

Greetings FSA family,

I am writing to you, not only as the Minister of Worship at First-St. Andrew's United, but also as a fellow sojourner, who imperfectly places one foot in front of the other. If it were not for the grace of others, the hospitality of strangers, and the teachings of other wisdom traditions, I would probably not be with you in my current capacity. From research projects with Muslim professors and colleagues to interfaith justice work with Jewish rabbis and scholars, I have been blessed with an abundance of care and education from persons all over the world. Which is why it is important that I emphasize here our firm commitment to creating a safe space for all, through radical hospitality and extravagant welcome.

This past Sunday, during part of our worship service, a phrase was used that—in our current climate—is interpreted in various ways, ranging from an attack on Israeli identity to a call for equal rights for Palestinians. No matter where one stands on the interpretation of the phrase, it is important that, as a sanctuary for all people, we do not choose words or phrases that create an unsafe environment for anyone. As easy as some might think it to be, that is quite a difficult task. For example, each week we read from a collection of texts that at times evinces a troubling if not abhorrent presentation of the Divine actively engaged in killing people and displacing entire populations. Neither I nor anyone else at FSA would endorse this vision of God (Yahweh), and yet, to read it as it is translated would still have these words and phrases ring out in our worship. Though I am against overly sanitized language, I also do not want to perpetuate the problematic theologies and social practices endorsed by these texts and beliefs. So, we as a ministry team, modify the text and/or choose translations that move away from this language (militarized, patriarchal, exploitative).

The same is true of any words/phrases that we utter in our sanctuary during times of worship. Regardless of our intent, things we say can be heard and experienced in ways that make persons feel unsafe, unseen, or unheard. That is part of why we are always working to live into our Affirming stance in the United Church of Canada. We will never be right about everything all the time, but we can freshly commit to adopting language that will invite rather than incite. And in doing so, we can open conversations and practices that are needed in a world rife with conflict, violence, and misunderstanding.

As it concerns the issue referenced this past Sunday, I am here directing those interested in the United Church of Canada's statement about the situation in Israel-Gaza, which calls for a cease-fire while it unequivocally condemns the attacks on Israeli civilians on October 7th of this year as well as the ongoing bombardment of Gaza and the Occupied West Bank.

<https://united-church.ca/news/ecumenical-statement-violence-between-hamas-and-israel>

As persons of faith, whom Jesus has exhorted to be peacemakers, we must not stand idly by while the principalities and powers inflict unimaginable harm on staggering numbers of people. Nor can we open ourselves to hate, resentment, or use language that can be heard as supporting these. We are all children of Creator, and our pain is shared by Creator as well when our world is suffering.

With hope for a just peace and prayers for open hearts and minds,

Pastor Joshua (he/him)