

Preacher: Audrey Hollenberg-Duffey

Scripture: Joshua 2:8-14

One Sunday, a minister had all the kids in the congregation up front on the steps for a short children's time on the 23rd Psalm. He told the children that sheep weren't smart and needed lots of guidance, and that a shepherd's job was to stay close to the sheep, protect them from wild animals and keep safe. He then pointed to the little children and said that they were the sheep and needed lots of guidance.

Then the minister put his hands out to the side, palms up in a dramatic gesture, and, with raised eyebrows, said to the children, "If you are the sheep, then who is the shepherd?" He was obviously indicating himself.

A silence of a few seconds followed. Then one wise boy said, "Jesus. Jesus is the shepherd." The young minister, obviously caught by surprise, said to the boy, "Well then, who am I?" The child frowned thoughtfully, and then said with a shrug, "I guess you must be a sheep dog."

Isn't it amazing how truth can come from unexpected places. I remember when I was a youth doing a workcamp in downtown Los Angeles, California being caught off guard by an unexpected prophet. One day we went out on Skid Row, where the most concentrated number of homeless live in the city and simply handed out cold water. While walking around, I met one man who was so amazed to see young people spending their time caring for others in this way. When we told him that we carry a cup of water in the name of Jesus Christ, he proclaimed that we were truly following Christ because if he were alive right now, this is where Jesus would be, among the down and out — the most desperate of society.

Here we have a scripture in the book of Joshua about a person who becomes the most unexpected model of faith. Rahab represents everything that was opposite to Israel's call to be righteous. She is an outsider, a resident of the land that God commanded be completely wiped out in front of Israel's occupation of the promised land. Her presence was the very threat of compromise God was trying to avoid by commanding the Israelites to utterly destroy all who came into their path. Outsiders would bring their foreign gods into the presence of God's people causing them to turn away from their God. She is also a prostitute, not to mention a woman, and, therefore, unclean. Some translations try to clean this story up by calling her an innkeeper, but that's just not true to the original context of the story. It is important for us to understand that she is the most unlikely ally in Israelite's conquest of the promised land.

You may have missed some of the meaning when you read this story because the English translations try to clean up the language, but the words used to tell Rahab's story in Hebrew are filled with sexual innuendo as if to drive home our preconceived notions of Rahab, making it even more surprising when she acts differently than we would expect. Here she is, an outsider, prostitute, woman offering protection to the spies of Israel and in return making a deal with Israel. And then she makes a clear proclamation of her faith in Israel's God, becoming an important example of the loyalty God is asking for his people. Everything about her story is contrary to expectations. But in her loyalty, courage, and care of the spies she turns us from our expectations and reveals her true character.

God often used the imagery of prostitution to refer to Israel's covenant violations. God had chosen the people of Israel and made a covenant with them; so for them to turn away from God was to break their covenant, like that of a marriage. With this in mind, we would expect a prostitute to be the downfall of Israel rather than an example of faith in the God of Israel. In fact,

in the book of Hebrews, Rahab is listed as one who was saved by her faith and hospitality. And in the book of James, she is named as one who was saved by her works for welcoming the spies and sending them out safely. Throughout scripture, she is an example of faithfulness, even though she is not one we would expect to receive such acclaim.

In the book of Deuteronomy, God's law demands the extermination of all the inhabitants of the land as the Israelites made conquest of the land God promised to them. Yet here at the start of the book of Joshua, we have a story about one of the land's inhabitants placing her hope in the story of God's faithfulness and being invited into God's people. As Gordon Matties says, "In contrast to Israel's bowing to foreign gods in the wilderness, a foreign prostitute trusts Israel's God.... Rahab as a 'sinner' has proved to be more 'righteous' than the 'saints.'" The supposed threat to Israel's purity now becomes the model of faithful confession and Rahab and her family are brought out of the city to live with Israel forever more.

Kari Myers tells a story about planting amaryllis bulbs early one spring. She writes: "With great anticipation I watched for them to sprout and bloom. But weeks turned into months before the first sign of life appeared. By the end of the summer, the bed of pink blooms I had imagined in my mind was nothing more than a few scattered leaves here and there. So, what did I do? Well, what would you do? I pulled them all up to make room for other things...."

