

Thirty years ago, in February 1996, I was at work in London when a 3,000lb truck bomb was detonated by the IRA. I was in a building about 200 yards away when it went off. The physical experience of being that close to that bomb is something I'll never forget, and the psychological aftermath lasted a very long time indeed. And that was just one bomb, and only 3 buildings were completely destroyed, and 2 people died, and fewer than 50 needed hospital treatment, and only about a hundred were injured by shrapnel and glass. For scale, three days ago the Israeli Airforce claimed to have dropped 5,000 bombs on Iran,<sup>1</sup> and Iran has launched hundreds of ballistic missiles and thousands of attack drones.<sup>2</sup> Thousands of buildings have been blown to bits all across the region, close to 2,000 people have been killed in a week;<sup>3</sup> we can only imagine how many more have been injured, and how many more have been traumatized by what they've experienced.

The IRA bomb, in London in 1996, marked the end of the ceasefire, and many feared that "The Troubles" - roughly 30 years of armed conflict, of horrendous brutality on all sides, that it would all start back up again.<sup>4</sup> The Troubles had *directly* impacted tens of thousands of lives,<sup>5</sup> and the wider impact was enormous. The hate between groups, between the Northern Irish and the English, the Protestants and the Catholics, the unionists and the republicans, the British Military in Northern Ireland and the civilians there, the IRA and UVF and the UDA – the hate, the enmity, the violence spanned generations;

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2026/mar/04/iran-war-live-updates-us-israel-latest-news-strait-of-hormuz-middle-east-crisis?page=with:block-69a8495f8f087bc3885fce08>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/3/1/us-israel-attacks-on-iran-death-toll-and-injuries-live-tracker>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/3/7/iran-war-what-is-happening-on-day-eight-of-us-israel-attacks?>

<sup>4</sup> Most of the violence of The Troubles would end in 1998, with the Good Friday Agreement.

<sup>5</sup> <https://cain.ulst.ac.uk/othelem/london.htm>

neighbors demonized each other, groups dehumanized each other, congregations even, were pitted against one another as sworn enemies, the cycle of violence seemed unbreakable.

But it did end. And some folks, from both sides of the conflict, have spent these past decades building relationship so that it stays ended. They have been intentional, have courageously spent a great deal of time and emotional energy in conversation, and have committed to learning each other's stories. They're in the process of healing together, and they know forgiveness has to be a part of that process; they're learning how to do that and they've been teaching the rest of us along the way that it can be done. One woman, whose father was killed by a massive IRA bomb, has been in ongoing dialogue with the man who planted and detonated that bomb for 25 years; as a result of this relationship, she now firmly and compassionately believes that "an enemy is someone whose story you've never heard."<sup>6</sup>

Today's Gospel reading was a long reading, a long story. This story, in the Gospel of John, is in fact in the longest continuous narrative in the Gospel texts, and in its reading and in its hearing, compared to most of our Sunday Gospel readings, it kinda reflects the reality of meaningful dialogue, especially between two people who are from groups who have long considered themselves enemies: conversation here is commitment of time and effort.

By the time Jesus was born, there'd been intense hostility between Samaria and Judea for over 700 years,

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.publictheologyireland.com/podcast/season-4-episode-2-jo-berry-and-pat-magee-beyond-the-brighton-bomb>

and in the two centuries before Jesus was born, there'd been a number of significant escalations in the violences between the two groups.

This wasn't just a petty regional rivalry, but an enmity with deep roots, with identity as God's true chosen people at stake. This was a conflict people were prepared to kill for. Who could rightly claim to be God's true Covenantal people, who had the true authoritative Scriptures, which group had the divinely ordained right to worship God in their way and in their place – which was Jerusalem for the Judeans, and Mount Gerizim for the Samaritans. This long conflict was fraught with violence, and killing, it was, seemingly, an unbreakable cycle of violence.

Right before we pick up today's reading, John's Gospel says "Jesus [on his way to Galilee] had to go through Samaria." He *had* to, the text says. He didn't have to because there were no other routes, there were, so perhaps he "had to" go that way because of the historic conflict, because of the history of violence and the lack of relationship between these two groups. Perhaps he had to go because there was healing to be done, there was violence to end.

Jesus meets the Samaritan woman and initiates a conversation, he engages with, speaks with, and listens to a person on 'the other side.' Back and forth they go, she questions, he answers, she speaks, he listens, he speaks, she listens, she asks, he responds. Back and forth they go, listening to one another, and learning about each other – there are no words of judgement, critique, or correction, no insistence on change, Jesus issues no threat, there's no domination, no imposing power over the other.

This conversation is not an act of divine shock and awe, it's not a swift, decisive divine act to bring change, force change,

but it's relationship-building, through conversation, at the pace at which it unfolded ... and this conversation is transformative, is generative. Their shared humanity, their shared love of the One who Created and sustains all life held the power to bring about that change.

As a result of this one connecting conversation, the Samaritans, the ones who hated "Jesus' kind" asked Jesus to stay with them ... and we might imagine that his stay with them was a time of proper enemy-busting/humanity-affirming story sharing, and attentive listening, on both sides.

We're told many more believed because of his word.

Maybe they came to believe, in a new way, in the life-saving power of God. Or in the sanctity of all life. Maybe they came to believe there absolutely is an alternative to violence; that Jesus' Way, the way of love and healing and forgiveness, *is* the way God calls us all to follow. Maybe they came to believe in the transformative power of relationship, especially where there'd previously been none.

Jesus is God's decisive act of reconciliation in the world, God's way of drawing all the world into life-giving relationship. In Jesus is the truth of God, revealed as compassionate and abounding in steadfast love and mercy and patience for what's needed to heal division, to bring an end to violence.

Jesus came into the World so that we might be saved from the ways the societies we've built choose to *keep* killing and suffering and destruction in the world.

Saved from deluding ourselves that there can be any other way to fullness of life for all, any other way to true peace, than by actually going into those places where relationships are broken, choosing to go there, having to go, where there's no relationship, and doing God's work there, choosing connection and relationship and story-sharing and attentive listening over an ongoing cycle of violence.

Going there, and taking with us what Jesus has taught us about healing and forgiveness.

In our own lives, going into those fraught spaces, those relationships fraught with harms done *by both sides*, choosing to go *there*, regardless of who we think is responsible for it all, or who we believe started it all, choosing to go there with unwavering compassion, with humility, and self-sacrificial love, as Jesus did, to end the cycle of hurt and harm.

We will never stop the cycling of harm by force, by intimidation, or by domination. Ever.

Jesus' way, of one conversation at a time, shows the way each of us chooses to live matters – we change and the world will change.

Relationship is the way to end violence, relationship is the way to peace.

Peace is not the stunned silence after the bomb explodes, or the building's been blown to bits. Peace is not the forced silence of surrender, or submission; peace is not the absence of war.

Peace is an end to wounding, it is the healing of pain; it is the process of forgiveness, it is the building of trust as we commit to hearing each other's stories.

Peace is only possible through relationship; and relationship is only possible if we're also prepared to go there ... to choose to break the cycles of harm, to choose to listen to each other, all of us, listen deeply and be willing to be changed by what we hear.