

Father Elias Chacour, a Palestinian Christian still very active today (and now Archbishop Chacour) in making peace between Palestinians and Jews, was confronted for several months by the cold, unforgiving hearts of his parishioners. Then:

On Palm Sunday of his first year as pastor of Ibillin, Elias looked from the front of the church at the stony faces before him. One of the brothers, a policeman, sat in the front row with his wife and children. Hymns were sung, but without any spirit. There were readings from the Bible, and then a sermon. 'The congregation endured me indifferently,' Elias recalls, 'fulfilling their holiday obligation to warm the benches.' But before the service ended, he did something no-one, perhaps not even he himself, had anticipated. He walked to the back of the church and padlocked the door.

Returning to the front of the church, he told his parishioners, 'Sitting in this building does not make you a Christian. You are a people divided. You argue and hate each other. You gossip and spread lies. Your religion is a lie. If you can't love your brother whom you see, how can you say that you love God who is invisible? You have allowed the Body of Christ to be disgraced. I have tried for months to unite you. I have failed. I am only a man. But there is someone else who can bring you together in true unity. His name is Jesus Christ. He has the power to forgive you. So now I will be quiet and allow him to give you that power. If you will not forgive, then we stay locked in here. If you want, you can kill each other, and I'll provide your funeral gratis.'

Ten minutes passed, but for Elias they seemed like hours. At last the policeman stood up, faced the congregation, bowed his head and said, 'I am sorry. I am the worst of all. I have hated my own brothers. I have hated them so much that I wanted to kill them. More than any of you, I need forgiveness.'

He turned to Elias. 'Father, can you forgive me?'

'Come here,' Elias replied. They embraced each other with the kiss of peace. 'Now go and greet your brothers.'

The four brothers rushed together, meeting halfway down the aisle, and in tears forgave each other.

'In an instant,' Elias recalls, 'the church was a chaos of embracing and repentance.'

Elias had to shout to make his next words audible. 'Dear friends, we are not going to wait until next week to celebrate the Resurrection. Let us begin it now. We were dead to each other. Now we are alive again.' He began to sing, 'Christ is risen from the dead. By his death he has trampled death and given life to those in the tomb.' The congregation joined in the hymn. Unchaining the door, Elias led them into the streets.

'For the rest of the day and far into the evening, [Elias said], I joined groups of believers as they went from house to house. At every door, someone had to ask forgiveness for a certain wrong. Never was forgiveness withheld (*Making Friends of Enemies*, Jim Forest, pp. 45 & 46, 1988.)'

[Please read more about (now) Archbishop Chacour's wonderful work at:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elias_Chacour.]