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Genesis 12: 1-10
The Journey and the Learning

One lovely summer's day, around noon, there was deep stillness over all the forest. The birds had tucked their heads under their wings, and everything was at rest. Then a bullfinch popped his head up and asked, "What is life?" Everyone was struck by this profound question.

A rose was just emerging from her bud, and was opening up one shy petal after another, rejoicing in the newly discovered sunlight. 'Life is a Becoming,' she said.

The butterfly was less philosophical. He flew blithely from one flower to another, snacking everywhere on the delicious nectar. 'Life is pure pleasure and sunshine,' he announced.

Down on the ground, an ant was laboring under the weight of a piece of straw ten times his size. He said, 'Life is nothing but toil and sweat and strain.'

There might have been quite an argument about the meaning of life, had not a fine rain began to fall, and the rain spoke, 'Life consists of tears, nothing but tears.'

High above the forest, an eagle swooped, making majestic curves in the sky. 'Life,' spoke the eagle, 'is a constant striving upwards.'

Night fell and soon a man staggered home from a party. 'Life,' he complained, 'is a constant search for happiness and a string of disappointments.'

After the long, dark night, at last dawn came, rising pink on the eastern skyline. 'Just as I, the dawn, am the start of the new day, so is life the beginning of an eternal journey.'

Most of us think of life as a journey. As fond as I am of this image I want to add that life is not empty, purposeless, meaningless journey but is a journey of learning. I cannot imagine life without learning, discovering, experiencing and growing. And life for most of us is wherever we are at the moment, in rain or sunshine, in disappointment or striving upwards, toiling and becoming, they're all part of the unfolding journey.

Our whole faith story begins with a journey. Abraham is called to move, to leave his home and go somewhere undefined. This call comes from his newly found God, Yahweh. Yet the request is somewhat curious since Abram and his people were nomadic wanderers who often moved from one place to another and settled where they found food and water. But now God was asking him to uproot by going to a new land, a new people, and an unknown future. I wonder if Abram saw this as an opportunity for learning, discovery and growth or just a journey. Whatever he was feeling, he did go on the journey, to another place, to a future without really knowing what was next, except an appealing promise of inheriting the land and becoming the father of nations.

Perhaps this promise was enough to get Abram going. Who could ask for a better promise – land and descendants! It was the dream of every patriarch. Any man would take it. But I do want to give Abraham credit. He did gather his family clan, and got on his way to the unknown.

I often identify with Abram when I think of my journey to the US, 27 years ago now, on August 26. I was thrilled to have gotten out of the war in Beirut, to come to a place of promise – school, learning and peace. School was a great delight; living in a new and different world was sheer joy. As I adjusted to a new world I discovered that the two worlds as different as they were, were also quite similar. The change was vast so were the similarities.

First there were little things I learned. I learned that in the US a salad was a bunch of lettuce instead of a combination of vegetables, that ice cream meant vanilla unless specified differently. I learned that a *buck* meant a dollar, and that when a car in an accident is beyond repair it is called *totaled*. I learned that there is something called *the bottom line* which is very important and that I should come up with one especially when I am arguing. I learned that a *lemon* is a bad car, that a *cup of Joe* is a cup of coffee, that a *silver lining* is seeing the good in the bad. I learned that there are different ages when one is considered an adult – at 16 one can drive, at 18 one can vote, at 21 they can drink. I learned that football had nothing to do with feet, and that the news is as much about entertainment as it is about information.

On a more serious note I learned that although cultures vary, people are people everywhere and anywhere in the world. We humans at heart are a wonderful species. Our wants and needs, our deepest desires and longings are basically the same around the globe. All people long for a good and peaceful life. All want to bring up their children in a safe and secure environment, to provide for them a better life than theirs. At the core of every human the deepest need is for healing and wholeness, generally experienced through love. And although cultures vary people are human, and human dignity is of central significance, thus respect is a birthright and so is human worth.

In this part of the world, however, some say – if you want respect you have to earn it. But to me respect is that right of every individual. Human dignity should not have to be earned. It is a given. All humans, living beings, creatures of the universe are of value and worth simply because they are. How else would we all have come to life?

