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Combatants for Peace and the 21st Century Civil Rights Movement

The civil rights movement of the 21st century is the global struggle for justice and peace. It will not be led by a few charismatic leaders who can be easily isolated and killed, but it will be led by ordinary people working at the grass roots. It will be people working on a variety of issues from resisting home foreclosures to young people leading the effort against the taking of children to fight as child soldiers. Like the civil rights movement of the late 20th century, it ought to be rooted in faith communities. Faith can take us to a place of peace in a way that law cannot. The state functions through a governance of law. Faith functions through a governance of love, and it is in a radical love that insists upon justice where we can forge true and lasting peace.

On Saturday March 21, my church—Union Baptist Church in Montclair, NJ—hosted the Courage of Conscience Speaking Tour. This tour brought two members of Combatants for Peace (C4P) to the United States—February 28-March 28. C4P is an organization of some 600 former Israeli soldiers and Palestinian fighters who work together for peace. The Peace Abbey, September 11 Families for Peaceful Tomorrows and The Rebuilding Alliance sponsored the tour. C4P was given the Courage of Conscience Award by the Peace Abbey this year.

Former Israeli soldier Yaniv Reshef lives near Gaza within range of rocket fire. He served in the sabotage unit of the Israeli army. Bassam Aramin went to jail when he was 17-years-old for planning an attack against Israeli soldiers. He spent seven years in prison, and when he came out, he was determined to work for peace. Donna Baranski-Walker of the Rebuilding Alliance also told her story.

When they came to Union Baptist, they spoke to an integrated group of people from the Montclair and surrounding communities. When Mr. Reshef and Mr. Aramin spoke to us, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict became something other than headlines in the newspaper, or yet another senseless, hopeless bad news story on television. The tragic biblical history of a holy land soaked in blood receded into the background and out of sight. The movie images of the brave and resourceful Israeli fighters fighting and winning against impossible odds and angry maniacal Arab terrorists faded into nothingness. We were face to face with two soft spoken men who had seen blood and death, and who from the deep well of their own pain decided to draw out the life-giving waters of peacemaking.

Mr. Aramin spoke of seeing a movie about the Holocaust when he was in prison. He remembered his tears, weeping for the pain that his enemy had suffered. For the first time, he saw their humanity. When he was released he decided to work for peace and to work against the common enemy of both Israel and Palestine—the occupation. In January of 2007, this married father of six children lost his 10-year-old daughter Abir. She was shot by an Israeli soldier while walking home from school with her friends. The moment he told us his story, his grief became our grief. Mr. Reshef made certain that we knew that the bullet that killed the daughter of his Palestinian brother was an American bullet, shot from an American made weapon by an Israeli soldier riding in an American jeep. His intent was not to say we were responsible. He wanted us to know the facts.

Mr. Aramin explained that pain can be a source of both violence and nonviolence. He chose nonviolence. Living, breathing grace stood before us.

Mr. Reshef spoke of Israel as a military society that is strong on the outside but weak on the inside. He reminded us that governments use the fear of common people to make them do terrible things. He called Gaza a big jail, and used the geography of the church to explain life for Palestinians in the West Bank. When C4P meets, Israelis go to the Palestinian areas because they can drive down the road as if walking unimpeded down the aisle of the church. In contrast, Palestinians have to stop at a checkpoint at every pew. The same trip for them would be long and difficult.

Mr. Reshef also spoke about the prison system in the United States. He told us he had recently read an article that described the number of people who are incarcerated in the United States and the disproportionate number who are African-Americans. "You are also under occupation," he said. He reminded us that the word "ghetto" comes from the Jewish experience in Europe. These common experiences of oppression tied us to each other. We were sisters and brothers in our shared history of suffering.

These men spoke of Martin Luther King and of Nelson Mandela, quoting Mandela saying that if you want to make peace with your enemy you must work with him to build something. Donna Baranski-Walker is a MIT trained engineer who left her job to work on rebuilding efforts. She travelled through the West Bank and now works with The Rebuilding Alliance to repair war torn areas. On this tour, she is working with C4P to get Congress to encourage Israel to bring the soldier who killed Abir Aramin to justice. Another purpose of the tour is to raise money to build a playground in Se'ir, a village near Hebron to honor Abir.

