

Rahab's Genius

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
September 14, 2025 – Sunday morning worship
Text: Joshua 2:1-21

Rahab is one of the most consequential women of the Bible and yet her story is so much more than what it appears to be on the surface. It is also surprisingly unknown as are so many of the stories of consequential women in the Scriptures. So, who was she, really? There are so many ways to answer that question because there are so many facets to how this woman's story is told, understood and remembered. This is precisely what makes her so very interesting and worthy of our time to pull back the many layers of her story which is, in the end, our story too.

If you do any reading about Rahab at all, even just in the Scriptures, you will immediately pick up on her identity as a prostitute. Was she, or wasn't she? Some scholars have suggested that perhaps she wasn't a prostitute but really an innkeeper at the margins of the city in which she lived. Literally, because her house was actually a part of the wall that surrounded Jericho. The prostitute rap, these scholars argue, was due to the fact that she was willing to house strange men in her home. But she wasn't a prostitute! Heavens no! Now why would some scholars feel this is such an important point to make? That's easy to answer. The genealogy provided in the first chapter of Matthew's Gospel lists Rahab among the ancestors of Jesus. This is because in some ancient traditions it is believed that after the fall of Jericho, Rahab ends up marrying Joshua and giving birth to Boaz who in turn married Ruth and so on down the long line to Jesus himself. Thus, this circuitous argument about Rahab not being a prostitute would seem to be at least tangentially connected to a desire to "clean up" some aspects of Jesus' family line. This is a perfect example of why careful reading of the Scriptures, even the stories we think we know, is so important. The richness of these stories such as Rahab's is found not on the surface words of ink on

paper, but much deeper in the details we seldom tend to excavate. So, what more can we discern in Rahab's story by digging deeper into who she really was and how she came to be such a heroine of the faith, both Jewish and Christian.

Personally, I've always loved Rahab's story. She's one of the very few female heroines in the Bible, Old or New Testament. Her actions made the fall of Jericho at the hands of Joshua possible. That she was crucial to this is made clear in the simple fact that she alone is named in this story of the spies Joshua sent ahead to check out the situation in Jericho before the attack. We don't know the names of the two male spies but we know Rahab. We know that Rahab lived in a house that was part of the city wall itself and we know that she hid the spies when the king of Jericho sent his men to find the Israelites who had come into the city. She lied to the king's men about hiding them. She even sent those men on a wild goose chase after the spies to get them out of the way so she could help the spies escape. But not before making them promise that she and her family would be safe when the attack everyone knew was coming finally happened. She even negotiated with them to ensure her family's safety when they insisted they could not be held responsible if her family left her house during the attack. They also conditioned the safety of Rahab's family on her marking her home with a red cord – the same red cord she had used to help them escape out the window of her home in the wall. She agreed to all of their conditions. The spies escaped and returned to report to Joshua. The attack happened. Rahab and her family were spared. End of story.

Well, not exactly. As I explained earlier, there are stories from other ancient sources (not the Bible) which talk about Rahab marrying Joshua or someone else among the leadership of the Israelites. But that's not the story that interests me. I'm interested in another character – Achan – who appears in chapter 7. Achan – a male warrior in Joshua's army which destroyed Jericho – broke the divine rules of engagement during the battle for Ai. Contrary to God's orders, Achan took some stuff – gold and garments – during the battle

thereby contaminating all of Israel with his sin. Before the battle, God had been very clear with Joshua that there was to be no looting for personal gain. Any precious items like gold and jewelry could be taken but only to be added to the treasury which belonged to God. Achan took the items for personal gain and hid them. His sin was discovered when Joshua lost the next battle he and his army fought at Ai. This battle took place after everyone had made the crossing over the river and began to occupy what they claimed as the land promised to them by God. Very long story short, Joshua's army should not have lost the battle for Ai but they did. By a process of divination involving the casting of lots, Achan's contraband was revealed and he and his entire family were destroyed for his sin, because the ancient Israelites believed sin was contagious. If Achan sinned, his whole family was held accountable. Yikes.

