

“Rahab: Unlikely Hero”

This is the first message in a series of sermons I'm doing this summer, looking at some of the men and women in the Old Testament.

The eleventh chapter of the Book of Hebrews lists some of the great heroes of the Hebrew faith. This chapter is what I call the “Hebrew Hall of Fame”. The writer of the Book of Hebrews celebrates and memorializes the faith of such notable people as Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Gideon, David, Samuel, Rahab. **Rahab!** You remember *Rahab*, don't you? Or maybe you don't!

The setting for Rahab's life goes back to the time of the Judges. By then God brought the Hebrews out of Egypt and freed them from slavery. They have endured the 40 years wandering in the wilderness. Now they're ready to enter the promised land, Canaan. Moses has died, and Joshua has succeeded him as leader. They plan to attack Canaan from the east, around the city of Jericho.

But before the Israelite troops launch their attack, Joshua sends out 2 spies on a reconnaissance mission. Joshua 2:1 describes what happens: "Then Joshua son of Nun sent two men secretly from Shittim as spies, saying, 'Go, view the land, especially Jericho.' So they went, and entered the house of a prostitute whose name was Rahab, and spent the night there." There was a wall around Jericho. Tiny houses of sun-dried brick were built into those walls. One house belongs to a woman named Rahab. We're not told much about her except that she is *prostitute*.

Hoping to gather information and remain undetected, the Hebrew spies go there. (Now there was probably nothing unusual about seeing men going into and out of Rahab's house). But someone spots these Israelite men (foreigners) going into Rahab's house and alerts the king. "The king of Jericho was told, 'Some Israelites have come here tonight to search out the land'" (Joshua 2:2). Hearing this, the king sends a message to Rahab: "Then the king of Jericho sent orders to Rahab, 'Bring out the men who have come to you, who entered your house, for they have come only to search out the whole land'" (Joshua 2:3).

But meanwhile, Rahab had hidden the spies in stalks of flax on the roof of her house. She lies to the authorities: “It's true, there were two men here, but I didn't know where they came from. They left and I don't know where they went, but if you hurry, you'll be able to catch up to them.” So the king's men take off in pursuit - all the while, the spies have been hidden at her house.

That night, Rahab sneaks up on the roof to the men, and tries to bargain with them. “I know your God going to give you our land. Our people have heard how the God of Israel dried up the waters of the sea and brought you out of Egypt – and how you've won battles with His power. Our people are terrified – for your God is the true God! "Listen, I've been kind to you. Swear to me that when you come and take over our land you will spare the lives of my parents, brothers and sisters, and their families.” The spies agree. "The men said to her, 'Our life for yours! If you do not tell this business of ours, then we will deal kindly and faithfully with you when the Lord gives us the land'" (Joshua 2:14).

She's told to gather all her family together into her house, put a scarlet rope out the window, and the Israelites will see that and spare her family when they invade the city. Then, since the city gates have now been closed, Rahab puts a rope out her window and lets them climb down over the wall and safely out of the city. Later on, we read in Joshua, chapter 6, how the Israelites keep their promise. When they invade Jericho, their troops see the scarlet cord hanging the window, and provide safety for Rahab and her family.

Interesting story, huh? Rahab's actions captured the hearts of the Hebrew people, and she became a hero in Israel's memory. She's up there with some of the "big guns" in the Hebrew Hall of Fame! Listen to what it says there in Hebrews 11: "By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace" (Hebrews 11:31). Rahab is also mentioned in the Book of James. Here she is held up as an example of a person who proved her *faith* by what she *did*. "Likewise was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road? For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead" (James 2:25-26).

Imagine that! Rahab, a whore, is made a celebrity in Hebrew folklore! A "hooker" who becomes a hero in the Bible! I mean, what's going on here? What kind of Bible hero is this? Would you want your daughter or granddaughter to be like her?

Why is Rahab remembered as a hero of the faith? To understand this brings us close to the heart and center of the gospel of grace!

The story of Rahab gives us an early glimpse into what "righteousness" is in God's eyes.

Who's a righteous person? How can we be right with God and acceptable to God? Most people think this has to do with whether we are a "good" or "bad" person. God likes good people. God doesn't like bad people. Good people go to heaven. Bad people don't go to heaven. Right?

So, people who are acceptable to God are the good people, those ***good enough***. If I can do enough good deeds I'll be ok. If I'm kind and generous. If I don't curse too much or drink too much. If I log enough hours at church and if I'm religious enough. Then I'll be acceptable to God. With this formula it's easy to figure out where Rahab fits in: she's a ***bad person, a lady of the night, a hooker, right?*** But then the question is: How in the world can ***she*** be an example of a ***righteous woman?***

*Here's something hard for many to grasp: There is a tremendous difference between who we think is a righteous person and whom God says is righteous. I want to show you a remarkable verse of Scripture. It's Matthew 21, the latter portion of verse 31. "Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.."' It says Jesus said to *them*. Who's them? The chief priests and elders (good, religious men). And Jesus astounds them - probably infuriates them - by saying that tax collectors (dishonest, hated people) and call girls would make it to heaven before them!*

Good grief. Is Jesus promoting sexual sin? Is He saying cheating people out of money, like the

tax collectors were doing, is ok? No! He goes on. "For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him" (Matthew 21:32). John the Baptizer came and called people to repent, to turn from their sins and turn to God. But the religious leaders pretty much turned a deaf ear. They were already good, they thought. They were already righteous, in their own eyes.

