

## ***The End of the Rope***

A Sermon for Morning Worship on the Sunday of Columbus Day Weekend  
United Congregational Church, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

October 9, 2016

Texts: Joshua 2:1-16

One day during my freshman year of college, I was thrilled to get a note in my mail box that there was a package for me that was too big to fit in the little mail cubby. I rushed to the service window and proudly presented my note. In short order I was handed a long cylindrical role of brown paper. I had no idea what it could be and, honestly, I was disappointed. I had desperately been hoping for a box of my mom's chocolate chip cookies and this was obviously NOT them. As I made the long walk back to my dorm at the outer reaches of campus, I could not imagine what my parents had sent me. Finally I made it to my room and ripped open the brown paper. I immediately started laughing when I unrolled what turned out to be a poster. This particular poster – a tiny kitten holding on to the very end of a big knotted rope – eventually became iconic of the seventies. Its caption explained why. “Hang In There!” it said in big, bold bubble letters.

I laughed at the image. I chuckled at the kitten and the rope, although I was mildly concerned about just how the photo had been taken. I wondered where it could possibly fit on my already poster encased walls. And I thanked God my parents were paying attention enough to what I said on my calls home that they knew I was struggling a bit to adjust to the college workload. Long story

short, I rearranged my other posters and fit this one in, right over my bed. It stayed on my wall through all four years of college and, truth be told, I think it's still tucked away inside the trunk that holds what little college memorabilia I still have. "Hang In There" spoke powerfully to me then and it still does today. And I suspect it does for all of you as well as we make our way through what has become a very topsy-turvy, impossible to predict and deeply distressing election season. The world we live in each day seems less and less familiar, less and less what we had imagined we would be handing over to our children and grandchildren of the next generations. And yet, here we are. Therefore, the question we ask ourselves as the people of God must surely be what are we supposed to do in the midst of all this mess? How are we supposed to find a way to move on as faithful followers of a loving God? Who does God need us to be to make things better?

Well, honestly, I'm not sure. Now perhaps you were hoping I'd say something else, something more direct, more profound, more miraculous even. No such luck because I am as dismayed and confused as you are. However, what I know we can do, what we must do as God's people is consider, ponder, together what wisdom God makes available to us through other people and other resources. The other people part, that you can find on your own and I'm sure you have. You all know I think there is literally too much information out there about other people's thoughts and

opinions, so much so that it has ceased to be helpful in many cases. Some of you may be wondering if I have opinions on this election and the state of the world we find ourselves in at this moment. I do. But they are just that, my opinion. And they have no place in a sermon or in any public pronouncement made by myself as an ordained minister of the Christian Gospel.

So what can I as a pastor do to help us, help you, as you ponder this mess we are calling an election this year? Well, we can talk about issues and we can talk about how the Gospel, how our faith, might inform our thinking and our deciding on such important issues. This is my thinking behind this whole sermon series we are in the midst of now – a series on who God considers heroes as recounted in the Bible. We’ve talked so far about a couple of them – Moses from the Old Testament and Philemon from the New to be precise. Ironically given the latest PR disaster of one of the Presidential candidates, today we are going to talk about a female hero in the Bible, and an unlikely one at that. We heard her story read a few minutes ago and it’s a remarkable one. So let’s spend some time talking about her, about Rahab.

Some of you may be wondering about now, having heard the Scriptures read, why I would even consider Rahab, a self-proclaimed prostitute, a hero of the Bible. Because she is, and the Bible makes that clear. Not only does she save the spies so that God’s plans for the fall of Jericho can happen, she goes on to

become none other than one of the ancestors of Jesus. Her name is listed right there in the Gospel of Matthew in the genealogy that begins his story of the birth of Jesus. Rahab was the mother of Boaz who married Ruth. Ruth in turn was the mother of Obed who was the father of Jesse who was the father of King David. Thus it is that Matthew makes clear that whoever Rahab might have been, in the final analysis, she was part of the lineage of Jesus himself. And that's not all! She's also specifically named in the Letter to the Hebrews as an excellent example of lived faith and in the Letter of James as someone justified by her actions in spite of any sin she may have committed – his argument that faith without action isn't really faith.

By now it's clear that Rahab was a very unusual woman, and a most unlikely hero in the Bible. And just what did she do that made her a hero? That role is grounded in what makes Rahab such an extraordinary person. Think about it. She was a prostitute, but she lived openly as an independent woman – a very rare situation in her time and place. She was smart – she outwitted the men sent to question her by the king of Jericho not once but three times. She told them the men had already left and sent them off in the wrong direction to chase them. She had hidden the spies on her roof under the flax she was drying – her other line of business – just in case the king's men decided to search anyway. And then she confounded the king's men once

more when she helped the spies actually escape – down a long rope she threw out and hung over the wall of the city.

