

Stories of Peace

In 2009, a young woman from Arkansas was living and working in the country of Jordan. After many weekends driving around Jordan, she and her coworker, Stan, were ready for a new adventure. They had already driven to the Iraqi border twice, hoping to cross over – just to say they had done it. But the war was raging, so they chickened out both times, making a U-turn to head back home.

And then a Jordanian businessman randomly brought up the idea of travel to Syria. “I’ve got a guy. Want to go?” he asked. By *guy* he meant a professional middleman named Ali who could bribe them across the border. The border between Jordan and Syria was the Wild West, unpredictable and volatile, especially for American passport holders. But a few months later, Stan and Natalie, along with two additional American friends, were on their way to Syria in Ali’s big black sedan.

They waited at the border cafe for a long time while Ali went to work with the border control agents. Just when they started to wonder whether they’d have to turn around and drive back, Ali came bouncing toward them with a smile, fanning their stamped passports in the air. And so began their sojourn in Syria.

One evening they wandered into a nightclub. The waiter hustled to their table with a big smile.

“Hello! Where are you all from?” he asked.

“I’m Canadian, but they’re American,” Stan told him.

“American? Wow!” he sputtered. “What are you doing in Damascus?”

“Just for vacation,” they told him.

“Vacation? I can’t remember the last time I met an American here for vacation,” he said. “So, what do you think about Syria?”

“We’re actually loving it. We really love Syria,” Natalie told him.

The next thing they knew, big platters of food started arriving at their table.

“We didn’t order these,” Stan said.

“Oh no, but you are our guests here,” the waiter beamed. “For our new friends, the Americans!”

Natalie and her friends turned to their *guy*, Ali. “What’s this all about?”

“I don’t know,” he said smiling. “But this is normal in Syria.”

They soon joined the party with their Syrian brothers and sisters. Eating their food and dancing their dance and being on the receiving end of love from a globally marginalized group felt like a divine celebration.

Delicious food kept coming, and the drinks kept flowing, and the bill never came. Was it because of their stark surprise-turned-delight over seeing American tourists? Was it because they saw their country’s enemies as new friends? Was it because of Arab culture, which is known for its radical acts of hospitality? Perhaps it was all of the above.

They went to sleep that night on a happy high. They had just attended the kind of party Jesus said we should all throw – the kind where we invite people who can’t give us anything in return. Natalie and her companions were the glad recipients of that kind of divine inclusion.

This story comes from a book by Natalie Toon Patton titled *Wanderlost*.¹ As I read it, I thought of today’s Bible story. I wonder if this was the kind of hospitality David expected, Nabal refused to offer, and Abigail used to bring peace.

¹ Natalie Toon Patton, *Wanderlost: Falling from Grace and Finding Mercy in All the Wrong Places*, Paraclete Press, 2021, pp. 110-121.

Let's review the story as told in 1 Samuel 25.² Nabal was very rich. He owned 3,000 sheep and 1,000 goats. It was sheepshearing time, which was celebrated with feasting and generosity. His wife, Abigail, was smart and beautiful, but Nabal was mean-spirited and bad-tempered, an embarrassment to his tribe.

David was living in the wilderness to escape King Saul who kept trying to kill him. Several hundred of his supporters were with him. From his hiding place, David heard that Nabal was sheering his sheep, so he gathered 10 young men to send to Nabal asking for gifts.

This is what David told the young men to say to Nabal: "Live long. Peace be to you, your entire household, and all you possess. I hear that it is time to shear the sheep. I want you to know that your shepherds have been among us in the wilderness, and not only did we not harm them, but not an animal was taken during their time among us. Please return our kindness and look on my young men with favor since we come on this feast day. Please give whatever you can spare to them and to your son David."

When his men did as David instructed, Nabal's response was unexpected and unfriendly. "Who is David?" he said. "I've never heard of him, so he must be nothing more than a slave who abandoned his master. Should I take bread and water and meat from my own servants and give it to men who come from who knows where?"

