**Party Time** Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake  
Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time The House of Hope Presbyterian Church  
Isaiah 25:6-9; Matthew 22:1-10 Saint Paul, Minnesota  
October 15, 2023

This has been a difficult week for many people.

Last Monday I was exercising at the *Inver Grove Heights Community Center* where they have eight giant TV video screens strategically placed in the Fitness Center so that they can easily be seen from the long rows of treadmills, elliptical machines, stationary bikes, and stair climbers.

Six of the screens are tuned to popular news stations: ABC, CBS, BBC, Fox, CNN, and PBS—and the other two are tuned to HGTV and ESPN.

The interesting thing was that all six of the news stations had a version of the same headline banner scrolling at the bottom of their screens: *Israel declares war on Hamas.*

To watch these stations with *sound* you have to have earphones. I usually can’t be bothered with these, so I followed the closed captioning.

As I watched these six news screens simultaneously, I was struck by the uniformity of the images—bombs exploding and buildings being blown up, distraught family members grieving the death of innocent loved ones, and others paralyzed by fear for the fate of those who have been kidnapped.

I also noticed that the networks weren’t spending much (if any) time in helping their viewers understand *why* this happening—they were pretty much just reporting events on the ground as they were happening without any context or background. And I also thought to myself: *“It’s really psychologically and emotionally unhealthy to be binge watching these kinds of images.”* In fact, I noticed that many of my fellow exercisers were intentionally avoiding looking at the screens—because it was just *“too much.”*

Thankfully, the coverage (at least in my view) has improved in recent days. But I want to focus this morning on how religious leaders are helping their communities deal with this unfolding tragedy and what we might be able to do to feel less helpless and hopeless.

For example, on Friday afternoon, NPR's Ari Shapiro spoke with *Imam Mohamed Herbert* in Overland Park, Kansas, and *Rabbi Sharon Brous* in Los Angeles about how they're counseling their congregations during the conflict in Israel and Gaza.

Shapiro said: *Watching events in Israel and Gaza over the last week has brought grief and pain to many Jews and Muslims in the U.S. Hamas launched its surprise attack last Saturday, and Israel's retaliation is still unfolding. This is a time when many people turn to their faith and their community. So we've invited a rabbi and an imam to share how they are counseling their congregations here in the States. Imam Mohamed Herbert is a resident scholar of the Islamic Center of Johnson County, Kan., and Sharon Brous is senior rabbi and founder of IKAR, a Jewish congregation in Los Angeles, California.[[1]](#footnote-1)*

Here is a part of their conversation …

SHAPIRO: What will be the message that each of you give to your congregations as people gather to pray together this weekend? Imam Herbert, your holy day is today. Why don't you begin?

HERBERT: Yeah. I think when we speak about a message, I think you elaborated it so eloquently when you mentioned that a lot of people turn to faith when they're looking for answers, when they're looking for that guidance in life, that light. And for our sermon today, what we've prepared is kind of a reflection piece, taking an opportunity to reflect on our lives internally and then to think about how it is that we will respond externally, right? Faith without action is absolutely useless, and action without faith is misguided. And so when we speak about an internal response to how it is that we internalize everything that's happened, one of the key things that I hope for my community to step away from the sermon with is understanding that there is pain on both sides, right?

SHAPIRO: Rabbi Brous, what is your message going to be this weekend for your congregation when they gather for Shabbat services?

BROUS: What I've been focusing on all week, since the moment that we heard about this attack on Shabbat, which was also the holiday of Simchat Torah last Saturday, a day in which we are commanded to experience joy as a Jewish people - so there is an added heartache that it happened on this holy day. I think the first role of a pastor in this moment is just to create sacred space where people can grieve together and hold an uncomplicated sorrow with one another. I also see the pastor's task as offering some kind of moral clarity, which in this case means both repeating again and again that there is no justification for crimes against humanity, that the rape, kidnapping, murder of innocents is never justifiable. And I also need to remind my community that Palestinians are suffering terribly also now and will continue to in the days ahead. And so just as we ask the world to see our pain and stand with us in our sorrow, it's our moral and spiritual obligation to do the same, to expand our lens of care and concern to also encompass the Palestinian people.

She continued: I was on a briefing yesterday, and there was a Bedouin doctor from Soroka Hospital in the south, *Dr. Yasmeen Abu-Fraiha.* And she's been treating many of the people who came in from the massacre site. And she said the real dividing line is not between Israelis and Palestinians but between those who believe violence is the answer and those who believe there is another way. And I believe there's another way. And Imam Herbert believes there's another way. And most of us believe that there's another way. So together, we have to reject the very reductive idea that Jews and Palestinians must be enemies eternally and instead create a different way of finding one another in relationship and lifting up and affirming our own humanity and one another's.

SHAPIRO: Before we say goodbye, is there anything you would like to say to each other?

BROUS: I will say to you, Imam Herbert - I'm holding you and your community, your beloveds in your mosque and their families in Gaza in my heart and in my prayers. And I know that there is a better way for humanity that we can walk together toward peace, dignity, and justice for all people. And I really appreciate you as a partner in that work. Thank you.

HERBERT: Absolutely. I think also I - sharing the same sentiment. For me, I think one of the most profound things that I heard you say that really, really stuck out to me, rabbi, was you mentioned that the real enemies of this war are not the Jews or the Israelis or the Palestinians. It's those people who have decided that violence is the only answer. And that really, really stuck with me - that this shows that there actually is a way to have a conversation.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This conversation actually ties in beautifully with both of our scripture readings for today—Isaiah 25 and Matthew 22.

