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 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
 Texts: Genesis 18:1-14
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Whichever Route Love's Caravan Shall Take: The Gospel According to Our Tree of Life Partnership

The sun was streaming through our bus windows as we pulled into the driveway leading to the Mount of Beatitudes in the Galilee. The Mount of Beatitudes is the traditional site on the northern western shore of the Sea of Galilee in the region where Jesus taught and ministered to the crowds: His collection of blessings is familiar to many of us (Matthew 5:1-12):

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be filled. "Blessed are the peacemakers..."

Little did we know that COVID hours remained in place there so we were unable to enter the parking lot let alone walk the beautiful grounds and see the church. We were barred from entry.

True to the ever-present reality of the Occupation on the daily lives of Palestinians, we got a real taste of what life was like there for the communities we visited.¹ "Closed for lunch" was the explanation at the Mount of Beatitudes this time! So, like the Magi of long ago making their journey to the baby Jesus in a time of Roman occupation, we found another way. Jumping off the bus, we followed a dirt access road around the back, fencing on one side and the Sea of Galilee sparkling in the distance to our right. We made a circle in the dirt and offered our own homegrown beatitudes; for the courageous people we'd met thus far, for one another and our growing friendships and for all the miles we'd yet to go. We'd become a community caravan of friendship, love and hope.

The journey -as you'll hear from some of us in a moment- was a pilgrimage of extremes; On the one hand, we witnessed the full-blown cruelty of the Occupation. From the deportations at Tel Aviv airport of two Syrian-American teenagers from the Berlin Mosque, sisters Rim and Rahaf, to the intimidating checkpoints we passed through manned by teenage Israeli soldiers with assault rifles any time we entered Israel from the West Bank.

And then, the stark 40-foot cement separation wall of 400 plus miles-aptly called the "apartheid" wall by human rights activists around the world. It surrounds and carves up the occupied West Bank. Your bulletin cover is a picture taken at the wall in Bethlehem as we walked along. In addition, one can't help but see the spreading encroachment of illegal Israeli settlements on every hillside separating Palestinians from their livestock, land and community.²

On the opposite end of this state-sanctioned cruelty and institutionalized racism, we received the most extraordinary hospitality! We sat at numerous buffets, kitchen tables, and open-air Bedouin tents filled with Mediterranean feasts. We were served (my personal favorite),

¹ See https://www.btselem.org/duty_to_end_occupation

The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories strives for a future in which human rights, liberty and equality are guaranteed to all people, Palestinian and Jewish people alike, living between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.

² Jeff Halper, *An Israeli in Palestine: Resisting Dispossession, Redeeming Israel* (2008).

"Upside-down Chicken" (called *Maqluba*), as well as lamb kabobs, stuffed roasted eggplant, cucumber mint and tabouli salads, spicy Zatar pita, Baklava and sesame cookies, you name— it we ate it! All washed down with steaming cups of black tea stuffed to the brim with mint leaves.

This most generous welcome has a long and ancient history and resembles today's Old Testament story of Abraham and Sarah who rapidly set out a feast for their 3 mysterious visitors under the Oak tree of Mamre (Genesis 18:1-14). That sacred meal led to unexpected and miraculous blessings - and a laugh that still echoes in barren places.

On our journey, we met each day with brave people, voices of conscience -many of whom you may remember from their visits here and your own trip with the Tree of Life. For each of our journeys over the past 20 years, we have had the privilege of meeting courageous champions of justice, human rights and true peacemaking. And relying on the generosity of many of you who contribute to the TOLEF, we're able to offer honoraria as an offering for our ongoing gratitude! And our friends always fed us before sharing their stories whether we were in Bethlehem, the Negev desert, the Golan Heights or Nazareth.

The extremes of cruelty and inhumanity on the one hand (symbolized by *The Wall*) and abundant hospitality (*The Banquet Table*) on the other is the paradox; we're witnessing and holding, both. The cognitive dissonance visible brought to mind the philosopher, Hannah Arendt's, discussion of the "banality of evil."³

Likewise, the uncertainty of where and when violence might arise around us was as stressful as ever- even more so given the current radical government in power.

