

## **“Guests and Hosts, Hosts and Guests”**

### **Scripture**

### **Ruth 1:1-17** *(The Message)*

<sup>1</sup>Once upon a time - it was back in the days when judges led Israel - there was a famine in the land. A man from Bethlehem in Judah left home to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. <sup>2</sup>The man's name was Elimelech; his wife's name was Naomi; his sons were named Mahlon and Kilion - all Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They all went to the country of Moab and settled there. <sup>3</sup>Elimelech died and Naomi was left, she and her two sons. <sup>4</sup>The sons took Moabite wives; the name of the first was Orpah, the second Ruth. They lived there in Moab for the next ten years. <sup>5</sup>But then the two brothers, Mahlon and Kilion, died. Now the woman was left without either her young men or her husband.

<sup>6</sup>One day she got herself together, she and her two daughters-in-law, to leave the country of Moab and set out for home; she had heard that God had been pleased to visit his people and give them food. <sup>7</sup>And so she started out from the place she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law with her, on the road back to the land of Judah. <sup>8</sup>After a short while on the road, Naomi told her two daughters-in-law, "Go back. Go home and live with your mothers. And may God treat you as graciously as you treated your deceased husbands and me. <sup>9</sup>May God give each of you a new home and a new husband!" She kissed them and they cried openly. <sup>10</sup>They said, "No, we're going on with you to your people." <sup>11</sup>But Naomi was firm: "Go back, my dear daughters. Why would you come with me? Do you suppose I still have sons in my womb who can become your future husbands? <sup>12</sup>Go back, dear daughters - on your way, please! I'm too old to get a husband. Why, even if I said, 'There's still hope!' and this very night got a man and had sons, <sup>13</sup>can you imagine being satisfied to wait until they were grown? Would you wait that long to get married again? No, dear daughters; this is a bitter pill for me to swallow - more bitter for me than for you. God has dealt me a hard blow." <sup>14</sup>Again they cried openly. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye; but Ruth embraced her and held on. <sup>15</sup>Naomi said, "Look, your sister-in-law is going back home to live with her own people and gods; go with her." <sup>16</sup>But Ruth said, "Don't force me to leave you; don't make me go home. Where you go, I go; and where you live, I'll live. Your people are my people, your God is my god; <sup>17</sup>where you die, I'll die, and that's where I'll be buried, so help me God - not even death itself is going to come between us!"

### **Revelation 3:20** *(The Message)*

<sup>20</sup>"Look at me. I stand at the door. I knock. If you hear me call and open the door, I'll come right in and sit down to supper with you."

### **Matthew 5:6** *(The Message)*

<sup>6</sup>"You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being 'carefull,' you find yourselves cared for."

### **Scripture**

### **Ruth 1:1-17** *(The Message)*

<sup>1</sup>In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. <sup>4</sup>These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, <sup>5</sup>both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

<sup>6</sup>Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had considered his people and given them food. <sup>7</sup>So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. <sup>8</sup>But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. <sup>9</sup>The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband." Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. <sup>10</sup>They said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." <sup>11</sup>But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? <sup>12</sup>Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, <sup>13</sup>would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me." <sup>14</sup>Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. <sup>15</sup>So she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." <sup>16</sup>But Ruth said, "Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. <sup>17</sup>Where you die, I will die— there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!"

### **Revelation 3:20** *(NRSV)*

<sup>20</sup>"Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.

### **Matthew 5:7** *(NRSV)*

<sup>7</sup>"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Recently, I've come across several critics of churches with the word, "friendly," attached to their name. The criticism isn't so much about lack of friendliness. The church's which advertise this about themselves can usually point to proof of their friendliness. The people in the church experience this among themselves, or those who end of visiting and then stay will testify that they were befriended. Bottom line, the criticism is leveled that while friendly is good, it is not deep enough. The friendliness usually is experienced with people I already know or with someone like me. The criticism says that "friendly" does not get to the depth and the promise of "hospitality."

