

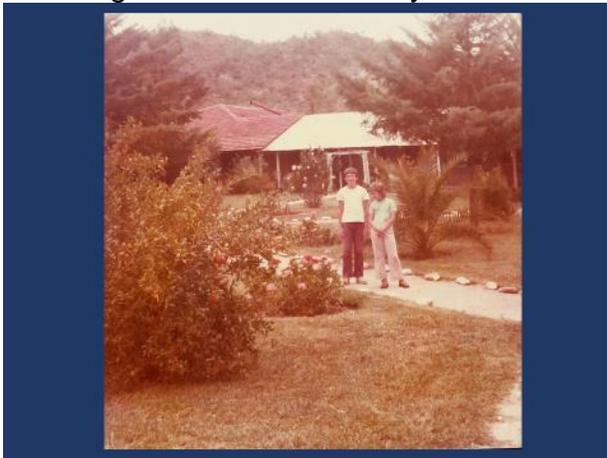
I. Intro.:

A. In June of 1976 it was hot in central Kansas, as usual.

Gerald Ford was president of the United States and the country was getting ready for a huge celebration of its bicentennial on that 4th of July.

But in Hesston a 12-year-old boy was focused on getting ready to travel with his parents and younger sister to live in Bolivia for three years. His parents would be serving God under Mennonite Central Committee there and he was along for the ride, not really sure what to expect. He was sad about leaving his junior high friends behind yet he wasn't resisting the move. In fact, he was excited about the adventure of living in this exotic little-known country in South America. He would have to learn Spanish but somehow that didn't seem too scary.

In one way, he knew exactly where he was going: to the little town of Cotoca, 14 miles east of the big city of Santa Cruz, where MCC had its headquarters. His dad would work in health care with a few other MCC nurses trying to improve the lives of rural tuberculosis patients. Meanwhile he & his 4th grade sister would be attending a mission boarding school 5 hours away in the mountains. They had never lived away from Mom & Dad before so this was the scariest part of it.



All these details of where he was going ... he had some idea in advance. But looking back later on those 3 eventful years, he really could have had no clue where those experiences would actually take him:

- Learning to speak Spanish much better than his parents ever did
- Learning to understand & appreciate many aspects of Latino culture
- Getting a minute glimpse of what it feels like to be a minority in a foreign land
- Observing firsthand the impact of widespread poverty, even while some of the poorest people were incredibly generous to share the little they had with guests
- Witnessing extreme inequities between rich and poor, as well as the injustices of systems that disempower indigenous people
- Worshiping with rural Spanish-speaking Bolivian congregations in lively and informal services that were totally unlike the worship he knew from Hesston Mennonite Church ... and yet undeniably this was the richness of the Kingdom of God!

B. Those were absolutely the 3 most influential years of that young man's life ... that is ... MY LIFE.

1. Those 3 years forever impacted my values, my theology, my view of the world.
2. In many ways, those experiences set the trajectory of my life moving toward places I never dreamed of going.
3. Though I didn't know what I was getting into when setting off on this adventure ... God knew.

II. Last month, 41 years later, I returned for the first time back to my old junior high stomping grounds in Bolivia.

A. Janette & I had the privilege of joining 7 people from 2 other Goshen congregations on a learning tour to witness the current programs and ministries of MCC in Bolivia.



1. It didn't hurt, of course, that our daughter Leah was already serving there in Bolivia through MCC's SALT program.
2. For me, returning to Bolivia felt a little like going home.
 - a) I was going home to the scenes of my youth ... home to the place of my spiritual and social awakening.
 - b) What's more precious, I got to share some of these special places and memories with Janette and with my children.

B. I'm very grateful for our congregation's assistance with some funds through the Mission & Service Ministry Team that helped make this trip possible for Janette & me

C. One of the highlights for me of this learning tour was the Sunday morning we worshiped with the Principe de Paz Mennonite Church in Santa Cruz.



1. Pastor Ona Saucedo is also head of the whole conference of Spanish-speaking Bolivian Mennonite churches.

2. A few years younger than me, he still remembers me and my family from those days 40 years ago when we were both kids.

3. Pastor Ona's sermon 4 weeks ago directly inspired me to follow his lead and also preach this morning from the book of Ruth.

III. He started by retelling the basic story of Ruth (which is not a bad thing for me to do either)

A. Background

1. In Bethlehem of Judea, about a thousand years before Jesus was born there, a famine struck Palestine. For people depending on farming and livestock, extended drought could mean starvation.