This year our intergenerational and interfaith group of 29 joined the lineage of over 500 TOL travelers over the past 20 years...Thanks to Tree of Life founder, David Good, our Pastor Emeritus of FCCOL and the steadfast commitment of all of you...we are here in partnership with the Berlin Mosque. Once again, we have been utterly changed in our sojourn to what David has called, "this holy and unholy land of promise". Now that we're home, there's much work and advocacy and storytelling to be done.

Speaking of storytelling, I'd like to introduce several of our fellow travelers (Fatima Aly, Lecia Harbison, Ken Roberts, Mansoor Bilal, and Kate Summerlin).

Fatima is one of the many remarkable college students from the Berlin Mosque whom we traveled with. Here is my new friend and Harvard University undergraduate, Fatima: Welcome Fatima: *Salaam a leikum!*

(After speakers)

Believe me, we have many more stories to share. May these stories cling to our hearts. They reveal who we are as a people of faith and justice seeking to...

Here this prayer by the 12th c Sufi philosopher, Ibn Arabi,

There was a time I would reject those who were not of my faith. But now, my heart has grown capable of taking on many forms.

It is a pasture for gazelles, an abbey for monks, a table for Torah, Kaaba for the pilgrim.

My religion is love.

Whichever route love's caravan shall take, that shall be the path of my faith.

Amen!

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/aug/29/hannah-arendt-adolf-eichmann-banality-of-evil>

Kate Summerlin: Abridged version of Palestinian reflection

My heart broke into a thousand pieces on this trip. I was not unprepared, I had read *Apeirogon*, by Colum McCann, a story of two fathers, one Israeli and one Palestinian. *Apeirogon*, derived from the Greek word meaning 'boundless', today resides in the vocabulary of math. It is a type of generalized polygon with a countably infinite number of sides. The perfect one-word description for the endlessly complicated Israeli/Palestine conflict.

Though I didn't have any skin in this game and can't come close to understanding the complicated acts of mutual aggression, I am a witness to the realities of both Israeli and Palestinian life and therein lies the heartbreak. You've heard a litany of these situations here today.

As a bystander to these conflicts it was hard not to feel overwhelmed yet I could perceive a spirit of hope. As unlikely as it might seem it was manifested in the eyes of all the Palestinians we met. Somewhere in their oppression they found a resiliency that translated into a belief in goodness. Yes, goodness, even a desire to work it out with those they perceived as the enemy. It was hard to fathom but it was real and palpable.

Each Palestinian we met seemed to radiate a kind of positiveness despite the pain and challenges. Perhaps this is best understood in the words of philosopher Mark Nepo. 'Eventually, all the love, suffering, and humility we go through wear away our walls of resistance until the Spirit shines from within us like an inner sun. This is how the spirit is revealed on earth-as the coverings we carry are worn away by life, the light we carry can pour into the world.'

Truly, the Palestinians we met beamed their light into a dysfunctional world opening up a way to live and love despite the conflict. Somehow, they were able to discover a truth in the goodness they carried within. Everywhere we went we were met with smiles, food and a generosity of spirit that couldn't help but be contagious.

So, what started out as a spiritual pilgrimage, defined by Richard Rohr as "a move in two directions at the same time—an outward direction toward a holy destination and an inward journey seeking an encounter with the sacred" turned into something w(holy) unexpected for me.

Though I knew I was on a journey of social justice awareness I also longed for an inward experience of holiness. In the immediate, it seemed that the outward direction overwhelmed the inner journey. When asked if I had a spiritual encounter with the sacred my first response was 'no'. Not in the cathedrals, not in the cave where Jesus was born, not in the site of the Annunciation. I was awed and humbled but did not encounter the sacred touchstone I longed for.

It wasn't until days after my return when the processing continued that I realized that the inward and outward pathways were moving simultaneously, one occurring next to the other. It wasn't in the bricks and mortar, stones, and shrines that the divine revealed itself but it was in the living, shining eyes of the Palestinians where the sacred God resided. In our shared humanity and faith. It was in walking the walk with fellow travelers, who like me, were forever transformed by 9 days of traveling in a land called Holy. A land of disparate realities, traditions, pain, sorrows, and yet miracles. And in the end, it is in the miracle called faith where love resides that I came to understand was the real place where the slow work of healing a broken heart begins.