

Stepping Out in Faith
Rahab - Joshua 2:1-24
Nov. 22, 2020
Rev. Kory Wilcoxson

How quick are you to judge someone? I'd like to think I'm a fairly open-minded and tolerant person, but in my heart of hearts I know that I have the capacity to be very judgmental. I believe we all do. For example, when you first heard Rahab's profession, what kind of person did you think she was? I believe in our world today, we are quick to put people into categories and then make judgments based on those categories.

Here's an example of that. I was at Target once doing a little shopping when I noticed an elderly woman staring at me. I tried to ignore her and move away, but every time I did, she followed me. Finally, she walked up to me and said, "Excuse me, can you tell me where I can find the paper towels?" I said, "No, ma'am, I actually don't know that." She said, "Well, you work here, don't you?" Now, I used to spend a lot of time at Target, but not enough to be considered an employee. I told her I didn't and she said, "But you're wearing a red shirt!" As a Reds fan, that's not unusual for me. I told her I was wearing a red shirt but I didn't work there. She said in a huff, "Well, you haven't been very helpful and I'm going to let your manager know that." The moral of that story is if you're going to wear red to Target, know where to find the paper towels.

That's a humorous example of how we can be quick to judge others, but I'm sure I'm guilty of doing the same thing, which is ironic because I hate it when people do that to me. When I hear people make generic negative statements about Christians, I want to jump up and down and pull my hair out. I will often introduce my profession by saying, "I'm a pastor, but not one of the crazy ones!" But if we're willing to admit it, we all have that judgment gene inside of us. We'd rather cross to the other side of the street or wait for the next elevator rather than be in close proximity with certain kinds of people.

Isn't that our first reaction to Rahab? A woman in her line of work is to be avoided. That's the kind of woman you talk about, not to, especially not in public. Like Hester Prynne in "The Scarlet Letter," Rahab should be held up as an example of what NOT to do, not celebrated for what she does. And yet, right here in the book of Joshua, we have Rahab's story.

But here's the thing: She's not only in the book of Joshua. Rahab is also mentioned three times in the New Testament. Three times! Why would a tarnished woman like Rahab deserve such notoriety? The first place she is mentioned – are you ready for this? – is in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew's gospel. Not only is Rahab the mother-in-law of Ruth, but she is also an ancestor of Jesus. The next place she is mentioned is in Hebrew 11, a chapter that lists a Spiritual All-Star Team, where the author names several people who are exemplary for their faith, people like Noah and Moses and David and Samuel – and Rahab. Would you have thought when you first heard about Rahab's vocation that she would make the Faith Hall of Fame?

The last mention of her in the New Testament is the most shocking for me. In his letter, James writes about the importance of living out our faith. As he says, "Faith without works is dead." He then gives two examples of people who have done this. The first is Abraham, the father of the Jewish and Christian and Muslim faith, the epitome of all things holy and faithful. James says that when Abraham was prepared to sacrifice his son Isaac at God's command, his faith was brought to completion by his works. He was justified by his willingness to live out his faith.

So, after lifting up Father Abraham as an example, who else do you think James names? Of all the heroic, wonderful people in the Hebrew Scriptures James has to choose from, who do you think he picks to hold up as a testimony to the power of stepping out in faith? A harlot named Rahab. He says, “Likewise, was not Rahab also justified by works when she welcomed the spies and sent them out by another road?” There you have it. Three different times Rahab is mentioned by name for her faith. Would you have thought that when you first heard about her? Do we think that “her kind of people” are capable of such things?

Well, let’s look at what she does in Joshua to merit such acclaim. The Israelites are finally preparing to move into the Promised Land, but in order to do so they’re going to have to displace the people who are already there. So Joshua sends a couple spies ahead to the city of Jericho to scout out the situation and report back on what they see. The spies arrive in Jericho and find shelter in Rahab’s house. That might seem strange to us at first, but realize that no one would question a couple of strangers going into the house of a professional like Rahab. It was actually the perfect cover for them to do their work.

