



Into the Fray

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A few weeks ago, I sat in a Zoom room with about a dozen UCC pastors and lay leaders from across the country who have been actively engaged in the denomination's efforts to move toward racial justice. We had gathered for an ad hoc conversation about how churches were making connections between their antiracism practices and responding to the genocidal violence and humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Over and over again, I heard people talk about their communities feeling both frozen by their fear of doing or saying something that would be hurtful or contentious, and overwhelmed by the complexities of the history and context of conflict in Palestine and Israel. One pastor said, "My people are so afraid of being accused of being antisemitic that they are even finding it hard to lift up prayers for Palestinians." Another person, citing their community's dedication to interfaith relationships commented, "I think we are trying to stay above the fray by promoting general calls for peace in the region." While everyone agreed that our faith, our values, and our commitments as a denomination required a response to the death, destruction, and inhumane treatment being experienced by Palestinians, in practice, people were feeling literally immobilized.

Hearing the phrase, "above the fray" got me thinking about one of my favorite episodes in the gospel of Luke: [the story of Zacchaeus](#). Here, the wealthy tax collector Zacchaeus, a person who has benefitted from the exploitation of his neighbors, is still drawn in by the ministry of Jesus. For some reason, Jesus' message of good news for the poor and freedom for the oppressed compelled this person of privilege to seek out Jesus. But, because of the crowd and his short stature, Zacchaeus had to climb a tree to catch a glimpse of Jesus as he passed by. He literally tried to get "above the fray" in his efforts to encounter the love and justice embodied by Jesus.

But Jesus calls him back down, into the fray. It's as if Jesus was saying to Zacchaeus, "if you're really going to see me, you're going to have to come down into the streets, into the midst of all this complexity and conflict, and figure out how you show up in loving and just ways." I wonder if these six months of bearing witness to such horrific violence in Gaza is calling all of us, like Jesus did for Zacchaeus, to come down into the fray and discover what it means to set a table for justice in the midst of our complicity in this violence. What would it look like for us to let this conflict, complexity, and fear mobilize us toward solidarity, instead of immobilizing us?

For example, what if we leaned into the fear of appearing antisemitic and let it motivate us to seriously explore the ways in which our Christian stories and practices contribute to antisemitic ideas and actions? Our desire to act justly with regards to our Jewish siblings could call us to [understand more deeply the Christian roots of antisemitism](#) and its [connections to racism, white supremacy, and Christian nationalism](#). Instead of operating from hope not to offend, this moment could be an invitation to come down into the fray and work to [more actively and effectively counter antisemitism](#) even as we learn to [distinguish antisemitism from antizionism](#) and ensure that our critiques of the state of Israel aren't relying on, reinscribing, or purveying antisemitic themes and ideas.

Or what if our dedication to interfaith relationships led us to ask more questions about [Christian Zionism](#) and its role in decades of violence and occupation in Israel and Palestine? This moment could be an invitation to come down into the fray and recognize [our own complicity in Israeli apartheid](#).

Or what if our desire for peace compelled us to delve more deeply into the complex intersections of [racism, Zionism, and white nationalism](#)? This moment could be an invitation to come down into the fray and [discover visions for collective liberation](#) that center on the full humanity, dignity, and flourishing of our siblings who are targets of racialized violence, from Minneapolis and Ferguson to Gaza and the West Bank.

In the end, Zacchaeus came down and met Jesus in the fray. Not only that, he offered hospitality and made commitments to reparations and living a transformed life. May we, too, hear the voice of Jesus

inviting us to come down into the fray of this moment so that we might more deeply and actively engage in creating a world where conflict calls us into meaningful relationship and deeper understanding as we build a world where all can flourish.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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