

20 June 2021
Ruth 1:1-18; 4: 13-15
Stories of
Relationships
First Mennonite
Church



Ruth's story is one of the better-known stories of a woman in the Bible. Ruth is regularly held up as a model of steadfastness, loyalty, and faithfulness not only for what she did but for what she said:

*But Ruth said,
'Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.
Where you die, I will die—
there will I be buried.
May the Lord do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!'* (Ruth 1:16-17)

My, what beautiful words of loyalty, and faithfulness! It's no wonder that these words have become popular at weddings. On one level I understand why a bride and groom might want to say such beautiful words to each other...but on another level—**who** are the words spoken to?



Before I tell you, I want to show you this. Those of you who love plants and flowers may know what this is. Some plant enthusiasts say this is one of the toughest plants around. You will notice its slick sword-like long leaves.

These beautiful words of loyalty and faithfulness in the book of Ruth are not from the dreamy eyes of the groom to the bride on a wedding day, but from **Ruth towards her mother-in-law!** These words in Ruth contrast sharply with our cultural stereotypes of mother-in-laws, which can be summed up in this plant, called the mother-in-law tongue.

This story about Ruth and Naomi is an incredible story of relationship ...with good reason. But in case we've forgotten some of the details, let's recall her story once again.

In Israel's history, there was a time, between the conquest of the land and the time that Israel became a nation, that the twelve tribes formed a loose confederation, ran their own affairs for the most part but banded together in times of trouble. The general and predictable pattern during this period went something like this: began in right relationship to the Lord, then Israel sinned and fell away, and then were drawn back to the Lord by some crisis or hardship. The Judges were charismatic leaders which rose up during these crises and provided needed leadership until the crisis had passed.



The story of Ruth takes place during this period. When famine strikes the land, a man of the tribe of Judah named Elimelech takes his wife Naomi and his two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, to live in Moab, a country on the other side of the Dead Sea from the territory of Judah. You can see my blue arrow at the bottom right of the map showing where Moab is located. While there, however, Elimelech dies. Naomi and her sons stay, and eventually the two boys marry Moabite women named Orpah and Ruth. Ten years go by, and then Mahlon and Chilion die as well.

By this time, the famine is past, and Naomi plans to return to her home. But she urges her daughters-in-law to stay in Moab, because she knows that they have no particularly bright future back in Judah. When they protest out of loyalty that they want to stay with Naomi, she reminds them that she has no

more sons to give them as husbands and therefore she can offer them no security or future. At this, Orpah relents and turns to stay with her family in Moab, but Ruth insists on following her mother-in-law, Naomi with these moving and beautiful words in vs 16-17.

*'Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.
Where you die, I will die—
there will I be buried.
May the Lord do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!*

In any event, Ruth follows Naomi into an uncertain future. But the Lord rewards Ruth with safety, security, and a future when she married Boaz, a wealthy man who is related to Naomi through Elimilech and who is impressed by Ruth's steadfastness. And Boaz and Ruth bear a son named Obed, and in time Obed bears a son he names Jesse, who in time bears several sons, the youngest of which is named David, the one who becomes king of Israel.

Of course, this isn't the end of this story, at least for those of us who love reading biblical genealogies! We know from Matthew's gospel that David's lineage extended to Joseph who just happened to be the father of Jesus. While we esteem Ruth so highly because of her great steadfastness and loyalty, I'm struck by how **God turned a simple relationship between a Hebrew and Moabite woman into such a strong link in the biblical story of salvation.**

Can you think of such a story in your life?

I have a Chinese friend whose name is Guo Xu. He lives in Beijing and is a successful international lawyer. When I met Guo Xu many years ago, he told me of his deep desire to do whatever he could to help the Mennonite work in China. Why would he say this to me, a MCC worker living and working in China at the time?



Stephen H. Wang with fiancée Zhang Rui-ling in 1933

But before I tell you more about Guo Xu, I need to tell you about Guo Xu's grandfather as he is an important part to the story. Guo Xu's grandfather was Stephan Wang. Stephan Wang was born in 1905 during the last days of the Qing Dynasty and died in 1997. Stephan Wang's mother was a peasant woman with bound feet. His father was a Confucian scholar. Both Stephan Wang's parents converted to Christianity and became evangelists for the Mennonite mission in what is now Henan Province. In 1927, both were shot by wandering bandits during a preaching tour.



Guo Xu's grandfather, Stephan Wang, attended the Huamei High School, which was founded by Mennonite Missionary E.G. Kauffman. Stephan Wang and

one of his classmates, James Liu

both showed great promise in their studies and were later invited by the Mennonites to go abroad and attend Bethel College, in Newton, Kansas. Stephan Wang graduated from Bethel College in 1932.