C4P builds playgrounds because when they come together to work on nonviolent solutions to conflict, they want their children to play together. Their children will learn and know the humanity of the Other from an early age. It was a vision we all could see. We have all taken our children to the playground. Children were in the sanctuary that night. Elders were in the sanctuary that night. During the question and answer period, the mother of the church, 92-year-old Lillie Margaret Conner, rose to give the two men her blessing. "You just keep on doing what you are doing and you will be successful in the name of Jesus."

At the worship service we listened to a portion of John Coltrane's A Love Supreme together. We heard the poem. We sang and clapped and heard a reading from the Bible that reminds us of faith, hope and charity, but the greatest is charity. The choir sang "This Little Light of Mine" and "If I Can Help Somebody." The scripture and songs and the pastor's words about charity reminded us that the meaning of life is found in our work to help others, not in the acquisitive impulse to gather unto ourselves as much stuff as possible.

This is the important role of religion in peacemaking. We know and often speak about the role of religion in conflict, its narrow focus and insistence upon an uncritical acceptance of this or that doctrine. We know about religion as an in-group definition that often is itself a kind of tribalism when it believes that God only answers to one name and only blesses one group in a particular way. However, there is a role of religion that takes us to transcendence. It helps us to understand that faith is the ability to see beyond site, to forgive the unforgivable and to love the unlovable. It gives us energy and courage to try to make the world a better place in which to live. At its absolute best, it helps us live into a radical love. It was this kind of love that led clergy from the community to surround these peacemakers, lay hands on them and pray for them, for their families and for their effort.

Religion in peacemaking, like religion in the civil rights movement commands personal responsibility of ordinary people. When Martin Luther King Jr accepted the Nobel Peace Prize, he gave credit to people who will never be famous for their work for justice and peace, the “humble children of God willing to suffer for righteousness’ sake.” Writing in the “Letter from Birmingham Jail” King wrote of the young and the old, clergy and lay people walking rather than riding segregated buses, sitting in at lunch counters, doing the necessary work to make a public case against injustice. King knew that a positive peace, a peace that was more than a calm and passive acceptance of the status quo, is only possible when we insist upon justice. It is only possible when ordinary people work for justice.

This is why the meetings that Mr. Aramin and Mr. Reshef had with congress people in Washington D.C. were important. They, along with Ms Baranski-Walker, met privately with Senator John Kerry, chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. They also met with a group from the House of Representatives. They met with people from the state department. They want an investigation into the death of Mr. Aramin’s daughter and into the deaths of other Palestinian children killed by Israeli soldiers. We know from the history of the civil rights movement that without demonstrable success getting to justice, it is difficult to make the case for nonviolence to people who feel that their humanity is under assault, that their lives have no value or meaning. C4P is not the only group of Palestinians working with Israelis for peace. However, without justice, those who preach an extremist violence win. The goals of the civil rights movement – freedom and peace—both depend upon justice in all its iterations.

Standing in the tradition of the civil rights movement, we locked arms together and sang a 21st century arrangement of “We Shall Overcome.” It was appropriate because the civil rights movement of the late 20th century was a movement that saw itself as part of a world movement against colonialism. In the “Letter”, King wrote of the *Zeitgeist* of the times of which African-Americans were a part: “with his black brothers of Africa, and his brown and yellow brothers of Asia, South America and the Caribbean, he is moving with a sense of cosmic urgency toward the promised land of racial justice.”

The Israel/Palestine conflict is not a colonial struggle. Israelis understand themselves as an indigenous people who are at home. It is a conflict of two nations in a struggle over how to live together on a tiny area of land, whether in one state or two. However, while the politicians and generals and diplomats try to work out an agreement, ordinary people committed to nonviolent conflict resolution are building playgrounds. They are telling their stories to other ordinary people in peace centers, churches, synagogues, and Islamic centers, in high schools, colleges and universities, at the United Nations and in the halls of Congress. They are building bridges and bringing hope that what seems to be an impossible conundrum does have a solution.

The 21st century civil rights movement is the global struggle for justice and peace and ordinary people like the members of C4P will lead it. People of faith will both pray for it and work for it.