So how is Rahab connected to Achan's story? She isn't really except that it is worth noticing that she – an identified prostitute who most likely slept with the spies she hid – was glorified in this story of the conquering of the promised land while a male warrior was executed along with his entire family for taking a few things from a house. Her sin of adultery – that would be the real sin of prostitution, causing men to commit adultery by having sex with her and one of the Ten Commandments just received by Moses – was overlooked because she was willing to betray her own people. It wasn't even named as a sin by anyone – then or by subsequent scholars who even attempted to change her story by arguing she was really an innkeeper and not a prostitute. This is really a noteworthy point for us to think about because it reveals the all too human tendency to overlook the sins of some while over-reacting to the perceived sins of others. It's also really curious that Joshua and supposedly God were willing to overlook God's other directives regarding the Israelites not becoming involved with "foreign women" because the worry was so great about the contaminating effect these foreign women would have on the whole kingdom of Israel in its fledgling state as the battle of Jericho

and the conquest of the promised land begins. This difference of how Rahab and Achan are treated is worth our noticing precisely because it illustrates powerfully a double standard we see over and over again in the Bible except that in this story the double standard benefits the woman involved and not the man.

This is the real genius of Rahab's story. Her story reveals in a unique way this double standard so common in human interactions. We are so willing to overlook problematic things about someone we want to glorify that we overlook, disregard or ignore the real problems with who that person really is. What do I mean by that? Well, let's think a little more deeply about what Rahab actually did, but not through the lens of seeing her as a heroine of the Bible. She is, as we have been discussing. But only to the Israelites. She was no heroine to the people of Jericho, her own people, because her treachery brought about their total defeat and annihilation. Her actions against her own people ended up with their deaths. She is "a woman turned against her own people in a narrative dominated by the theme of righteous conquest, and of the impurity and unworthiness of the Canaanites. ... If I join the text in applauding her initiative, have I assumed the perspective of the invader?"¹ So says one commentator from a commentary note in *The People's Bible*.

Dear ones, these are precisely the kinds of questions we need to engage with as we strive to study the Scriptures and deepen our relationship with God. This is why it matters that we look at stories such as Rahab's through a more complex reading than what we usually do. Is Rahab a heroine or a villain? Did she open a way forward for the Israelite army that required her to betray her own people? Yes, she did. And perhaps she had reason to. We don't know her whole story. We don't know how it is she came to be a prostitute living in a house in the wall that formed the boundary with the outside world instead of in a regular house in the center of the city. We don't

¹ Dora R. Mbuwayesango, "Commentary on Joshua," *The People's Bible*, ©2009, Fortress Press, p. 347.

know who her family was. We only know she is anxious to protect them, to negotiate for them with the spies. Was it her own parents, her children, her siblings? We don't know. Perhaps whatever happened to her caused her to no longer care about what happened to the people of the kingdom of her birth. That, dear ones, is entirely possible. Or was it more like the text says – she had heard of the God of the Israelites as being more powerful than any other god, including the ones she was raised with, so she realized she needed to get on the good side of this new and powerful God by any means necessary? A real possibility. Here again, our lack of biblical knowledge as background information is clear. At this point, the Israelites did understand their God as one god among many other options. Of course, their God – I AM THAT I AM – insisted that he/she was the one and only God because all the other gods were frauds and fakes. But, at that time, Rahab would only have known that this God who appeared to accompany the Israelites in everything they did and everywhere they went was now coming for her home town. And she was not convinced her gods or the king and his army were up to the task of defeating them. Holy Cow. What was she supposed to do? These were obviously real questions for Rahab and I think she struggled mightily with the answers. And then, the spies knocked on her door and her opportunity came to imagine a new life for her and her family.

Rahab, dear ones, is indeed worthy of our deeper reflection and our respect. What we learn about her in the text reveals so much more about her than a simple surface reading of her story would ever do. We have to wonder about her back story, how she came to this point of being a prostitute, living literally at the margins of her own home town. I would suggest her story also invites us to look more closely at the all women living at the margins of our society whom we encounter in our own lives every day and realize how quick we are to label them based solely on our first impressions of them. A young mother using food stamps to buy her groceries must be a slacker. An old woman

struggling to push her partially full foldable grocery pushcart back home up the hill must have done something bad to her family to end up alone. A teen girl with green hair and more tattoos than clothing just hanging out with other kids who look like her must be a trouble maker just waiting for her next chance to get high. Dear ones, let's be honest and admit we make these kinds of snap judgments all the time. We all do. It's almost an involuntary response, except it isn't. Not really.

This is why Rahab's story is so important. Instead of rushing to judgment, Rahab's story invites us to ask who these women, and everyone we encounter every day, really are and, more importantly, how is it that they have come to be in their circumstances? How did they come to be who they are, where they are, and more importantly, why should we care? That dear ones, is the genius of Rahab and her story. She invites us to see these women, really see them, not only for who they are but even more importantly to see and acknowledge them as beloved of God just as they are. Rahab, dear ones, reminds us once again that God's love knows no bounds. God sees value and worth in every single person. Even right here, right now. Even for you and me. Amen.