N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Before I begin this morning, I’d like to take a couple of minutes to tell you about a product that Bob and I have come to love over the past three years. It’s called the SodaStream.

It allows you to create soda water or sparkling water in your very own kitchen.

There are even flavours you can add to make your own versions of pop, if you’re so inclined.

All you do is fill the litre bottles with water—
either filtered or straight from the tap—
and then twist it into place,
press the big button to carbonate,
and in seconds you have,
what we call at our house, fizzy water.

Voila!

It saves us money over the long run because we no longer have to buy soda water at the store.

And it reduces the environmental impact of using plastic bottles or shipping heavy bottled water across the country.

The best part is that we don’t have to schlep heavy two-litre bottles from the store to our kitchen.

What’s not to love, right?

Now, if this were a real infomercial—something I swear that I would never subject you to—
I’d tell you that there’s nothing
that’s not 100% loveable about this product.

But, as you may have guessed, it’s not that simple.

SodaStream is one of Israel’s great success stories in recent years.
A business that has gone global and won over fans everywhere.

Its critics point out that SodaStream is an Israeli company operating in
an illegal settlement on occupied land in the West Bank.

For the past few years there has been
an active boycott of the company around the world—
something I should say I did not know when I bought ours.

The boycott reached a milestone this summer, when the company’s
largest store closed in London after being steadily picketed for two years.

And hanging in the balance, on the other side of the scales of justice,
in all of this, is the recognition that SodaStream
is one of the largest employers in the West Bank—
with some 500 Palestinian personnel—
a crucial point in an economy where steady jobs are hard to come by.

And, so, a simple glass of water isn’t so simple—
in my household or in countless kitchens around the globe.

The truth is that I think about my connection and my complicity
to the conflict between Israel and Palestine,
every time I carbonate a fresh bottle of water,
and every time I pour myself a glass to drink.

On an almost daily basis I’m confronted in my kitchen
with the question of what one is supposed to do in such a situation?

It’s the kind of question we must ask ourselves frequently
in our highly interdependent world.

As Unitarians, we celebrate
the interconnected web of being with great gusto.
We understand that our destiny on this planet is shared. We affirm that what touches one touches all.

It’s easy to appreciate and honour the wondrous webs of connection that we’re caught up in.

Harder, though, is owning up to the reality that these same connections, and our sense of kinship with the wider world, come with some very serious complications.

Complications that can be, quite literally, matters of life and death.

So, whatever are we to do?

This ongoing conflict, familiar to us all on some level, has, of course, brought about innumerable protests and calls for justice.

Horrified by the violence that has played out in that part of the world, people in Israel, Palestine, and countless other countries have routinely taken to the streets to register their anger at the violence and aggressive action that has gripped that part of the world for as long as most of us can remember.

Over the course of recent years, some have called for boycotts, for sanctions and divestment. Some have called for a renewed commitment to the feeble peace process. Some have called for new governments in both Israel and Palestine. And some, having absolutely no idea what to do, have simply given up hope.

The conflict between Palestine and Israel is one of the toughest and most complex topics there is.

I find it difficult to discuss with strangers and friends alike, for it feels hopelessly fraught, and impossible to unravel.

For starters, it’s never clear where to begin sorting through the litany of woes—whether we are to go back to the lead-up to this summer’s war, or back to the Second Intifada, or the first; whether we are to take up the grievances that date to 1967, or the ones evident at Israel’s founding in 1948.
Or whether we are to trek back through time
to what ancient archeology and biblical records have to tell us.

In light of all of this, I often wonder what my opinion,
held in the relative safety of Toronto, can possibly mean.

For years, I had heard people say that you had to go there to understand.

And so I did that two years ago, and only came back more confused
and disheartened about the prospects for peace.

I learned a lot. I gained an appreciation, at least on a small scale,
of how different the conflict appears on opposite sides.

Bob and I had dinner with Israeli friends in Tel Aviv across the street
from where a suicide bomb killed 22 people on a bus in 1994.

We heard them speak of the gripping fear in which they perpetually live,
and their hope to leave Israel before their children reach
the mandatory age for service in the Israeli Defence Forces.

Days later, we found a Palestinian guide who took us
into the heart of three refugee camps in the West Bank.

There, we saw, first hand, the squalor that defines daily life,
as we walked through residential buildings meant to hold temporary refugees
that have now been home to three and four generations
of Palestinians raised within their walls.

We witnessed the deep longing for a return to ancestral lands,
and we saw the dreadful impact of daily life behind the Separation Wall,
or Apartheid Wall as many people there call it.

I told the story shortly after we returned,
but Bob and I also witnessed a conflict on the Temple Mount that involved
rock throwing and the tossing of chairs, smoke bombs and rubber bullets.