Go back to our St. Andrew mission statement and I think you will see the difference here. It's on the front cover of our bulletins if you need a reminder. I would highlight these words: **Keenly aware of both the joys and risks in caring for one another, we have willingly chosen to develop a fellowship through which we are no longer strangers.**

I'll stop at the "no longer strangers" phrase for emphasis sake and in order to keep us from falling back into the comfort of the word "friend" that will come, as a way to highlight what hospitality is. I would also underline the phrase "aware of both the joys and risks" as essential to what is a very ancient, time honored Christian practice of hospitality. When Jesus said, "Behold I stand at the door and knock, and any who open the door and invite me in, I will come in and sup with them," he was reminding the church of their calling to hospitality through his appearance there, as a stranger at the door. To welcome him to enter came with an awareness that one invited him in not only with an anticipation of joy, but also of risk. He was not the nice "welcome wagon" representative coming with coupons that would get you shopping with the local merchants. His entry into your home came with the possibility – no the probability – that the one welcoming him would be changed.

Nor was all of this dynamic, unique with Jesus. In fact, the Bible is so full of stories of the faithful welcoming strangers that as biblical scholar John Koenig has phrased it: "hospitality is seen as one of the pillars of morality upon which the universe stands." Arguing that the tradition of hospitality has virtually disappeared in our contemporary Western culture, Koenig spells out how strong this ethic was in the Bible, saying: "when guests or hosts violate their obligations to each other, there, the whole world shakes and retribution follows." As you may recall, it is hospitality (or the lack thereof) which drives the narrative in the Christmas story. "There is no room for Joseph and Mary at the inn." Could we put this in modern terms? What was the hotel full? Were the rates too high and the desk clerk said, "Unless you show me your Mastercard, I can't help you?" Would the local pastor or the town constable have seen their tired and helpless lot and said, "Well, I do have enough in the discretionary fund to fill up your donkey with gas so you can try your luck in the next town?" If someone did invite them in, such hospitality would be remarkable and out of the norm. But the way the Bible tells the story, when the innkeeper denies the holy family it invites our disappointment. It risks the shaking of the world, and it underscores that the world needs such a shaking.

Having said all of that, I don't want to make the biblical world just sound quirky or quaint. We are a world of strangers in our day. To have someone traveling in ancient times was much more unusual and we could perhaps

understand why there were such high expectations. When you were on the road in those days, you were so vulnerable and greatly at risk. To leave a stranger stranded, left their life in jeopardy. Today, we have learned how to manage such things. Yet, still, hospitality remains something quite necessary to daily life.

The homeless, the immigrant, the brave visitor who shows up for worship and wonders whether they will have someone say hello to them and invite them to have a cup of coffee or out to lunch even, are the ones who can stretch our church from shallow friendliness to a richer sharing of hospitality. But look how that works when we extend these rarer welcomes to what happens every day for us. In the words of Ana Mariá Pinada: “Ironically, it is not just hospitality to the ‘stranger’ that is in peril in our society. We are short not only of tables that welcome strangers but even of tables that welcome friends. In a society that prizes youthfulness, the elderly are often isolated from the affection and care of their own families. In many busy families, children find no after-school welcome home, and spouses find little time to host one another over supper. And when we become estranged—separated by grievances large or small, or simply crowded out of one another’s lives—we all too often become ‘strangers’ even to those we once loved.” She asks: “Can we move beyond strangeness and estrangement to learn the skills of welcoming one another and to claim the joy of homecoming?”

In an intriguing twist of meaning, in the Greek of the New Testament the word “xenia” means not only “stranger,” but also “guest” and “host.” Our word xenophobia comes from this Greek word, and sometimes our “friendliness” is a mask for the fear we have towards strangers. But in the image of Jesus knocking at the door, we have an opportunity to see things differently.

I’ve never quite figured out how that would work when he came inside to sup with us. Would he be the guest? Or would he be the host at the supper? Wouldn’t you want to ask him to say the blessing, to break the bread, to pour the cup? In the ancient practice of hospitality the lines between guest and host often blurred, so that by the end of the evening it may be unclear which role each has to play. Guests come with unexpected gifts. To offer hospitality to a stranger is to welcome stories to be told that we have never heard, to allow paths to be before us which we had anticipated, to find in the presence of an other, a presence of the holy one. Indeed, this was at the heart of why hospitality was so valued in the ancient world: by being hospitable, you never knew if you were entertaining angels, unaware, or even the same Jesus who said, “Behold I stand at the door and knock.”

Our beatitude for today says we are blessed if we show mercy. Hospitality is mercy to the other. The blessing is that by being a gracious host we may just find that we were the ones hosted after all. When we practice hospitality, we may just find an unexpected friend supping with us at the table. Amen.