us to adventure—to experience the world as a dynamic presence—as a changeable, interactive thing?”¹⁷ Then she continued: “I can't be Picasso. I can't be Jesus. I can't save the planet single-handedly. I can wash dishes.”

Rachel Corrie did a great deal in addition to washing dishes through her truth-telling and justice-making and peace-making efforts. May we all be inspired by her principled and courageous witness.

¹⁷ My Name Is Rachel Corrie, p. 20.