

“Where you go I’ll go”

Good Morning. What a great place to be on this beautiful morning here in Houghton. My name is Katja Falker and I am not the pastor at this wonderful church, but my husband is. Since he is at summer camp with two of my children, I am excited to take his place this morning and share my message with you.

Our family has had quite a busy spring. We have spent time with family celebrating Jonah’s confirmation, attended Emily’s last dance recital, celebrated Emily’s high school graduation, celebrated Eric’s ordination at Annual Conference in Traverse City, and have taken Emily to her college freshman orientation. All this and summer with its accompanying adventures is just starting.

I am so glad that you decided to come and join us in worship this morning. If you are here for the first time today, I want you to know that we welcome you with open hearts. Let the person next to you or an usher know if you need any help and I’m sure they would be more than happy to assist you.

And now, I invite you to pray with me.

Almighty Father, we are here to receive your Word. We know that you have something to tell us today, and we are ready to listen. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to You, LORD, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Have you ever wondered what life would have been like for you if you had been born in a different country? Or if you had moved across borders for some reason?

[map of Moab] Take a moment and try to imagine what Naomi and her family must have felt like moving to Moab. We just read that Elimelech decided to move his family away from Bethlehem. He knew that the famine was a great threat to them and decided that the unknown was a risk worth taking to make sure he could keep providing for his family. He risked the journey to a country

with a different language, a different culture, and different gods to make sure that his family was taken care of. The Bible does not tell us how old Mahlon and Chilion were when Elimelech and Naomi moved their family to Moab, but we do learn that they were still in Moab when the two sons are old enough to get married.

Even though Israelites are not supposed to marry foreigners, Mahlon and Chilion marry Moabite women when their father dies. They make their relationships work, despite the differences. Unfortunately, both of Naomi's sons die before they are able to have children with their new wives. Now Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah are left on their own, without a man to protect them and provide for them. At the time this story takes place, being a widow without any family support was one of the worst things that could happen to you.

[Naomi, Ruth, Orpah] Naomi hears that the famine in Judah has ended and decides to return to her own country. She knows how hard life in a foreign place is and tells Orpah and Ruth to return to their families so that they can get remarried.

Orpah accepts after some initial opposition and leaves. Ruth, however, insists to stay with Naomi. Her words to Naomi are captured in the scriptures we read earlier.

Ruth 1:16-17

¹⁶ But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. ¹⁷ Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me."

Naomi realizes that Ruth will not change her mind and finally agrees to let her come with her. The two women travel to Judah together and reach their destination just in time for the barley harvest.

[Boaz and Ruth] Ruth decides to go and glean fallen grains behind the harvesters to provide for herself and her mother-in-law. Without her knowledge, she picked the field of Elimelech's relative Boaz. Boaz notices how hard Ruth works and he tells her to only follow his workers for safety. He lets her drink the water that his workers bring with them and explains to her that he is impressed with the way she so selflessly takes care of her mother-in-law.

When Ruth arrives back home, she tells Naomi about the encounter and Naomi explains that Boaz is a close relative and can act as a kinsman redeemer. Boaz is eligible to marry Ruth and would be able to help the two women escape their hopeless situation. The two women come up with a plan.

Ruth finds Boaz at night on the threshing floor and asks him to claim his right as a kinsman redeemer. While Boaz agrees to marry Ruth but he explains to her that there is a closer relative, whose right to Ruth would trump Boaz's.

The next morning Boaz meets the other relative at the gate and tells him about Ruth's situation. The other relative does not have the necessary funds to redeem the land that belonged to Elimelech and with that earn the right to marry Ruth. That frees the way for Boaz to follow through on his promise.

[Ruth, Boaz, Baby, Naomi] As was the custom Ruth and Boaz's first son, Obed, was considered Mahlon's son. He became the grandfather of King David. (I Chr. 2:12) He is also mentioned in Jesus' genealogy in Matthew 1:5.