Fast forward to China's Cultural Revolution, a turbulent and violent time, which lasted from 1966-1976. Because of Stephan Wang's foreign education, the entire family was labelled "rightists", which in China at the time, was a bad label. Guo Xu's parents were forced to leave their home in the city and go work in the countryside. As Guo Xu was still a child, he stayed with his grandparents. Over these 10 years, Guo Xu was deeply influenced by his grandparents while his parents were away.

Back to the grandfather, Stephan Wang. Back in the 1920s, I imagine that the Mennonite missionaries wanted to train Stephan Wang in university so that he eventually take over the leadership of the Huamei School. I don't think the Mennonite missionaries ever dreamt that their relationship with Stephan

Wang would have an impact, not in the 1930s or the 1940s, not even in the 1980s, but almost 100 years later when I lived there from 1998—2014.

My relationship and friendship with Guo Xu was largely because of the Mennonite Missionaries' relationship with Stephan Wang almost 100 years ago. Guo Xu is profoundly grateful for how the Mennonites helped his grandfather get an education and wanted to do whatever he could to help. And he did. The Suderman family could not have remained in China for as long as we did without his legal help. All the good work in the name of Christ MCC was able to do in China would not have been possible without Guo Xu's legal help.

I imagine that Naomi and Ruth, like the Mennonite missionaries and Stephan Wang, never dreamed about how their simple relationships would be used by God to further God's purposes in the world.

The biblical story is all about relationships: God's relationship with the world, God's relationship with Israel, and God's ongoing relationship with you and me. The gospels are filled with stories about Jesus' relationship with all sorts of people, including tax collectors like Matthew, fishermen like Peter and John, and others like the Samaritan woman or Mary Magdalene. Matthew the tax collector began to follow Jesus but never dreamed how his relationship with Jesus would change his life. He not only became an apostle, but later he also wrote a gospel. Likewise, Mary Magdalene, never dreamed that her relationship with Jesus would result in her being the first to bear witness to the resurrection.

"I have seen the Lord"! These words from those very first witnesses to the empty tomb and the encounter with Jesus summarized what they had experienced. They had faith. From their faith came a group of believers, the Church. From the faith of the Christians in the church came the testimony to what they had seen and heard. We find their testimony in the books that comprise the New Testament. The church today, you and me, stand as a visible testimony to their witness.

God's story continues with you and me. It continues in our lives, in the stories we share with our family and friends, and in our relationships.



When my spouse and I were MCC's NE Asia Representatives, my spouse travelled to NK many times on behalf of MCC to manage a conservation agriculture project MCC had there, oversaw the distribution of canned meat, dried apples and soup mix from the Gleaners in BC, blankets and quilts—some of which may have come from the very hands who made these quilts that we blessed today, and soy beans, which the recipients of this material aid ground up to make soy milk to

give to small children living in orphanages in different parts of the country.

On one occasion when my spouse couldn't make the trip to NK, I went instead. And I wound up at



an orphanage where I checked to make sure the material aid MCC

sent had wound up in the right place. At this one orphanage, I found that the canned meat, the bags of soybeans, and the blankets MCC sent had arrived.





While I was there, I came across these boys on a playground who were the same age. Both were 11 years old but had quite different starts to their still young lives. The one on your right had obviously had some nutrition when he was a baby and toddler, while the one on the left didn't. This lack of nutrition early on had stunted his growth; this child was not tall; only came up to my waist. Yet, he was 11 years old! I imagined that this lack of nutrition would probably result in shortened lifespan and/or long-term mental and physical problems.

As I reflected on these two boys, I thought of all the people like my mother who volunteered as a meat canner, the farmers who grew, harvested and donated soybeans, all the way to those who spent time getting all the material, organizing people, and use their hands to stitch, sew, and

tie blankets and quilts so that they could be used by someone in some part of the world to stay warm. People were doing these things not because they knew all these people around the world, but because of their relationship with Jesus, and Jesus' call to love and care for others.

I sometimes think, "oh, wouldn't it be nice if I could return to that place and find those two boys to see if these donated items made a difference in their lives." Then again, that isn't the point.

Like I said earlier, God's story continues with you and me. It continues in our lives, in the stories we share with our family and friends, and in our relationships with those we know and love and with those we don't know anything about. We don't know what, if any, impact our stories and our relationships with others will have over the long-term. And we don't have to know; all God calls us to do is to be faithful, to live our lives in hope and trust that God is working in the world and is doing so through you and me.

God can do incredible, earth-shattering, transformational things though our simple acts of faith. The question is, do we have the ears to hear it, the eyes to see it? Thanks be to God!