

“Introduction to the Seekers Community Conversation”



September 29, 2024

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

This is the fourth Sunday of the Seekers recommitment season, a time when we intentionally re-explore our commitment to Christ and to Seekers Church. This morning and every Sunday, as an integral part of our worship, we recommitted ourselves to “work to end all war, violence and discord.” Today, we have a unique opportunity to further explore that commitment. We

have an opportunity to ask ourselves: Do we take that commitment to heart? Do we take it seriously? Are we really “committed” to it? And if so, how do we live out that commitment in our individual and corporate lives?

Amidst all the turmoil, pain and suffering in Ukraine, Sudan, Myanmar and elsewhere in the world, and lord knows there is plenty, none has generated, and demanded, the attention and contemplation of Americans as has the “war, violence and discord” in Gaza, the West Bank and Israel; and now Lebanon. Not since Iraq, and perhaps even Viet Nam have, we Americans, been so divided about a zone of conflict. Those divisions have played out over coffee, on college campuses, around dinner tables, in houses of worship, and on our streets.

We as a congregation have been a bit tangled up as well. Seekers has been developing and wrestling with corporate statements about the Israeli war in Gaza and a separate statement on antisemitism. Those drafts and processes are now at various stages with the stewards and there is, of course, some value in the sharing of those struggles themselves.

Emotions run deep and at the same time are just below the surface. For a whole variety of intensely held and very personal reasons we have struggled with grief and lament, anger and outrage, speaking up and holding back, advocacy and paralysis. Individually and as a Christian church body, we want to be objective, balanced, respectful, loving and compassionate. And yet this is a conflict that defies consensus, that seems to relegate logic, facts, and common sense to the dust bin and seems to render a positive way forward elusive.

Over the past year, yes almost 1 year, efforts to promote conversation and dialogue in Seekers and beyond have been

fraught, sometimes increasing disunion rather than consensus. One clear lesson we have learned from those efforts is that words and phrases hold tremendous power. Rather than single, agreed-upon meanings, many of these words and phrases mean different things, to those who speak them and to those who hear them. Are they true, accurate, inflammatory, hateful, appropriate?

Here are just a few of the words and phrases that incite such disputes and opposition: Zionism; anti-Zionism; antisemitic; pro-Palestinian; genocide; apartheid; intifada; from the river to the sea; free Palestine; settler-colonial project.

The Racial and Ethnic Justice Ministry Team has invited two outside speakers, Aaron Shneyer and Nizar Farsakh, to help us as a congregation unpack some of those powerful words and phrases and deepen our understanding of what lies at the heart of the current Gaza/Israel conflict. Aaron is a Jewish American involved with a peace organization called Standing Together; Nizar is a Palestinian American currently involved in non-violence initiatives in Palestine/Israel and a founding board member of the Museum of the Palestinian People, which is supported through Seekers Domestic Giving.

I'll say more later, but this morning, Aaron and Farsakh have gifted us with their time, their experience, their wisdom and their commitment to bridging divides and forging a better world. Immediately after worship, we will reconfigure our seating to promote conversation. Aaron and Nizar will make foundational presentations and then we will open it up for a broader community conversation.

We'd like to think of this conversation as an extension of our worship. Appreciating that we all come to this conversation with different perspectives and different life experiences, we encourage all to enter the space prayerfully. Additionally, and as part of our individual and corporate work during this recommitment season, we are called to consider what we might

do differently; what we might do better. How might we “be opened,” opening ourselves to new ways of thinking and new ways of being. Accordingly, we invite all to enter the conversation with hearts and minds open to new revelations and understandings.

Let me close by quoting Hiba Haroon, a local therapeutic healer, artist and activist. She offers,

“How dare our leaders ask us to choose who matters more, all in the name of their unchecked and insatiable hunger for greed and dominance... We must sit with this and confront how, time and time again, we deem some lives as less than others, some children as less than others.

“The roots of what we are witnessing are historic, deep and coated in racism, sexism, classism, colonialism, [antisemitism] and Islamophobia. We can denounce Hamas and be in solidarity with Palestinian communities. We can denounce Israel’s actions and be in solidarity with Jewish communities. We can decouple people and governments, people and terror groups, and invite in some space which lets us both sit with and move through the messiness and discomfort, to figure out how we center both humanity and accountability. Let’s question the beliefs that at best give us a false sense of safety and at worst silence our conscience and grant us permission to commit the most obscene and heinous actions. While witnessing... violence of unfathomable proportions, we must actively reject the belief... that some of us are more worthy of protecting; some of us are more worthy of saving; some of us are more worthy of living. We must dismantle the ladders of worth that we are so incentivized to construct, contribute to and climb – before they cement our collective demise.” May it be so, Amen.

After reconvening...

OK – Let’s reconvene. Again, please make sure that your

phones are silenced and please feel free to grab a few snacks, quietly. As we talk, let us do so respectfully and with a willingness to “be opened.”

Before turning things over to Aaron and Nizar, allow me to offer these further introductions:

- **Nizar Farsakh** is a Palestinian-American political analyst with extensive experience in the Israel-Palestine conflict as well as US Middle East policy. Nizar served as an advisor to the last two Palestinian ambassadors to Washington, DC (2011-2017). He also worked as a political advisor for the Palestinian negotiating team from 2003 to 2008, working with President Abbas, Prime Minister Dr. Fayyad, and several ministries. Nizar is currently Lecturer of International Affairs at George Washington University. He advises several American-Palestinian institutions, and is frequently invited by think tanks and the media to comment on Middle East affairs.
- **Aaron Schneyer** is a musician and activist based in Washington, DC. A 2008 Fulbright-MTVu Fellowship took him to Jerusalem where he formed Heartbeat (www.heartbeat.fm), an organization that harnesses music’s power to transform conflict. He has worked with Seeds of Peace, the Sulha Peace Project and various other Israeli-Palestinian peacebuilding efforts. From 2017-2022 he served as Managing Director of One Common Unity, working with youth artists to prevent violence in DC. Today he is the Musician in Residence at the Sixth & I Historic Synagogue, Service Leader at the Adat Shalom Congregation, a 2024 Artist Fellow with the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities, and a consultant for nonprofit organizations. He regularly performs with his band, the Love Rebellion, and has performed across the US, Europe and Israel/Palestine. Since October 2023 Aaron has helped found and lead [Am Shalom](#) and [DC](#)

[Supporters of Standing Together](#), a grassroots mobilization of Jews, Palestinians and allies working to build a future of safety and freedom for Israelis and Palestinians. www.aaronshneyer.com

Aaron and Nizar represent networks of people who, despite their differences, are engaging in efforts to stem the violence and bridge the divide. They've promoted discussions with their perceived foes. They see their adversaries as human beings, treat them with respect, and acknowledge that all people are worthy of freedom and that all people deserve to live lives without fear of violence.

Aaron and Nizar – thank you for joining us this morning and over to you.