This very human story of Ruth and her family describes role models, who live in goodness, dedication, and fear of God. There is the dedication and righteousness Ruth shows by not leaving Naomi. Naomi shows faithfulness by helping Ruth come up with a bold way of letting Boaz know what he can do for them. There is the dedication and faithfulness Boaz shows by following levitical law, purchasing Elimelech's land and marrying Ruth,

Despite all this, the real focus is on God, who allows loss and grief, but whose mercy and grace don't end. He guides those, who dedicate their lives to him, through their human hardships. Therefore Ruth's simple family story ends

up in God's great story of redemption. Ruth may not have grown up knowing about the God of Israel, but she opened her heart and embraced what her husband's family shared with her wholeheartedly.

[Sticky Note Face] I don't know about you, but if you have ever visited another country, you know how hard it can be to find your way in a different culture. Depending on where you go, the language, the food, the way people dress, the belief system, and the way people interact with each other all contribute to something called culture shock. Our experiences as children and youth influence who we are when we grow up in a major way. We have certain expectations on how society works, that get turned upside down when we insert ourselves into a different culture.

However, the story of Ruth teaches us that no matter where we are born and how we grow up, we can overcome our cultural bonds and integrate ourselves in a totally different society.

I find the story of Ruth fascinating, and I have a deeper reason for sharing it with you today. Pastor Eric has been talking to us about the way our faith shapes our lives and how we can be a beacon for others. We are encouraged to teach our story, to share with others, how we got to know Jesus Christ.

Even though most of us are probably not called to be pastors, we can all tell our story and how it intersects with God's story.

By a show of hands, how many of you have ever told your story to someone else?

How many of you have told your story to more than one person at a time?

How many of you have told your story to a room full of people?

That is what preaching is. We take our own story and tell it to others. It doesn't matter how old you are, or whether you are male or female. If a 13-year-old boy can tell his story to a room full of adults including our bishop, we can all tell our story. Ask Lucas at some point about that experience.

Today I want to share my story with you. While I don't know all of your unique stories, I hope you can relate to mine in some ways.

[Salzwedel Map] I was born in August of 1979 in a small town in East Germany. My mom's parents left the church before my mom was born. My dad grew up in the Lutheran Church, but left when he was 18. In East Germany belonging to the church was discouraged if you wanted to do anything other than work after you finished 10th grade.

So obviously I did not grow up in the church. I would hear the church bells ring on Sunday mornings, but we did not attend services. I'm not sure how old I was exactly, but at some point in elementary school I asked my grandfather to take me to church one morning because I wanted to know what it was like.

[Church picture] I loved the Sunday School program and learning about the stories in the Bible. The times I was able to attend were few and far between as I would only go when I was at my grandparents' house.

Fast forward to the year I graduated from high school. I graduated in 1998, nine years after the Berlin Wall fell and eight years after the German Reunification. When I was in 5th grade our whole educational system was overhauled. Instead of learning Russian in school as the mandatory foreign language, I was part of the first class that had a choice between learning Russian and English.

After eight years of English classes, I was pretty fluent. I wasn't quite sure what I wanted to do after graduating, so I decided to spend a year in the US as an au pair. I found a host family in Maryland and took care of their 3-year-old daughter and their newborn son.

[Laurel sign] I arrived in Maryland on a Thursday afternoon in August, just a few days before my 19th birthday. When Sunday arrived and with that my actual birthday, I was pretty homesick. I called my parents first thing in the morning and had a good cry before I went downstairs to eat breakfast. I thought I had a good handle on my emotions, but when my host mom and the little girl I

was taking care of started singing 'Happy Birthday', I broke down and started bawling.

They both stared at me in shock and weren't quite sure what to make of my reaction. When I finally calmed down and reassured Natalie that I wasn't upset, but was just missing my parents, Cathy, my host mom, invited me to come to church with them.

Since I didn't want to stay home alone, I decided to join them. While I was fluent in English, I had learned British English in school and still had a hard time understanding American English. I had to watch people really closely and rely on lip reading along with the spoken word to understand what they were saying. That being said, my first experience with church in the US was nothing short of a miracle. I had never heard any of the hymns before but was able to sing every one of them without hesitation. I still remember the sermon to this day 25 years later. The title was "Just Do It" [fence sitting] The pastor had asked one of the lay members in the congregation to preach. He talked about sitting on the fence of faith. On one side there is the decision to follow Jesus fully and on the other side, there is life without Jesus. Sitting on the fence, with one foot on either side is not comfortable at all. He challenged us to think about where we were and to make a choice.

