

What Does It Mean to Find a Home?

Sermon for the 3rd Sunday after Epiphany

Sermon Text: Ruth 1:1-19



In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. ² The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. ³ But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴ These took

*Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, ⁵ and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband. ⁶ Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the Lord had visited His people and given them food. ⁷ So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. ⁸ But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. ⁹ The Lord grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!" Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. ¹⁰ And they said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." ¹¹ But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? ¹² Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, ¹³ would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me." ¹⁴ Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. ¹⁵ And she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." ¹⁶ But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. **For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. ¹⁷ Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried.** May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you." ¹⁸ And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more. ¹⁹ So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the women said, "Is this Naomi?"*

Elimelech and Naomi lived in Bethlehem in Israel. Translated, that means “House of Bread.” But there wasn’t any bread in the “House of Bread” so Elimelech and Naomi had to leave. From our understanding today, we would say that they were economic refugees. For a time, things went well in the foreign country. Elimelech could live well with his wife, Naomi, and both their sons. They had something to eat again and were able to build houses for themselves. They even integrated well into their new homeland. Both sons took Moabite wives, Orpah and Ruth. So one could say that they had now put down roots and had successfully integrated into their new homeland. But then all the men of the family died. Only Naomi, who was an Israelite, and the two foreign daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, were left. To live in a foreign country without a husband was the worst thing that could have happened to a woman at that time. There was no social security or other insurance for such women. Such a woman would die. Naomi heard that her homeland was doing better economically and therefore made her way back to Israel. Both daughters-in-law were so close with Naomi that they followed her. But Naomi knew what it was like to go to foreign lands. She learned that the hard way. And the closer they got to Israel, the more she thought that it was unfair to impose such a hard fate on her daughters-in-law. So she stopped the small group of travelers and spoke with Orpah and Ruth. The two should return. It would not be good for them in a foreign land. Orpah obeyed her mother-in-law after much persuasion and returned home... not Ruth. She stayed firmly at her mother-in-law's side. Her words are heart-rending:

For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. ¹⁷ Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried.

You all know the story we just heard very well. Each one of you knows how hard it is to leave your homeland and to integrate yourself into a new land and to feel at home there. Many of you have experienced the difficult process of integration in Germany. Some of you are in the middle of this integration. Some have even returned to their homeland again and have found that returning home is just as difficult as it is to leave home in the first place. It is therefore very natural to ask the question: “What even is home?” In the Old Testament story that we heard today, we see that home is more than flesh and blood. Home is also more than land. But love, friendship, and loyalty are reasons why people find or have a home. And that is the true home that we people need. There are many people who have citizenship, who have a job, and who are also otherwise economically well off, but their relationships with people are nevertheless damaged. When marriages break apart and families fall apart, love, loyalty, and home are destroyed. When people here in Germany must live alone and can’t find anyone to talk to, they are also homeless. When people are not allowed to see other people because of the Corona restrictions and sit alone in their houses, then we experience all these things which denote being homeless and foreign. How can we then still experience that which we define as home? I’ll tell you a little modern story that might explain all this:

Mary came from Afghanistan and had lived for a few years here in Germany. Mary knew how hard it is to be homeless. Even as a child, she had felt homeless not only in her country but even in her own skin. Her single mother disguised her as a boy to buy bread. Because this was the only way for them to get any food. Mary had to go to school as a boy and play with boys just to survive. She was a girl among boys and didn’t know why she had to hide from being a girl. Eventually, she came to Germany after many detours. Tragically, her mother also then died. Mary no longer had to be ashamed of being a woman, but she still was alone in a strange world. But Mary learned from her mother that there are always solutions. And that’s why she learned German with much energy and strength and got an education. But she remained alone and that was hard. Despite her language skills and her job, she

remained homeless. She needed people to talk to about this hardship. She needed people to talk to about her desire for a home. At some point, Mary started conversing with her German neighbor, Sarah. At first, they just greeted each other kindly. Later, they invited each other for coffee, and much later, they talked about everything. They became best friends. Mary could tell Sarah everything. She could talk about her past and about her wish to finally be at home somewhere. Mary's new friend, Sarah, had also talked about her hardships. Sarah had also experienced something difficult: her husband had left her, and her disabled child died afterwards. She also was in a certain way homeless and could not only understand Mary well, she also shared with her the desire for a home and peace. Sarah was also a Christian. That fascinated Mary. Sarah had told Mary that despite her difficult experiences, she always believed in God and always knew that God would find a way for her eventually. Once she even told Mary that she herself, Mary, was a gift from her God and that she thanked God for this friendship. Mary was deeply moved. She had never heard such a thing and she didn't know how she could be a gift from a God that she herself didn't know. Perhaps that's why she went to church with Sarah once. She didn't understand much. But there was one thing especially that fascinated Mary. Towards the end of the service, the congregation members went forward. At that time, there was no Corona. And everyone ate bread from a bowl and drank a sip of wine from the same cup. "This is my body" and "this is the cup of the New Testament in My blood" the pastor had spoken over these things just before. Mary had no idea how this could all be. Later, Sarah could explain that the words of her Lord and God, Jesus Christ, had the power to build a bridge from God to people and therefore was God closely connected to the fate of people. And these words not only had the power to bind God with people but also the power to connect people with one another. Mary was fascinated and understood immediately what Sarah meant: Because in this congregation, everyone was equal: men, women, foreigners, children, old people.... "everyone was baptized into one Christ," Sarah said. Mary didn't know what she should say. Only one thing was clear to her. She had to be a part of this congregation. She received this Baptismal verse: John 4:14 - "but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." Amen.