She was a take-charge woman as well. She knew right away she had the Israelite spies at a disadvantage so she negotiated with them. Hard. She told them she would help them escape if they promised she would be safe when the attack came, she and all her family. Now that “all her family” part is really extraordinary. She was openly a prostitute. The chances that her parents and her family even acknowledged her was slim at best. But she still loved them and saved their lives when the time came. One gutsy lady for sure. That’s probably why the Israelites agreed and ultimately kept their word, telling her to tie a red cord in the window through which she helped them escape. That way their soldiers would know which house to leave intact. She did and they kept their word, going so far as to bring her and her family into their midst in the aftermath of the conquest of Jericho.

Rahab was indeed an incredible woman and her story is a foundational story of our faith, albeit one we seldom hear or dwell on much. That whole prostitute thing, I’m guessing. I remember hearing about Rahab in Sunday School when I was little, her courage and her willingness to help the spies lifted up even as she was described as a “harlot.” “What does that mean,” we all asked. “Never you mind,” was the only response. I was a religious studies major in college before I really understood who Rahab was

and what it meant. It was confusing for sure. But also very compelling for reasons difficult to explain then. Now I know I was drawn to her courage, her selflessness, her intelligence and her faith. And yes, Rahab was a woman of deep and profound faith. She *tells the spies* who their God is and gives that as her reason for agreeing to help them. She told them about all that God had done for them to get them this far and then she said this: “The Lord your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below.” Your God is God, she says. I know that and I want to be a part of his people, his plans for the future. I want your God to be my God too.

Rahab is indeed a remarkable woman, a worthy heroine for our consideration, a role model we should emulate for her faith and her courage and her willingness to risk everything to do the right thing. She is also one more thing. She’s an example of a problem that has plagued human history since time immemorial and still plagues us today. Rahab’s story, dear friends, is an example of what happens when human arrogance allows itself to believe it can do anything it thinks is right, without consequence. This is the uncomfortable side of this story these days. It’s uncomfortable because when we think about the reasons the spies were there in the first place – to set up the conquering and destruction of a city because they wanted to take over the land – it’s not how we like to think of our God and God’s instructions to

his people. We don't like to think God encouraged one group of people to kill another group of people just to get their land. That can't be our God, we think to ourselves. And, in truth, I don't think it is our God. I think what we see in these stories is classic human manipulation of a situation and trying to say it's what God wants to happen. Humankind has always been guilty of this kind of arrogance and it still is. The wars around the world – no matter their reason or justification offered – prove this to be true. Rahab didn't confront this reality because it was her only reality. She didn't know another way was possible, a way grounded in caring about one's neighbor, loving the other person as much as you love yourself. Jesus taught us that. That's why it is so amazing, and so perfect, she's still part of that message of Jesus we build our lives around because she's there in the lineage that gave him life.

By the way, there is one other fact about Rahab I'd like you to keep in mind. If you saw her on the street, she would stand out because she'd be dressed like any Muslim woman. Even as a prostitute, she would be draped from head to toe, a headscarf covering her hair. You might see her and be afraid of her for that reason alone, and that would be too bad. You'd miss her courage and her intelligence. You'd miss her compassion and her stories about what it was like to live on the edges of the society in which she was born and grew up. You wouldn't know that she'd been hanging from the end of the rope long before she threw it over the

side of her house for the spies to escape, securing her survival and the survival of her whole family in the process. You wouldn't understand that she recognized God in the stories she heard about what God had done for the Israelites long before the spies knocked on her door. You wouldn't be filled with the contagion of her hope that this new God was offering her and everyone she loved a new life. If you couldn't see past the way she was dressed, or the way she had to provide for her loved ones by selling the only asset she had – her body, then you would miss Rahab and everything she stands for as one of God's heroes.

That, dear friends, is Rahab's gift to you. Rahab and her story prove to you that the world is full of people who are at the end of the rope, people whom the world has beaten up on and ignored, people whom society is all too willing to write off because of the circumstances of their lives which are beyond their control. Rahab reminds all of us that even at the end of the rope we ourselves are clutching there is hope a new beginning is possible. Rahab tell us that God is always doing a new thing and we can all be a part of it. But – first, we have to let go of the rope. We have to let go of the rope if we want to reach toward the new beginning God offers. That's really hard. Rahab knew that. We know that. But aren't we just weary of all those rope-burns? Let go. Let God. Reach for hope and new life. And the church? We'll help you do it because we're all trying to do the same thing. Amen.