David was greatly offended by this response and ordered his men to strap on their swords. He made an oath to kill every male of Nabal's household by the next morning. He and 400 men set off for battle while 200 remained behind.

One of Nabal's servants recognized his master's insolence and told Abigail, Nabal's wife, what was happening. "David sent messengers from the wilderness to salute our master, and Nabal returned their honor with insults. David's men have been very good to us. Nothing happened to us while we were with his company, and we never lost a single sheep in the fields in the time we were there. They were like a wall protecting us day and night the whole time we were near them keeping the sheep. You should know this and think about what to do next. Evil is coming to my master and his entire household if you don't do something. Nabal is so worthless that no one can talk to him."

Then Abigail, knowing the stakes, rushed about gathering gifts similar to what her husband should have offered: 200 loaves, 2 jugs of wine, 5 sheep (butchered and dressed), more than 50 quarts of roasted grain, 100 clusters of raisins, and 200 fig cakes. She had these loaded on donkeys and told her servants to go ahead with all the gifts. She would be right behind them. Abigail never stopped to speak to her husband Nabal. She had decided to approach David herself.

As she rode down the mountain on a hidden trail, David and his men were approaching, and they met. When Abigail saw David, she dropped quickly from her donkey and fell to the ground in front of him.

"My lord," she said, "any guilt here falls on me. You must not take seriously the words of this worthless man, Nabal. His actions have proven that his name and his nature are the same: Nabal is a fool. Unfortunately, I, your servant, did not see the young men you sent. Fortunately, the Eternal God has kept you from senseless killing and from seizing vengeance yourself.

"Please accept my gift and distribute it among the young men who are with you. Please forgive your servant's shortcomings. The Lord your God will certainly make your house into a lasting dynasty because you fight on behalf of Him, and no evil will be found in you as long as you live. If anyone dares to rise up against you and seek your life, then you will be protected by the Eternal One, your True God, who will launch the lives of your enemies like stones from a sling.

"When the Lord has done for you all the good things He has promised and has installed you as ruler over all Israel, you will never have to be grieved or conscience-stricken for having shed blood

² Adapted from 1 Samuel 25:1-35, *The Voice*

needlessly or for taking vengeance into your own hands. When He has dealt generously with you, I pray you will remember me, your servant.”

David listened to Abigail and granted her request. “Blessed is the Eternal God of Israel,” he said, “who sent you here today to intercept me. And blessed is your wisdom—blessed are you—for keeping me from shedding blood needlessly and from taking vengeance into my own hands. If you had not hurried out to meet me, tomorrow there would not have been a single male left alive in Nabal’s household.”

David accepted her gifts. Then he told her to get up and return home in peace.

It’s difficult to know the motivation behind Nabal’s refusal of David’s request for food.³ We’re told that Nabal was “surly and mean,” but we also know that biblical writers tend to favor David’s perspective. It appears that both David and Nabal acted out of a sense of entitlement: David thinks that he and his men are entitled to Nabal’s generous hospitality (food, wine . . . and who knows what else) because David’s crew had protected Nabal’s shepherds in the fields. Nabal feels it’s the prerogative of the rich to do as they please with their wealth. On top of this sense of entitlement, we’re also dealing with two very big egos.

While we can’t be sure of the exact nature of interaction between Nabal and David, the clashing of these two men threatens to erupt into extreme violence. Only Abigail’s humble intervention keeps the peace. We don’t know whether Abigail believes that David and his men deserve the provisions they’ve asked for, but she clearly understands how dire the results will be if Nabal’s insult in refusing the request is allowed to stand. Abigail acts quickly, packing up a large amount of food and taking it out to David and his men before they have a chance to attack.

Interestingly, in her conversation with David, Abigail emphasizes protecting David from committing violence rather than saving herself from being a victim of violence. She tells him that he doesn’t have to worry about the repercussions of shedding blood without cause. Seeking peace benefits potential perpetrators as well as potential victims.