And, later, uncomfortably close to where we fled
to avoid getting caught up in the violence,
the death of a Palestinian boy who was shot
after throwing a firecracker at an Israeli officer.
These experiences, relatively minor to those who live there, day in and day out, left me shaken on many levels, uncertain what to think.

And they left me humbled, feeling that there were complexities to this conflict I will never—and can never—fully understand as an outsider.

I returned, resonating with the sobering bit of wisdom found in Betty Smith’s novel *Tomorrow Will Be Better*, that:

“Bad quarrels come when two people are wrong. [And] worse quarrels come when two people are right.”

There is so much wrong and right in this epic quarrel that it leaves those on the outside simply bewildered.

What’s clear enough is that all people of good will want the killing to stop, for there to be an enduring end to the cycles of violence.

How to go about that, though, is where these people of good will so often part ways.

I can see validity in the arguments made by people on both sides.

I have respect for people, who out of genuine concern for the welfare of people in Palestine, or Israel, or both, have taken action by signing petitions, donating money, or calling on their politicians—people who have tried to do something, anything, to pave the way to peace.

I do not know the answer. I’m not sure anyone does anymore.

What does seem obvious is that until the existential fears of Israelis are alleviated—their deep-seated fears of annihilation relieved—and until the existential needs of Palestinians are met—needs as basic as food and water and as vital as dignity and security—there is no real promise of peace to speak of.
In this prolonged stalemate, there remains a need for those who demand and deliver humanitarian aid, and for those who pressure and protest our government to act in response in accord with our highest values.

Our meager efforts, though, are not always adequate to the task. And our limitations can leave us feeling powerless and pessimistic.

I have reluctantly come to believe that only the parties directly involved can find the solution that has so long evaded them.

I’ll admit that can be a profoundly depressing thought.

And, yet, I find a glimmer of hope in the risk-takers who are defying the boundaries and barriers that would divide them to forge a new way forward.

Peacemakers, in the truest sense of the word, who reach across the gulf of grief, the chasm of chaos, to say, “this has to stop.”

Israelis and Palestinians who reach over seemingly insurmountable walls, to declare that they refuse to be each other’s enemies.

The most profound example of this, for me, is found in the almost unthinkable existence of the organization called Palestinian and Israeli Bereaved Families for Peace.

Immediate family members of people who have been killed in the violence have—against all odds—come together in the hope that through dialogue they can bring about tolerance, reconciliation, and peace.

Can you imagine the strength required of one’s soul to turn up at one of these events?

Can you fathom the radical change of heart that it would take to turn away from such overwhelming grief and justifiable anger in order to walk toward the possibility of peace and understanding?
The organization’s motto is: “It won’t stop until we talk.”

And, so, defying so much of what could come so naturally—bitter resentment and hate-filled rage—these people open their broken hearts to the promise of a different story, or at least a different ending to the nightmare they have been living.

To hear their stories, to read the letters of outreach and reconciliation, which I would encourage you to do, is enough to crack open even hearts that have grown cynical and cold.

I am in awe of such people.

And I am compelled to do what I can to support their efforts.

For, if there is ever to be peace, it will come through what they do. As they say, it won’t stop until they talk.

The Sufi mystic Rumi famously said the same thing.

“Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,” he said, “there is a field. I will meet you there.”

That proverbial field is, in my view, the single most important field in any war, in any human conflict, in any misunderstanding, no matter the size or scope.

Amid the battlefields strewn with the desecrated debris of war, it can be difficult to find that field.

Caught up in the senseless cycles of conflict, it’s easy enough to give up the search—to reconcile ourselves to the costs of war, rather than wrestle with the difficult demands of reconciliation.

And so the question remains: what, then, are we to do?

In the coming months, there will be a series of dialogue opportunities
here at First concerning the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Come, listen, and learn.
Engage and act in the ways your heart is moved.

But, mostly, though, commit to being keepers of the field.

I think that is a meaningful role that we, as Unitarians, can play—be it with this particular conflict, or with any other, if we can summon the spiritual strength to do so.

It’s tricky. It involves holding your heart open, and sometimes entertaining opinions you may radically oppose.

It means creating a protected place, where the truth can emerge, where fears can be named, and where fragile hopes can be held and given the room to grow. It is in such a field that the healing of the world will begin, just as it always has.

Let us, then, labour in that field until the harvest of justice and peace has been brought in.

Amen.

**Closing Words**

In the words of the Roberta Bard, author of the hymn we sang earlier:

Bless the earth and all your children, one creation: make us whole, interwoven, all connected, planet wide and inmost soul.

Holy mother, life bestowing, bid our waste and warfare cease.
Fill us all with grace o’erflowing.
Teach us how to live in peace.

May it be so.

Amen.