

UMC, Peace Church, München  
Sermon 14.3.2010, Åsa Nausner,

Text: Ruth and Naomi,  
The book of Ruth 1: 1-11a, 13b-17.

### **Introduction:**

I am so happy to worship with you all today. Every congregation is an important community of faith. Our community is one with the Biblical community as well when we meet to pray, preach and sing. When I step into the Biblical texts, I am fascinated by meeting so many different persons from different cultures. Every time we open this fascinating book, we meet people who have gone through a lot in their lives.

I meet men, women and children in the Bible. I meet people filled with sorrows, people in pain as well as people with hopes and dreams. The closer I come to the Biblical persons, the closer I might understand God. I might anew see God's love in action and discover God's logic and perspective on life. As I seek ethical guidance, I often discover that the Bible helps me anew to live in a complex world.

Through ordinary, diverse, yet specific individuals in the Bible, we get glimpses of God, who is trying to speak to us, even today, a God willing to guide us on our ways.

Today we are invited to enter the text about Naomi and Ruth. We are invited to mirror ourselves in their intercultural relationship and in their experiences. Let's to try to engage this text with open ears and eyes, hearts and minds.

## **1. God is creating a community of immigrants and non-immigrants**

The book of Ruth brings us to the times of the Judges, at the 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century before Christ. The book is written as the people of Israel lived in tribal communities dreaming about becoming a great nation with their own king. At this time they do not know that Saul and David will enter the historical scene some hundred years later.

The first thing I notice with this story is that the intercultural issues were high on their agenda, as they are for us today. I discover that God creates creative communities of immigrants and non-immigrants both in Moab and in Israel. Ruth's book is but one fascinating example of this. I wonder if the story of Ruth and Naomi can help us live in our own diverse multicultural societies here in München, in Reutlingen and worldwide?

### **The three women**

The book of Ruth brings us right into a stressful life-situation of a family in sorrow. Three women are standing weeping together at the graves of their husbands, one is an immigrant and two are non-immigrants. They have different cultural and religious heritages.

The two younger Moabite women; Ruth and Orpah, and the older Israelite woman Naomi, have become family through immigration and marriage. I can imagine how they have cooked food together, and I how they've been sharing recipes from their different cultures at common meals. They have celebrated weddings together. Honestly, I can also picture that they had their arguments due to their different personalities and frustrating misunderstandings based on their cultural traditions.

Nevertheless, when Naomi evaluates her time in Moab with her daughters-in-law she uses the word *kindness* to characterize their relationship. The Hebrew word used here for kindness is related to “God’s acts of unmerited grace and mercy. . . Human beings are also able show (this kindness) to each other.” To do kindness, means that they “demonstrate loving kindness and loyalty far beyond what the law requires, and beyond anything what the recipient expects or deserves to receive.”<sup>1</sup> It is definitely not a kindness one can or could request.

Naomi and her husband fled or migrated to Moab when her hometown Bethlehem was struck with a famine. For your information, Bethlehem means “house of bread”. They left because of natural disaster; there was no more bread at home for people to survive and live well. Life must have been tough for them to choose Moab. This land, Moab, “was a country located on the east side of the Dead Sea, roughly opposite Judah.” There had been tensions and hostility between Moab and Judah for a long time and “any reference to Moab had negative moral and emotional overtones.”<sup>2</sup> The people of Israel had only shameful or hostile exchanges with Moab in their historical and cultural memory. Today, many Germans feel this way about Turkish people and many in the West are hostile against people from the Middle East.

In the coming chapters we glimpse the former life of Naomi and Elimelech before they fled. They were respected people; they had lived a good life; they owned land, and they were surrounded by relatives. Despite the stress of immigration in the beginning we could assume that the Israelite woman, Naomi, lived as a relatively successful immigrant in Moab with her sons married. However, Naomi’s hopes of grandchildren and a big family and safe old age were shattered in Moab. We do not exactly know why death visited Naomi’s

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen R. Farmer comments on the Book of Ruth in *The New Interpreters Study Bible*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003, 385

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, comment on Ruth 1:1

family, but we can imagine the tragedy of having to bury not just your partner but your children in a foreign land.