While we don’t know much more about Abigail than what we read in 1 Samuel 25, we can be grateful that somehow this remarkable story of her humility, wisdom, generosity, and courage is preserved for us to learn from today.

We can also learn from current stories of peace. Recent issues of *Anabaptist World* contain a number of these stories. Listen to one in which teaching a message of peace to parents of preschoolers saved a life.⁴

In Ethiopia, Meron Bejiga attended a training that sought to produce peace ambassadors across the country. She put that training into practice in the school she owned. Beyond teaching children, Bejiga established the school to share about Jesus to parents. She trained her preschool teachers and staff on peacebuilding and organized parents’ meetings to pass along the training.

A parent named Dechassa stood up in one of the parents’ meetings and confessed that he set a time to kill one of his neighbors because of a disagreement. Others tried to resolve the conflict, but Dechassa refused. He purchased a weapon but came to the parents’ meeting because the preschool invited him. To his surprise, he learned the importance of peace, forgiveness and reconciliation.

“The schoolmaster was speaking about peace passionately,” Dechassa said. “I could see that she was speaking from her heart. I was touched and could not resist.”

The neighbor he wanted to kill, named Taye, was at the same meeting. Dechassa stood up at the end of the training, called to Taye and asked for forgiveness. The two hugged, reconciling instantly. The participants were amazed, and the room was filled with joy and laughter.

³ This sermon draws from the Week Nine Prepare Essay and Sermon Notes written by Joanna Harader, *Current: Seeking Peace Together*, a digital curriculum from MennoMedia, [Current - Menno Media](#).

⁴ Shambu Balcha, “Preschool preaches peace, saves a life,” *Anabaptist World*, August 4, 2023, p. 32, [Preschool preaches peace, saves a life | Anabaptist World](#).

“The training saved my life,” said Dechassa, who has joined the school’s parents committee. “It was like a last-minute call for me not to do the crime.”

Peace also flows from welcome by churches and Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in the Democratic Republic of Congo.⁵ Ever since survivors of brutal fighting fled to the city of Kikwit in 2017, the Mennonite Brethren Church has been ministering to them with faith and action.

Survivors came with burns, wounds from machetes and babies about to be born. They were exhausted from walking for weeks or months without much food or water. They carried emotional wounds from seeing family members and neighbors murdered in front of them.

The Mennonite Brethren Church of Congo saw their need. Members responded by taking people into their homes and giving them clothing and food. Hospital staff provided medical care. Churches became temporary shelters.

But the needs were greater than the church could meet alone. MCC, with help from the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, is walking with them. A local committee is empowering displaced people to establish new lives in Kikwit.

General secretary Antoine Kimbila said the church is called to meet its people’s holistic needs. When a person’s spiritual and physical needs are met, they are more likely to experience peace. “Peace is a synonym of shalom. When we say shalom in Hebrew, it is the total salvation of mankind,” he said. “When what MCC brings to us in the community as projects is married with the word of Christ, that brings peace to humankind.”

Peace didn’t come to Kikwit immediately. The arrival of displaced people caused conflict. Some local residents invited people to live in their homes, but there were also those who pushed newcomers aside because resources were already limited.

In addition, some displaced people acted out because of the trauma they experienced. A member of the church’s local committee described it this way. “Someone who is displaced because of war, his head is troubled. It looks as if the war has been following him even where he is,”

Providing equal education was one way the church helped strengthen the connection between the two groups. By providing school supplies for primary school students and secondary school fees for displaced teens, the burden on host families was lifted. The church also provided trauma training for teachers.

One teacher named Colette, whose fourth-grade class doubled in size with the arrival of displaced children, said she struggled at first because displaced children self-segregated in the back of the classroom and did not speak the local language, Kikongo, or the academic language, French. Some displaced children were violent. Others would sometimes cry when she called on them. When she asked why, they told her, “We are thinking about the situation that we have passed through.”

Through the trauma training, Colette and other teachers learned the importance of mixing students in the classroom, instead of allowing them to sit in separate groups. Teachers organized outside activities so students from both groups would be on the same teams.