I learned that there are extremes in any culture, any place in the world. Generally most people anywhere are reasonable. Most are willing to consider possibilities, to engage in sensible discourse, live in peace and let others live in peace as well. Yet, people are complex and complicated beings, not just good or bad, as we sometimes polarize so simplistically. In every culture there are radicals and extremists, accordingly fanaticism is part of the experience of every society, every culture – Germany had the Nazis, Muslims have Al-Qaida, US has KKK, Peru had the shining path, Italy had the red brigade, Cambodia had Pulpot, just to mention and remember a few.

I learned that a polarized way of thinking is more western, new country, than eastern, old country; that our culture here including media of all forms encourages polarization for the sake of argument and emphasis. Yet polarization comes with a price. Always arguing about issues from only two seemingly contradictory perspectives leaves out a large number of people who are spread out on the spectrum. Besides, life is much too complicated and circumstances too complex, for absolute and clear answers to all issues. Most people try to live the best they can in the circumstances in which they find themselves. Having a polarized and dualistic view of *either or* gives one a false sense of clarity, while the world and life are usually *both and*.

I learned that most people around the world want answers to tough questions. However, in the east most seem to be more comfortable with the complexities and paradoxes they cannot understand and the mystery they cannot fathom, most of which is attributed to God. While in the west reason takes over and we want clear, bottom line answers without complexity; as a result in the west the faith question is – does God exist? While in the east it is – who is God?

I learned that life is not really about favorites, bests or number ones. I learned this from being asked frequently which I like best, living here or there, what my favorite is and so on... I would always flounder at the answer until I figured out that to me it is not about favorites or number ones. All places have traits I like and traits I do not. All life has different sides and shades. I like the color red because it is bright and happy. I like black and white because they look good on me. I like blue because it is the color of the sky and seas. I like the US because of its freedom and individual right to some privacy and choice, because of its abundance and resources, its diversity and pluralism, its idealism and its possibilities, and more. I like the old country because of its sense of community and identity, a different kind of diversity, its lifestyle that allows one to live one day at a time, enjoying life's moments, not to be so caught up in work; and for its ability to deal with complexities of life, not shrink away from them by polarizing them. So I figured out, it is not about favorites but about enjoying life and what it brings. It's about learning from every moment and appreciating every experience. It's not about the place or what it can give you. It's about what you bring to that place and how you can make a difference. It is how you receive an experience and what you do with it that makes the difference.

I learned that life is an amazing gift and that you alone are responsible in making it into what it turns out to be. Life brings different moments – rain or sunshine, strings of disappointments or a constant striving upwards. We take these moments and make them into what they become for us. We can make them into moments of learning and growth, moments of resentment and anger, or moments that are wasted. Yet, life will be whatever you make of it. For it is a gift. Received with gratitude it flourishes, received with resentment it wilts and fades.

I learned that the church anywhere in the world is the church. Differences are minor. Similarities are great. Every church argues about the color of carpet, the air conditioning, the kitchen sink. Yet most people want what's best for the church from their own perspective often forgetting that others have the best in their hearts too. Generally most church people share this motive – “it is the good of the church.” The issue is, while motives can be similar, perspectives are not. As a result many churches find themselves in conflict making issues personal which causes hurt and pain, forgetting that it's about perspective. The good news is most churches eventually rise above the pain of the past, resolve issues and recover health and move on the journey.

I have learned that one of the most important, central learning in life is about accepting, receiving life as it is and letting go of life as it is. It's a paradox. You have to embrace life and let go of life. Receive life as a gift, and let the gift go free. Accept life, transform the parts that don't look like a gift, learn from them, and let go of the parts that diminish and lessen you. The serenity prayer has the right idea. Receive the gift. Change the parts you can, let go the parts you cannot change, and trust. This process not only brings meaning and joy to life, it also brings healing and wholeness.

We as individuals and as community continue on a journey, and I like to think that ours is a journey of learning and transforming, a journey of grace and gratitude. According to our plans we have another four months together to continue to make the journey meaningful, inspiring, transformational and healing. Let's continue to work on it. Let's walk together and let the Spirit continue to guide the journey into the unfamiliar.