2. This story tells us of one Israelite man, Elimelech and his wife Naomi

a) They are so desperate that they're willing to leave behind their very families ... their family's lands ... their friends and the culture and language that they know.

b) That's ironic, considering Bethlehem literally means "house of food", yet people are going hungry in the "house of food"

3. Elimelech & Naomi have 2 sons they're responsible for ... the hardship of not being able to even feed their own children probably pushes them over the edge to go start over in a new land

B. But what a strange & hostile land!

1. They don't choose just any neighboring nation, but they choose Moab!

a) Throughout the OT, there's a history of hostility between the Israelites & Moabites

b) Yet here they are, a foreign husband and wife with a family, settling down as resident aliens in a land that is able to feed them, but a land that probably doesn't warmly welcome them (*Hmm ... do you think any of our Latino neighbors in Goshen can identify with that narrative ...?*)

2. The fact that the 2 boys grow up and marry Moabite women is

evidence that this move to Moab is not just temporary

3. Sometime later tragedy strikes Naomi when Elimelech dies, leaving her a vulnerable widow ... but at least she has sons and daughters-in-law to provide for her, right?

- a) About 10 years after her sons marry, they also both die ...
- b) So suddenly here is Naomi with 3 strikes against her in that ancient culture: She's a woman ... a foreigner ... with no family!

C. Receiving word that the famine is over back in Judah, it's no wonder that she decides her only choice is to return to her own people in Bethlehem ...

1. Maybe they will take care of her in her old age since apparently God has abandoned her!

- a) Orpah & Ruth, the daughters-in-law, offer to go with Naomi back to her homeland, but Naomi recognizes how her own future is so much bleaker than theirs, that this wouldn't be fair
- b) She knows that these childless women could simply return to their own families in Moab. They could find support & potentially still have children by marrying again

2. Naomi pressures her daughters-in-law to go back & make lives for themselves while they still can

- a) Orpah does the reasonable thing ... bids farewell & goes back to her own family
- b) But Ruth is either admirably loyal or else she's just foolish ... she clings to Naomi despite the older woman's admonition not to throw in her lot with someone so accursed
- c) Ruth's amazing love and dedication, beyond the power of blood, is revealed in these famous poignant lines of v 16

IV. (Courage & risk-taking)

A. These two women are such incredible models of courage and risk-taking

- 1. It took a lot of faith for Naomi & her husband to leave everything behind for the hope of a new life in a hostile place
- 2. Once all their husbands were dead, and Ruth's mother-in-law was about to leave forever, then the tables were turned & Ruth's courage matched Naomi's
 - a) It would have been so much easier for her to stay within the

relatively safe boundaries of her own country & just let Naomi go

b) Now Ruth was going to be the outsider, the foreigner, the one people were suspicious of ...

c) With no family, and not even born an Israelite, she might be ostracized or ignored ... and likely to have to live off the charity of others (or resort to prostitution) to avoid starving

B. In his sermon Pastor Ona spoke of the great risks & vulnerability taken on by both Naomi & Ruth

1. Ona was preaching in a congregation and conference that basically began thru Bible studies that MCCers had led in local towns ... these groups of believers were grown and strengthened by foreign missionaries in the 1970s and 80s.

2. Like Naomi & Ruth in the Bible, Ona recalled the risk-taking and boundary-crossing of those Mennonite missionaries from 30 & 40 years ago ...

a) People who left their homes in Argentina & the US to spread the Gospel & grow Anabaptist churches in Bolivia ...

b) People like Steve & Debbie Fath who worked with these very churches in the 1980s

It was so touching for me to hear Pastor Ona recall how he was counseled and baptized by Steve Fath when Ona was a youth

The man who is today the leader of the Bolivian Mennonite conference of churches considers Steve Fath his spiritual father

3. The Spanish-speaking Bolivian Mennonite church is now under its own leadership without foreign missionaries, but they recognize and appreciate how early on there were people willing to step across borders ... be the foreign sojourners, kind of like Naomi & Ruth

C. Naomi & Ruth's stories can often be hard for us settled North Americans to relate to, especially if we're in the majority group

1. How many of you have ever been refugees, or started a new long-term life for yourself, living in a country or culture that's not your own? (not talking about just temporarily for a year or 2)

a) Look around ... we have such people among us: Mariko Claassen ... Stan & Ursula Green ... Daphcar & Bervalie Lehman ... Mauricio & Irma Robles ... Pushpa King ... The Ross Richer family ... Carlos & Celina Romero ... Jan Oostland

b) Ask them sometime how they personally identify with Naomi or Ruth as migrants in the Bible

2. But it's not only nationalities and countries: what about people who did not grow up Mennonite at all but chose to be in the Mennonite church or who married a Mennonite?

a) People like Cindy Voth ... JE & Katie Misz ... Vicki Weirich ... Matt Bateman ... Karen Sommers ... Chris & Lori Judson

b) Ask these folks some time to talk about how it feels to be a religious minority

3. All of these folks I've just named in some way know what it's like to be an outsider or a foreigner ... and I used their names with permission ... but our own life experiences do affect how we relate to many Bible stories

V. Pastor Ona reminded us that God often chooses to speak to us precisely when we are outside of our comfort zone

A. Earlier I mentioned some insights I gained about the kingdom of God and how the good news of Jesus Christ truly transcends any particular culture ...

