

## A 'Second Mile' Story

Rev. Alida Ward

September 7, 2014

One Sunday this summer,  
after worship was over,  
we were all outside right out here on the patio,  
having our ice tea, and chatting.  
And a car pulled up behind the church,  
and out stepped a young man,  
who walked toward us and then paused at the edge of the patio,  
nervously, hesitantly.  
I figured he was lost - people get lost around here. A lot.  
So I headed over to offer him some ice tea and directions.  
But he didn't need directions, he just had a question. For me.  
"Could I get married here?" he asked. "With my girlfriend? Could we get  
married here?"  
So we started chatting.  
He told me to call him Bert, because he said his Chinese name was too  
tricky.  
Bert and his fiancée were both from China,  
they'd come here to study at the University of Bridgeport  
and they'd fallen in love.  
They were hoping to be married on a Wednesday in August.  
In church, properly.  
I told him I loved doing weddings, and it would give me joy to do theirs.  
So he took my email address,  
and the next day I got an email.  
"Greenfield Hill is the warmest church I had been to," said Bert,  
and asked when he could bring his fiancée to meet me.

And so it was that I got to officiate this summer  
at one of the sweetest little weddings I have ever been a part of.  
Two young people, utterly in love,

and ten thousand miles from home,  
who wanted to be properly married.  
At their wedding rehearsal, I asked if anyone in the wedding party had  
been in a wedding before, and they all shook their heads.  
Then I paused and thought.  
"Have any of you been to a wedding before?" I asked,  
and again, they all shook their heads.  
And so, instead of just practicing walking in and walking out,  
as we tend to usually do,  
I went through everything, explaining what it was and why we did it,  
the I do's and the vows, the prayers and the rings.  
Their parent couldn't come -- too far, too expensive, too difficult,  
so I said to their friends that they would be the ones to give the blessing.  
YOU represent everyone who has ever loved these two, I said,  
or ever will.  
And we all got teary.

Then the wedding day.  
The wedding was at 2:30.  
At 2:30, I was the only one here.  
Jian-heng<sup>i</sup>-- that was Bert's real name -- came hurrying in at 2:40 with his  
groomsmen, very apologetic.  
His bride, Mei-ying, had texted him to say she was having a little trouble  
getting the dress on, so it might be a few minutes.  
An hour later, she was there, and we began.  
I led the groom in, and the groomsmen.  
In the front pew, where the parents *would* have been sitting,  
there was a giant stuffed Panda to represent family, and China,  
and good luck, and loved ones far away.  
I brought it with me this morning ....  
The bridesmaids came in, and then the bride.  
Princess Kate had nothing on her. She looked like the top of a wedding  
cake,

so spectacular that Jian-heng went "OH!" and I thought he was going to keel over.

I found out later that the mothers, back in China, had picked the dress and sent it to her -- across the waters, with their love.

Mei-ying walked in arm and arm with her maid of honor -- I don't want to walk alone, she'd said.

When it came time for the vows, they were ready -- they'd asked for them ahead of time so they could practice -- in sickness and in health, in plenty and in want.

Then Jian-heng asked if he could say something to his bride, and he did, a long speech, in Chinese, of course:

and what he was saying was making him cry, and it was making her cry, and I started to cry because it was so beautiful.

And then they were married,

and up in the balcony, Roni Widmer, our office manager,

and her daughter Devenny, who had come to watch,

jumped up and went to the bell rope and hauled on it joyfully for all the neighborhood to hear that yes, Jian-heng and Mei-ying were married.

The next day, Jian-heng and Mei-ying came to say thank you, which they did with large amounts of chocolate, which made me happy. And they said that probably next year they'd have to move back to China. "Maybe in ten years," said Jian-heng, "we can come back, and we will see you again,

and we will see this beautiful church, and see how it is thriving, and you will remember us."

And I will.

I tell you this story, this long story of a sweet wedding, because everything about it is why I love this church-- everything about it is why this is a second mile church.

Jesus said "if someone asks you to walk with them and carry their load for one mile,

do it for another mile too. Go an extra mile."

Two young people, far far from home  
and so much in love,  
come to this church four weeks before their wedding date  
and ask if it can be here.  
And because of the kind of church you are,  
because you are a church that always says 'yes' to the first mile  
and then offers up the second,  
you made it so easy for me as your pastor to say 'yes'.  
To welcome a couple we've never met before,  
and for one day in August to be their family.  
To throw our doors open, and put a panda bear in the front row to feel  
like home, and to cry with a roomful of strangers made friends.  
All of that is second mile stuff.  
"Greenfield Hill is the warmest church" said Jian-heng,  
and as I watched Devenny Widmer ring the bell for them,  
with a huge smile on her face,  
I knew he was right.

YOU are the warmest church.

You go the second mile in welcome, and so allow us as pastors to do the same.

You go the second mile in warmth, and that's how we end up with folks feeling instantly home here, no matter what path they've followed to this place.

You go the second mile in caring, and that's how we end up with a mountain of food outside these doors, and a crazy amount of pennies, and emails that David and I constantly get saying "what more do you need us to do."

You go the second mile in outreach, and that's how we end up with 200 people in West Virginia, and a crowd of kids in a slum in India with me. And you go the second mile to each other, and that's how we end up with folks who drive all the way down to Rye over and over just to visit our friend Ed in the hospital, and people who show up at the front door with

a card and lasagna, and people who pray every day for the names on our lists, and call me to ask how they're doing.

You are a second mile church,  
and nothing gives me greater joy than to be a part of that with you.

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<sup>i</sup> Names changed for privacy reasons