

Life in all its fullness

John 10:1-10

May 7, 2017

Jonathan Yarngo has made his home among us. He was born in Liberia, but he has lived for twelve years now in the United States, in Minnesota and in Iowa. Four years ago, Jonathan became a naturalized citizen of this country.

Jonathan Yarngo has made his home among us, the members of the First Congregational United Church of Christ family. He has been attending worship here for a number of years and two years ago, on a Sunday in April, he was received as a new member. You may remember the resplendent African outfit he wore for that special day -- red and gold and maroon. Jonathan lives among us, he is one of us, but that does not mean he has left behind his African heritage, or his love for his homeland and its people.

Jonathan has made his home among us and we know him. We know him well enough to love him, to appreciate his faith and his faithfulness, his eagerness to join us in worship and in service. He joined us two years ago on a Habitat build for a Burmese family and has many times shared with us his delicious homemade rice dishes.

But most of us, myself included, know very little about his story and the story of his homeland. Does it matter? Does it matter that we know?

What does it mean to be a church? What does it mean to be a family? What does it mean to be brothers and sisters in Christ, not merely to share seats in a sanctuary once a week, but to share our lives with each other?

Of course it matters that we know! So let me tell you a little bit of Jonathan's story ...

Jonathan was born in the Republic of Liberia. An image of the Liberian flag is printed on the front cover of your bulletin. Does it look familiar? There are many connections, many common features, between his homeland and ours.

His homeland is a young nation by global standards, as its ours. We have not yet celebrated our two hundred and fiftieth anniversary. That is still nine years away. When you consider the thousand years of England's existence and the histories of Greece and Italy and Russia which are much longer yet, you realize just how young our nation is.

Liberia declared its independence in 1847, so it is younger still. It is, like us, a nation of immigrants, its people, like ours, crossing an ocean to make a new home. Settlement of Liberia began in 1822, as free blacks and freed slaves from the Caribbean and the United States were encouraged to move there. The American Colonization Society instigated the resettlement, believing African-Americans and Afro-Caribbeans could live better there, free from the constraints and social limitations placed on them here.

So, like our own nation, Liberia was born out of the promise of a better life. And, like our own nation, the realization of that promise is as yet incomplete and has meant struggle and pain along the way. The settlers of Liberia displaced and usurped indigenous populations as did the settlers of this country, and they too had their civil war. Liberia has suffered two civil wars, both in the last twenty-five years, resulting in the death and displacement of 500,000 people and leaving many in the nation in deep poverty.

The war made Jonathan a refugee. He went first to neighboring Sierra Leone, only to return to Liberia once the fighting stopped. But shortly after he returned home, the fighting erupted again. He landed this time in Ghana.

Jonathan tells me he lived eight years in Ghana, in a UNHCR refugee camp where he worked as a telephone operator. It was his job to help people connect by phone with family members from whom they had been separated. When they didn't have money to make the calls, Jonathan would place the call anyway and tell them they could pay back later. Wherever he goes, people know him. Liberian refugees know him, the telephone man!

Jonathan relocated to the United States in 2005. March 16, he says, was the day he arrived. He settled first in Minnesota, then Cedar Rapids, and now Waterloo. Jonathan works at Tyson, he takes care of his two boys, Andrew and Prince, he has worked many gigs as a DJ, he is captain of his employee soccer team, and he is a member of our church family.

His story continues, but how has his past, his struggles, his displacement, affected him? You know! You know him! You know his kindness, his generosity, his gratitude, his faithfulness, his deep faith. "Trust in God," he says. "Give it up to God." Jonathan has lived, he lives, by putting his trust in God and by listening to the voice of the shepherd. And what has the shepherd given him? Life. Life in all its fullness.

Life in all its fullness. That's that Jesus came for, to give us life, life in all its fullness. Do you want it? Do you want life in all its fullness? Then listen to the voice of the shepherd, and you will have it. You will have life in all its fullness.

But what is it? How would you describe it -- life in all its fullness? I asked that question to members of our program staff this last Tuesday afternoon. Let me share with you their responses, our responses.

Hannah said that life in all its fullness would be a life that was especially good: full of joy, full of love, full of everything good. It would be a life brimming over with all the good things God gives.

Ben said life in all its fullness would be a life that includes the full spectrum of human experience: sorrow as well as joy, struggle as well as success. Because it is the one that makes the other all the sweeter and because it is simply part of being human, of living the fullness of life. Jesus himself knew the full range of human experience and emotion: joy and grief, friendship and enmity, intimacy and rejection.

Miah said life in all its fullness means knowing that the life you have is good, no matter what. This life we have, as it is, is good, because we have it, because God gives it. We experience life in all its fullness when we embrace the life we have, when we live fully into the life we have.

And I said life in all its fullness would be a life that is not closed off, closed in, self-contained. Life in all its fullness is a life that includes so much more than me, so much more than my neighborhood, so much more than the life with which I am already familiar.

Life in all its fullness means knowing and embracing people different from me, places and ways and customs and ideas different from mine.

Life in all its fullness means seeing all the different colors, hearing all the different sounds, experiencing new ways of experiencing the world and new ways of praising its Maker.

We enjoy life in all its fullness when we are conscious of our place as one part of the glorious and wonderfully diverse body of Christ on this earth, when we love the church, as Pope Francis says, for the “beauty of her varied face.”

In just a moment, we will sing the communion hymn, including this verse:

*Jesus call us in, sends us out
bearing fruit in a world of doubt,
gives us love to tell, bread to share:
God (Immanuel) everywhere*

God (Immanuel) everywhere. God in Iowa. God in Liberia. God in Burma. God in Nicaragua. God in Haiti. God in Korea. God is everywhere, because God is everywhere! Our world, our lives, are filled with God.

It is God who fills us up. It is God who gives us life in all its fullness. Our lives are full when they are full of God. Our lives are full when they are full of God. Our lives are full of God anyway, whether we are aware of it or not, but it sure makes for a happy life to know it, doesn't it?