1. God revealed those things to me precisely when I was living in Bolivia, making mistakes in another language and culture and seeing "church" happening in new ways all around me

2. There is no way I could have absorbed these messages from God by simply reading books about Bolivia or hearing inspiring sermons

3. I had to actually take a risk, put myself in a place of being an outsider or enter a relationship where I was not the one in power

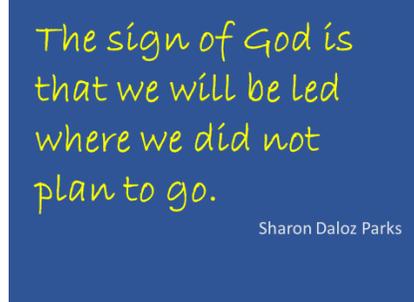
B. I find that the more we are settled in our ways, the more comfortable we are, then we become not very open to God's message ... not open for God to do anything new with us

C. Just this week I read an opinion blog reflecting on events of the recent Orlando MCUSA convention

1. It was written by Ken Gingerich of Albuquerque, NM who appreciated how some of the apparent new direction for our denomination is coming from "nontraditional" Mennonite voices

2. But what caught my eye in connection with the biblical story of Ruth and with this Bolivia trip was a favorite phrase that Gingerich likes to quote from Sharon Daloz Parks:

- a) *The sign of God is that we will be led where we did not plan to go.*
 (<https://themennonite.org/en/entry/led-places-not-plan-go/>, accessed 7/22/17)



- b) The idea certainly has precedence in biblical characters, from Abraham to Moses to Jeremiah to the apostles Peter and Paul ... they all found God leading them to places where they hadn't intended to arrive

D. I've certainly seen this quote played out in life

1. As I hinted earlier, although I knew in advance as a youth I was going to Bolivia, I had no idea of how God would use those powerful experiences to take me to new places
2. And while in Bolivia recently again, I saw several MCC examples of boundary-crossing people doing God's work and being led to places they hadn't expected

- a) I saw it in Brisa, her husband Parker and all of the staff of a Bolivian organization whose name translated means "A Breeze of Hope Center" ...

This group has dared to break silences about sexual abuse in Bolivia in order to provide support and hope for a better future to children and youth who have been victimized

- b) I saw it in Rebecca Nimtze & the dedicated Bolivian staff of Casa



de Amistad

In Bolivia some children actually live in the prison where a parent is an inmate, sometimes living there for years

Casa de Amistad provides a safe place and resources for these children, creating a wholesome community

c) I saw unexpected boundary-crossing in the ministries of Otto & Lidia Funk, and Freddy & Rowena Hiebert, who work with the low German-speakers from isolated Mennonite colonies. The Funks and the Hieberts



are constantly straddling uncomfortable lines of the freedom we have in Christ vs. the security of certain traditions of not conforming to worldly ways

The sign of God is that we will be led where we did not plan to go.

Sharon Daloz Parks

VI. Repeat quote ...)

A. Are there places you didn't plan to go, where you can now see that God was leading?

1. The hard part sometimes is seeing or believing God's leading us, when our own plans aren't working out.
2. This is especially true for many of us who feel more comfortable in planning and controlling things than adjusting to the Holy Spirit

B. If you are one of these kinds of folks ... if you never arrive any place that you haven't planned and insured that you would go, as a Xian you might want to re-examine if God has been in those plans at all ...

1. Or did your rigid plans and timelines take away space for God to operate?
2. When God is leading, God often takes us to places we didn't plan to go ... They are not always familiar or comfortable places, but they are usually better places in the end

C. Are we seeing in our personal lives signs of the God who leads in this way?

1. Are such signs at work here in the congregation?

2. More importantly, are we placing ourselves at God's disposal to take some risks for His Kingdom?
3. If the Spirit so moves us, are we willing to cross some boundaries that will open doors to new destinations God might have in mind for us?
4. I invite you to prayerfully sing the response song, "Will you come and follow me", which is essentially asking the same questions ...