Naomi looks back at a life in fullness. She experienced a time as an immigrant where she says she was met with kindness, but as she stands by the graves she feels empty; she is on the brink of falling apart. Without men in her family she probably also felt insecure and could not imagine a future alone in Moab – she looked back, she was longing for home. She wonders where God is in all of it.

Now, after the funerals, Naomi, Ruth and Orpah must figure out how to live on. It is a stressful situation and cultural norms and expectations are to be negotiated in their decisions and choices. Widows at that time had no pension or social security; to stay together was not really a realistic choice for their future.

In this dire situation, they start out together in the direction of Bethlehem in Judah, according to Naomi's wish to return home. Suddenly, Naomi realizes that it might not be the best solution, because she, an aging woman, has nothing to offer her daughters-in-law at home. She cannot guarantee them a good life, nor security or new husbands. Naomi decides to send Ruth and Orpah back to their mothers so that they can start anew within their own traditions. Again the women weep together.

In the emotional discussion among the three I find it amazing that they reluctantly allow each one of them to make an individual choice about the road ahead. Each of the women is faced with the difficult question “what should I do now?”

Without many words, Orpah accepts the offer from Naomi and returns home to find a husband and start a new life. In a way, Naomi sets Orpah free with a

blessing, “May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with me and the dead.” (Ruth 1:8) How Orpah is received by her people being the widow of an immigrant man, we do not know.

Ruth’s reaction is opposite to Orpah’s. She disagrees with her mother in law. Ruth insists on staying with Naomi. Ruth shows extraordinary kindness to Naomi with her commitment and her declaration of loyalty, kindness and love, is extraordinary. “Where you go, I will go: where you lodge, I will lodge, your people shall be my people, and your God shall be my God.” (Ruth 1:16)

Naomi cannot really receive this offer. She is not ready to celebrate. Her reply to Ruth is: silence.

Naomi worries what would happen to Ruth, the Moabite, in Israel, when their tables turn around. After more than ten years abroad Naomi will return home, to familiar and safe grounds, but Ruth is to become the immigrant, the “other.” The bible refers to Ruth as the “foreign woman,” and as “the Moabite.” These are the titles used for her in the biblical text. Naomi is not unaware of the history of her people, their norms and values regarding outsiders. She knows that her people are hostile toward Moabites. Will people gaze negatively toward Ruth, will people talk with her, will she find a husband? There are so many questions for Naomi. Probably, Naomi is really worried for Ruth, expecting prejudices, disrespect, and hate. She doesn’t comment on Ruth’s offer, Naomi is silent.

Despite this silence, a brutal break in their communication, the two stubborn women take to the road. In their years together Ruth seems to have found a way to understand her foreign mother-in-law. Even if not every word or every act of Naomi was familiar to Ruth, she had a way to communicate with her mother-in-law.

How easy is it to return home after a long time away? Naomi, had no phone, nor email to prepare for her coming. She doesn't even know what her people will think of her – she left as the people suffered, and now she returns in old age for help. Will she be accepted in her community again? It is a relevant question. After my almost twelve years away from Sweden my mother has been asking me if I still am Swedish!

Arriving in Bethlehem we learn that the women in the village do recognize Naomi, despite her aged face. They remember the young Naomi, and probably that reminded them of their own youth and their good times together before the famine tore them apart. She is welcomed.

It is amazing to read about how the adventures of Naomi and Ruth continue in the coming chapters. With empty hands Ruth goes looking for jobs, finds mercy from Boas who allows her to reap grains as his people harvest his fields. When Boas finds out who Ruth is, based on what he has heard about her character, he encourages his people to share also water with Ruth. That is a powerful symbol of respect and acceptance of a foreigner.