All day long, I thought about the sermon, and that night I made a decision. I decided that choosing Jesus could never be wrong.

You never know when your story will make a difference in someone else's life. I was in a foreign country, listening to a sermon preached by a layperson, because someone made the on-the-spot decision to ask me to go to church with them.

My heart was ready that day to hear the Good News. I will be forever grateful to all the people who were in the right place that day.

Standing in front of you today, I realize that telling our story to others is not always easy. Sometimes it is hard to even know how to start. We don't always

have someone in front of us who is ready for a blunt “You should come to church with me!”

[REACH] If you look at the screens, you will find a way you can R.E.A.C.H. out to others. I find that acronyms like this help me remember how to achieve my goals better.

The letter R helps you remember to Reveal that you are a Christian. It might seem as though my host mom skipped that step, but she had already told me before I decided on moving in with their family. I was happy to live with a family who believed in God and had a moral compass I could get behind. This step can happen right before you move on to the next step, or it can happen days, weeks, or months earlier.

The letter E encourages us to Extend an invitation to a church event or service. Sometimes this is a scary step. We never know how our invitation will be perceived. My son Jonah has a friend, who lived right next door to us when we lived in Bellaire. He invited her to come to join us for Sunday School or special events for two years before she accepted the invitation. Pastor Eric and I invested nearly 5 years into our friendship with her parents before they decided also to join us. We never pressured them to come, but let them know about special events and services. They finally took us up on the invitation on our last Easter Sunday in Bellaire. What a joy it was to see them walk into the sanctuary.

Moving on to the letter A, we should Ask if it is okay to share our story. Sometimes conversations naturally move in the direction of our faith and beliefs, but not always. I have a friend who grew up in a very conservative evangelical church. She has a very rocky and hurtful past with her relationship with churches and God. We were friends for quite a while before we ever talked about our faith journeys. She knew that I was a Christian, being a pastor’s wife kind of helps with establishing that, although it is not a given. I knew that her parents attended a different church in town and that she did not attend church, but we did not venture into sharing our faith stories until we knew each other much better.

In contrast, I shared my faith story with my doctor in St. Ignace the first time I met her, because she asked me about it. Situations are always important to consider when we share about ourselves.

Let's move on to the letter C. Communicate how and why you became a Christian. This one naturally follows immediately after the last step. Once the person we are talking to agrees to have us share our story, we can tell them how we decided to follow Jesus. This can be short and sweet or a lengthy, in-depth conversation. Just follow the lead of the other person.

The last step is the letter H, Help them know Christ personally. This step is absolutely awe-inspiring to me. Sometimes this can take quite a while. The heart of the other person has to be ready to receive. Some people are quick to make this decision and others will take lots of invitations. However, when the person you are talking to is ready to make that personal decision to fully follow Jesus, you can help them. Lead them in a simple prayer like this: "Dear Lord Jesus, Thank you for dying on the cross for my sin. Please forgive me. Come into my life. I receive You as my Lord and Savior. Now, help me to live for you the rest of this life. In the name of Jesus, I pray. Amen."

These steps are just a simple guide to help us realize that personal relationships are very important. They should be based on trust and have a give and take in them. When we take the time to really pay attention to the person we are talking to, we will be able to see if they are ready for the next step or not. None of these have to happen in rapid succession, but there is nothing wrong if they do. Sometimes other people have laid the groundwork and we are there to watch the completion. Keep investing in your relationships with others, no matter at what point they are on their path to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Remember that our past shapes our expectations, but that does not mean that we cannot change the course of our lives.

[sermon title]The little girl who was born 44 years ago in a socialist country to parents who didn't even attend church, has grown up to be the wife of a Methodist pastor and is standing in front of you today.

While I have not had to go through the hardships Ruth had to go through in our scripture today, I do know how hard it is to live in a different country, speak a different language, and serve a God that I did not know growing up. I know how important people are, who invest in us and don't give up on us. As Christians, we strive to be more like Christ every day and we should also share what we have found with those around us. I know I am not perfect. I know I make mistakes and I am not always the best person I can be. But I do work on getting it right more than getting it wrong. I try to learn from my mistakes and I am more than happy to learn from other people. I study God's word and share what I have learned with those around me.

Keep sharing your story.