Jesus says that because the religious leaders did not *believe John's message, nor repent*, this would keep them out of God's kingdom. On the other hand, many of the tax collectors and hookers had no illusions about being good, and when John called them to turn from their sins and turn to God with faith, they did it! They were willing to admit they needed help!

Do we get the point here? We get into God's kingdom, we are saved, not by trying to be a good person - *for none of us is totally good*. Rather, we are made acceptable to God by realizing that we're not good, that we need help and forgiveness, and by trusting Christ to forgive us and save us.

This is kind of a "bad news", "good news" sermon! It's bad news if we're self-righteous - and we think we can have a relationship with God by trying to be good. It isn't going to happen!

You know, self-righteous people can be a pain-in-the-neck sometimes! Mark Twain once observed: "Having spent considerable time with good people, I can understand why Jesus liked to be with tax collectors and sinners." Peter Marshall, a famous pastor of the last century, once offered this prayer: "Lord, when we are wrong, make us willing to change. And when we are right, make us easy to live with." One day, an instructor at the University of Arizona, Terry Mikel, was speeding toward Tucson. He passed a car, which happened to be an unmarked Arizona Highway Patrol car. An officer pulled Terry over. When Terry explained that he was late for a class he was teaching, the officer took pity on him and let him off with a warning. Before the officer went back to his car he said, "Slow down and drive safe." Terry felt obligated to correct him: "Excuse me, sir, but it should be 'Slow down and drive *safely*'. You said 'safe'". At that point the officer went back to his car and promptly wrote out the speeding ticket!

Jesus had a lot of trouble dealing with self-righteous people! Read the New Testament: who did Jesus have run-ins with? Not the Roman government. Not people of questionable morals and non-religious people. But *religious leaders!* Those who thought their good life gave them an "in" with God that others didn't have!

What are you trusting in to make things OK between God and you? The good things you do? Your church attendance? If so, you're trusting in the wrong things. The haunting question that has to be asked whenever any of us think we can be right with God through our religion or good works is this: If I could be right with God just by living a good life, *why did Jesus have to die?*

Now here's the good news...and by now I think you've figured this out! ***If we realize we're not good enough (ever) to earn a relationship with God, and we trust Christ to make up for that,***

we can be right with God and close to God. This is called "grace". Grace means God loves us, God welcomes us, God accepts us in Christ, even though we don't deserve it, and can never earn it!

This is why Jesus drew to Himself people on the edge of society, the "riff-raff" whom the religious leaders avoided and condemned. Recently in our adult Sunday School class we finished a series of lessons by Andy Stanley called "Christian - It's Not What You Think." In one of his messages he points out how Jesus attracted non-religious people, people shunned by the "church" of the day: tax collectors, prostitutes, sinners. They would be like the non-church-goers of our day. Then, in this lesson, Andy encouraged us to ask: Is that the kind of people we attract in our churches today? How come they were drawn to Jesus, like bugs to a light, but so often are not at all attracted to us who say we're Christians? A big part of the answer to that question is that we in the church just criticize, judge, and exclude these people.

In one church I served we had a young lady on staff working with children's ministry. One day she shared with the congregation how she was working with a family in the community, trying to minister to them and encourage them to come to church. Afterwards, one of the leaders in the church came to her and warned her that she better not do that. He said he knew them, and they didn't have a good reputation, and he didn't think it'd be good if they got involved in our congregation. When I heard this, my heart sank. This church leader *just didn't get it!*

Rahab, a lady of the night, becomes a hero, and a model of notable faith! ***Did faith in God and commitment to the Hebrew God change her? I think it did!*** The Bible does not specifically tell us that. It does not say Rahab gave up her sex business and became a seamstress or a secretary! But we can read between the lines! Joshua 6:25 says, "But Joshua spared Rahab the prostitute, with her family and all who belonged to her, because she hid the men Joshua had sent as spies to Jericho – and she lives among the Israelites to this day." Notice: "she lives among the Israelites to this day". Hebrew tradition has it, and this verse suggests, that Rahab became a convert to the Hebrew faith, probably through marriage – and for that to happen, we can assume she would have turned from her former ways and lifestyle!

See, trying to be good never makes us right with God or gives us a relationship with God. But when we come to Christ, and through Him are declared righteous, *we begin a new relationship with God that changes us! And God starts to clean up our life!*

The story of Rahab is an awesome story about the grace of God! It reminds us that even though we don't deserve it and can never earn it, God welcomes us and offers us forgiveness and a new life through Christ. Someone has made an acronym out of the word "grace". GRACE is God's Riches At Christ's Expense. It was that ***crimson rope, the scarlet cord***, hung out of the window, that symbolized Rahab's faith in the living God! And it is the ***red, crimson blood of Christ***, shed on the cross, that provides the means for our escape from sin and our ultimate salvation!

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July 16, 2017

Community United Methodist Church