Slowly, we notice a change of Naomi's empty spirit. With Ruth finding acceptance, food and work in the area Naomi becomes hopeful and strategizes for the future. Naomi plans a wedding.

## **2. God is helping people with the fear of meeting and moving to another culture -**

**A Transformative journey from exclusion to inclusion for God's people**

**The presence of God**

God is not directly speaking to us in the Book of Ruth. Naomi is however, in constant dialogue with God in a rough way. She feels that God has turned away from her. When her husband has left her, Naomi, is reported to feel “destitute, bitter and “empty.”

God is showing Naomi his redemptive power in the mercy shown to her by Ruth. Ruth is a foreigner, who like the good Samaritan is “an agent of God’s redemptive activity in the world.” In the Book of Ruth, the people of God learn to honor a woman who is culturally an “other”. I believe it is a challenge for any majority culture to reflect on how we often fail to recognize that people from minority groups greatly participate and contribute to the success of the larger society. Here God is even showing Naomi a future through Ruth. We can follow how God is present when people meet and move across cultures.

The book of Ruth is like a transformative journey from exclusion to inclusion for God’s people. This is not at all a naive story. It carries a provocative social political and religious counter message to the leaders and priests in Israel at the time. We should remember that intercultural marriages were highly disputed within the Israelite communities, to the extent that we can read in the book of Ezra and the book of Judges that foreign wives and children were sent away in repentance for the unfaithfulness of the people of Israel’s tribes. In chapter 10, verse 10 -13 of the Book of Ezra, the prophet declares to the tribes of Israel: I quote “You have trespassed and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel ... Now, separate yourselves from the people of the foreign land and from the foreign wives.” End of quote. We can imagine the personal pain in such a social political and religious policy.

With this historical context in memory, Ruth’s book carries a counter message, that of a blessed successful intercultural marriage, which even opens a way for

the whole nation to survive and flourish. Ruth is important for us Christians. She is the ancestor/foremother of Jesus.

### **3. God is making the most different person in the community the most important one -**

#### **The Kingdom of God as transformative intercultural praxis**

Learning from Naomi and Ruth, I am inspired to live courageously in the multicultural community of which I am part. I am inspired anew to face the difficulties in communication, to challenge the fear any group builds up over against the “other.” At times I am in the minority, as when I am the only Swede among Germans, but at times I am in the majority as a white European among people from non-European nations. In each position I am challenged to choose my ways and my relation to the “other” people I meet.

Through interesting circumstances, Naomi’s planning of Ruth’s future leads to the marriage of Ruth and Boaz, a distant relative to Elimelech. The whole community is engaged in the negotiation about marriage and landownership as we read in chapters three and four. Unfortunately, I cannot reveal all details to you in this sermon. Look it up, it is great.

In the end of Ruth’s book, a child becomes the sign of God’s redemption, providing hope for the future of not just Naomi and Ruth but the whole people of God.

Ruth marries a relative to Naomi, his name is Boaz, and he is a good man. A child grows in Ruth and when Naomi gets to hold the child, Obed, she is praised by the other women in Betlehem. Obed, is a promise toward the hope that Israel will one day become a large people, with their own King.

And Obed, the son of the foreigner, the Moabite Ruth, is to become the heir to King David. I like this, that the purity of a people is not more important than the mercy of a people. As King David's heritage is intercultural, it makes the history of his people the more real. It is a way for God to teach us to live together seeking good open communities where we learn to listen to each other, to respect each other, and to courageously participate with each other in building our common future.

In this text about Naomi and Ruth I discover how God supports families and creates community across cultural and religious borders. I discover how God helps people with the fear of meeting and moving to another culture. I discover that God is making a different and marginalized person in the community to be an important participant in the society.

I understand the Kingdom of God increasingly as transformative intercultural praxis.

Praise be to God.

Amen.