You see, the prophet Isaiah shows us heaps of stones that were once fortified cities, citadels of the proud that no longer exist and will never be rebuilt (v. 2). These constructions were built to keep people safe and secure, but they failed to accomplish their task. The privileged may have walls to hide behind, but these are temporary, whereas Isaiah’s God is a refuge for the poor, a refuge for the needy and all who experience distress (v. 4). Those who lack material well-being (and remain faithful to God’s call for justice) are promised peace from God, who shelters them from the storm and shades them from the heat (v. 4).

In a similar way, in Matthew, amid life’s uncertainties, we are given God’s peace, a peace embedded in a messianic vision of the Lord of hosts preparing a banquet for all people, a banquet where the finest wines and richest foods are served. On that day, mourning will end, death will be vanquished, and every tear will be wiped away by the very hand of God. Hope in God will not be in vain, for salvation will come from God’s outstretched arm (Isa. 25:6-9). However, while all are invited to this feast, not everyone will choose to come.

The late Archbishop of South Africa, Desmund Tutu put these ideas in contemporary language when he said:

*“Dear Child of God, before we can become God’s partners, we must know what God wants for us. “I have a dream,” God says. “Please help Me to realize it. It is a dream of a world whose ugliness and squalor and poverty, its war and hostility, its greed and harsh competitiveness, its alienation and disharmony are changed into their glorious counterparts, when there will be more laughter, joy, and peace, where there will be justice and goodness and compassion and love and caring and sharing. I have a dream that swords will be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, that My children will know that they are members of one family, the human family, God’s family, My family.”*

*In God’s family, there are no outsiders. All are insiders. Black and white, rich, and poor, gay, and straight, Jew and Arab, Palestinian, and Israeli, Roman Catholic and Protestant, Serb and Albanian, Hutu and Tutsi, Muslim and Christian, Buddhist and Hindu, Pakistani and Indian—all belong.…*

*We have heard of God’s dream from His prophets throughout history and in modern times from great leaders and humanitarians like Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mahatma Gandhi. King spoke of it … when he dreamed of the day that the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners in Georgia would be able “to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.” Gandhi wrote about it in 1929 when he stated that his goal was not just the brotherhood of Indian humanity but “the mission of brotherhood of man.” (Today they would have referred to daughters and sisterhood, too.) The visions and triumphs of these prophets of God helped change their nations and inspire the rest of us around the world in our own struggles for equality.”[[3]](#footnote-3)*

Diana Butler Bass says much the same thing when she lifts up Jesus’s image of a *banquet* *(a party)*.

She writes: *“(Scripture) describes a vision of diversity, of people from every tongue, tribe, and nation, who gather in the New Jerusalem. In the holy city, we maintain our uniqueness while God dwells in our midst. Unity is experienced in love and friendship, not doctrine or dogma. There is no coercion of faith.*

*… a throne is at the center of the sacred city. In a hierarchical world, thrones are elevated chairs, the special places where kings or queens sit. But a throne is just a fancy chair. If asked to think of a room where there are chairs, most of us do not say “throne room.” Most of us say, “dining room.” Instead of thinking of (the) sacred city as a sort of imperial throne room, perhaps we should see it as a dining room. And around the table are many chairs. The places are marked with cards: ‘Christian,’ ‘Jew,’ ‘Muslim,’ ‘Buddhist,’ ‘American,’ ‘Arab,’ Chinese,’ ‘African,’ ‘Human,’ … and so on. No one owns the table. No one gets to take it over. We receive this table; it is the gift of heaven to earth. Our job is to pull up more chairs. And to make sure all are fed.*

*Where is God? God hosts the table at the center of the world. The sacred cosmos is a feast, a party of host and guests, seated around the table that practices hospitality for all. The only requirement for joining in is that you want to be there.”[[4]](#footnote-4)*

Friends, “we can look at the life of Jesus to see what God asks of us. Jesus came into a deeply divided and polarized society. There was the divide between the hated foreign oppressor and the citizens of the vassal state. Within Judaism there were different religious groupings, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Zealots. There was the divide between the Jew, the Gentile, and the Samaritan. And then men were segregated from women. There were free persons and there were slaves. There were the rich; there were the poor. The world saw a veritable miracle unfolding before its very eyes as all sorts and conditions of women and men, rich and poor, slave and free, Jew and Gentile—all these came to belong in one fellowship, one communion. They did not regard one another just as equals. That in itself would have been a huge miracle…. No, they regarded one another not just as equals but as sisters and brothers, members of one family, God’s family.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Our hope is in doing the same. As the Rabbi and Imam put it: we do it by following a *“better way.”*

1. Karen Zamora, Sarah Handel, Ari Shapiro, Heard on All Things Considered, October 13, 2023, 4:38 PM ET [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Desmond Tutu with Douglas Abrams, *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time* (New York: Image Books/Doubleday, 2005), 19–22. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Diana Butler Bass, *Grounded: Finding God in the World—A Spiritual Revolution,* Harper One, New York, 2015, p. 272 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Desmond Tutu with Douglas Abrams, *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time* (New York: Image Books/Doubleday, 2005), 19–22. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)