Colette learned to pay more attention to the emotional needs of displaced children by drawing them aside when they looked upset. If a student is absent often or sick, she visits the student’s family to see if there is a problem she can help resolve.

Colette also has learned to be less serious in the classroom. “It has helped not only the displaced children but all the pupils to live in peace with everybody,” she said.

She’s happy that one of the displaced children is at the top of the class academically. He helps her monitor classroom behavior when she is absent. “Things didn’t change so quickly,” Colette said. “We worked progressively. Now there is a change.”

⁵ Linda Espenshade, “Peace grows in Kitwit,” *Anabaptist World*, June 16, 2023, pp. 8-11, [Congolese Mennonites open homes to survivors of violence | Anabaptist World](#).

Holistic healing also came through healthcare. At one hospital, staff struggled initially with the behavior of displaced people. A member of the local committee who is responsible for health care, said displaced people demanded to be treated first and tended to be violent and noncompliant with treatment. This created tension between nurses and patients.

“Imagine your father was murdered in front of you; your mother was raped in front of you. They were living with all of this,” the doctor said. Sometimes they would express anger when there didn’t seem to be a reason for it.

He said nurses have learned to understand this trauma response and how to help people deal with emotions through trauma training MCC provided. The hospital also provides free primary care to displaced people, including disease prevention and medication for common ailments such as malaria and waterborne diseases.

The church has worked with MCC to lower the rate of waterborne diseases by drilling two deep wells. Potable water from the new wells significantly reduced waterborne diseases treated at the hospital.

Clean water has improved the health of thousands of people in Kikwit. It also reduces fighting at remote springs where youth, whose parents expected them to get water multiple times a day, would fight over who could access the single water pipe first.

Now that water is available near where people live, adults can get it throughout the day. They have time to work together in fields provided to the most vulnerable displaced people and their host families.

“Without water, there’s no life,” General Secretary Kimbila said. Clean water helps treat diseases; education helps people to understand things; agriculture helps them to eat. “So all of these projects need water to help humans survive.”

He compared the church’s holistic work with the people who were hungry and tired while listening to Jesus preach. He fed them by distributing one boy’s fish and bread to the crowd.

Jesus “came not just to save the soul but the body,” Kimbila said. “God takes care of us, not just spiritually, but physically, too. For this reason, we as the church work with partners to save people holistically. It’s difficult to bring someone who is hungry to peace.”

In another city, a 10-hour drive from Kikwit, the Mennonite Church of Congo is implementing projects similar to the Mennonite Brethren Church. The Evangelical Mennonite Church there also carried out projects with MCC for years. Once-strained relationships among the denominations have been resolved as groups worked together to meet the needs of the displaced people.

With training and conflict-resolution skills, local committees in each denomination are equipped to respond to crises. Women have trained together to learn peacebuilding skills that equip them to resolve conflicts among family, friends and community. As a result of all the peacemaking work — humanitarian and spiritual — displaced people are gradually settling into life in Kikwit.

“Since they came here, they completely lacked a lot of things, but now they have first the joy because many have become members of our church, an important step,” Kimbila said. “Because they are at our side, they feel there are people who love them, with whom they can live.”

The stories I’ve told today came from far away – from Syria, ancient Palestine, Ethiopia, and Democratic Republic Congo. But we could tell additional stories of seeking peace with others that are happening in Kansas right now. Stories from Neighborhood Accountability Boards here in Salina. Stories of restorative justice through the work of Offender/Victim Ministries based in Newton. Stories of relationships built thorough gardening or home repair; in the classroom or laundromat; by providing food, shelter, or the items needed in a new apartment.

Last week, the story of Isaac and his neighbors helped us to consider when it might be best to walk away from conflict. Today’s stories of peace illustrate that seeking peace also requires stepping into the situation and acting creatively to prevent violence or to help people heal. When tense situations emerge and the threat of violence looms, may God give each of us the wisdom to know how we can act peacefully. And may God give us the courage to take those actions. Amen.