"Now imagine how I felt when I looked out my window one morning a year later to see a single delicate amaryllis blossom. My surprise and delight quickly turned to dismay — for I realized I had given up on them too soon. Had I the least bit of patience or a little faith, I might have had a glorious garden full of pink flowers. Yet that single amaryllis I somehow neglected to pull taught me a valuable lesson about giving up on things too quickly."¹

In our desire to learn something from Rahab's story, I wonder if we might do better to make space for the unexpected and to not give up so quickly. Even Israel didn't live out their faith in a legalistic manner, truly excluding and wiping out the inhabitants of the land. Rahab is just one of these stories in Joshua. There are others where the scripture says that residents of the land remained in the land alongside Israel. Even the book of Deuteronomy itself contains laws about caring for the alien in our midst. Outsiders were often welcomed. We must keep this in mind as we read the rest of the Old Testament with its warring and utter destruction of people. Rahab's story at the beginning of Joshua is a correct-all reminding us that we cannot so narrowly limit God's character and purpose to the law of extermination of all outsiders.

And here is the kicker. If you turn to the opening of the Gospel of Matthew, we find Rahab listed in the genealogy of Jesus, alongside Ruth who is supposedly Rahab's daughter-in-law and a Moabite; Tamar, who tricked her father-in-law into sleeping with her so she could conceive when he refused to give her his son as he promised; and Bathsheba, the wife of a Hittite with whom King David committed adultery! Jesus is born into a family that repeatedly crossed the cultural boundaries stipulated in Deuteronomy. This will become an important marker in his ministry as he extends the good news even to the Gentiles and welcomes the likes of tax collectors and prostitutes.

I can't help but wonder today who are the Rahabs in our society today. Who are the ones we are quick to dismiss because they don't seem to fit within our boundaries or even scriptural boundaries. Israel's command to completely destroy the inhabitants of the promised land was supposed to keep them safe from turning away from God, but they often broke this commandment in individual circumstances. They took everything contextually.

¹ homileticonline.com

However, as harsh as this may sound, God's ban on including outsiders was also for an important purpose. I don't want this to become a pastoral approval of mass genocide, and I hope you, like me, struggled this past week as you read about the people of God being commanded to completely destroy nations. But there is an important reason why God put a ban on outsiders. The people of Israel were vulnerable and the vulnerable must be protected.

Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove and his wife Leah started a hospitality house in response to the hospitality they received in an unlikely place. They visited Iraq during the intensive bombing campaign in 2003. When a part of their delegation was in a terrible accident caused by shrapnel in the road, a doctor in the nearby town of Rutba, picked them up and cared for them, nursing them back to health. The doctor said, "Three days ago your country bombed our hospital. But we will take care of you." They found themselves living in a modern-day Good Samaritan story, maybe better called the Good Iraqi or the Good Muslim. In response, they felt God's call to start a hospitality house where any and all people could feel at home. In honor of this experience they named the house the Rutba House.

At the Rutba House, they welcomed any and all who came to their door in need of residence. Whether they be ex-convicts, recovering drug addicts, or the chronically homeless. This was a risky venture, and one that came with plenty of challenges. They discovered that to protect their vulnerable community, strict boundaries had to be put in place. They hosted regular Monday house meetings where they could work through problems and share life together. Each person in the house was given some of the responsibility for the community, like cleaning or cooking. And while they were living in the house, they had to be clean. These boundaries occasionally meant that individuals had to leave if they could not live up to them to protect the community and to make it work. Boundaries are important and necessary to any community, especially when it means protecting those who feel most vulnerable.

Ultimately, it's a balance, and I think this is what Jesus meant when he summarized all the laws and the prophets with the greatest commandments to love God and love neighbor. With love ruling our decisions, then we are more likely to make decisions that are of God rather than out of our own fear or biases.

The story of Rahab reminds us to look for God and faithfulness even in unexpected places and in the most unlikely people. May we turn aside and notice God, even when and where we think God cannot be found. Amen.