Except the mission was over before it ever started. When these guys walked into Jericho, they must have worn their flowery Hawaiian shirts and had cameras around their necks and carried a sign that said, “Hey, we’re spies!” because the next verse tells us that the king of Jericho was told that two spies from Israel had come to scout out the land. So the king sends some soldiers to get the intruders, but Rahab lies to them, telling them the men have already left, when they were actually hiding on her roof. The motifs of hiding and a woman outwitting the king take us back to the story of baby Moses, when two midwives lie to Pharaoh and then baby Moses is hidden in a basket to save his life.

I find it very interesting that the king’s men didn’t question Rahab on her lie. I’m sure they could have forced themselves into her house and conducted a thorough search to make sure she wasn’t lying to them. But they didn’t, probably because they didn’t believe Rahab was either clever enough or brave enough to fool the king. After all, women who do what she does aren’t worth our attention. Forget that she was probably forced into her profession out of poverty. Forget that her only choice was either this line of work, or her whole family being taken as slaves. Forget her resiliency and her courage and her love of her family. After all, she’s just a...well, you know what she is. That’s all we need to know about her to make our judgment, right?

After the soldiers leave, Rahab goes to the roof and strikes a bargain with the spies, a bargain based on faith in God and faith in each other. Rahab tells them that she knows of their God and the powerful things God has done. Even if the rest of Jericho doesn’t believe, she does. So, she says, “I have dealt kindly with you, so swear to me by the Lord that you in turn will deal kindly with my family.” The Hebrew word for “deal kindly” here is “hesed,” which means the responsible caring of one another in a covenantal relationship. So when two people get married, they promise “hesed” to each other.

The spies agree to this bargain, and tell Rahab to mark her house as a safe place by hanging a crimson cord out of the window of her house. What an interesting choice. Our modern minds might first compare the crimson cord with the scarlet letter, the color red signifying the sin that has taken place in that house. But ancient readers would have heard something much different. When God was rescuing the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, the people were instructed to paint lamb’s blood on the doorframes of their houses so God would pass over them and spare their lives. The crimson cord is the same kind of signifier, indicating that the person inside is a child of God to be spared.

A child of God. That's a far cry from what Rahab was probably called by those around her. She would have been seen as a morally reprehensible and untrustworthy character, even in her own day. This was so true that later translators of the Bible tried to soften the language here and make Rahab an innkeeper instead of a harlot. After all, a woman like her can't really be in Jesus' genealogy, can she?

Yes, she can, and that has profound implications for us, because there are Rahabs all around us. On a global scale, human trafficking and forced slavery are still urgent issues to be dealt with. The overall value of human life seems to be plummeting. And even in Lexington, a place that feels isolated from many of the vulgarities of the world, there are Rahabs, people who have been cast aside by society. Crestwood supports an organization called Natalie's Sisters, which works with women to help them escape from these kinds of lives. We pass them every day. What do we see? Do we see a child of God? Or do we see "one of those people"?

I hear Rahab's story as a warning and a sign of hope. With God, it isn't who you were that matters, it's who you are becoming. We may be tempted to give up on people, but God never does. In God's world, there's no such thing as a lost cause. If there were, some of us might not be here today. God has the power to transform people like Rahab into examples of faith. God did it then, and God is still doing it today. For God, there's no such thing as "those people." There is no "other." There is only us, each of us and all of us, made in God's image and called to live out our faith while practicing "hesed." Not all of us will do this. Some will make bad choices; others, like Rahab, will be forced by life's circumstances into ungodly ways of life, so much so that people will give up on them. But that doesn't exclude them from God's love or from stepping out in faith.

The next time we feel ourselves passing judgment on someone, may we remember the story of Rahab. That person we are so quick to write off has the potential to do great things in God's name, because God hasn't given up on them. God never gives up. Every person, no matter their station in life, has the potential to become a force for good in this world. And what is potential? It's hope, hope that God's work in a person will come to completion. May we have hope: hope for ourselves, hope for each other, and, maybe most importantly of all, hope for the Rahabs in our world. Others have given up on them. But we're not going to give up on them. Are we?