

AUGUST 2023

Belton Joyner, Jr. - Based on the scripture lessons from Cokesbury's Adult Bible Study Series

August 6th - Text: Joshua 2:1-14 "Rahab's Plausible 'Truth'"

It sounds like the plot of a TV drama: the heroine is a prostitute who tells lies. (Check out Joshua 2:1 and Joshua 2:3-5). This mixture hardly seems like the account of someone faithful to God.

Nevertheless, Rahab is one of the few women mentioned in Matthew's account of the genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:5). Nevertheless, Rahab is celebrated as an example of faith (Hebrews 11:31). Nevertheless, James uses Rahab as an example of good works (James 2:25). It seems that Rahab spoke Truth, even though she did not speak truth!

I am remembering the stories of German citizens who saved their Jewish neighbors during the Second World War. These citizens would hide their Jewish neighbors in the trunk of their car and when asked by Nazi police "What do you have in your trunk?", they would reply "Just the usual groceries." It was a lie, but it was love, dangerous love.

Some scholars think the Rahab mentioned in Matthew 1:5 is a different Rahab from the one in this story in Joshua. Even so, the name "Rahab" is one honored in our faith tradition. We remember the name "Rahab" because of this harlot who believed in Yahweh (Joshua 2:11). In that culture, it was uncommon for a woman to be honored, much less one who had made her living as a prostitute. What an encouragement it is to

August 13th - Text: 1 Kings 11:1-13 "Solomon: The Realities of Human Kingship"

Solomon was a mixed bag. He got the temple built...1 Kings 6:1-38 (Hooray!) He showed great wisdom...1 Kings 4:29-34 (Hooray!) He worked to make for peace...1 Kings 4:24 (Hooray!)

One of the marvelous moment's in Solomon's reign came when two women came before him, each claiming to be the mother of the same baby boy (1 Kings 3:16-28). To settle the dispute, Solomon said they should cut the baby in half and give each woman half of the baby. The real mother screamed "No! Give the baby to the other woman!" When Solomon saw the anguish of the one woman, he knew she was the real mother, and granted her the child. Wisdom.

But King Solomon was a mixed bag. In this week's focal text, we see that he had hundreds of wives and concubines (v. 3). He began to worship the gods of his foreign wives (v. 5) and even built high places for their worship (v. 7). God is so upset that God says, "I will surely tear the kingdom from you..." (1 Kings 11:11). Solomon loses. Because of God's grace, there will be a token tribe left (1 Kings 11:13).

Most of us cannot identify with Solomon's wisdom or his wealth or his power. Most of us are just ordinary kind of folks. But we need to be aware that when God judged Solomon, it was not on the basis of wisdom, wealth, or power. God judged Solomon on whether or not Solomon had obeyed the covenant (God's agreement with God's people) and kept

realize that God is able to use our lesser selves!

These verses in Joshua are not intended to convince us that it does not matter about our moral choices (prostitution?), but they do assure us that even when we make wrong choices, God does not let go of us and God still can use us. In those days, a woman who was not supported by the males in her family was left to desperate decisions for survival. But notice that Rahab, when asking for safety from the invading Israelite army, she includes the men (father, brothers) in her family (Joshua 2:13). The customs of that time would suggest that they had abandoned her, but she had not abandoned them. I dare not limit God to using only holy people for God's work.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *A Theology for Our Times* (Wethington Family Foundation), L. Elbert Wethington is quoted from one of his sermons: "(Humans) need God's grace, need faith to act where they can't see the possible outcome; and power from an eternal, indestructible Source."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Grace-giving God, take my frail self and use it for love..."

God's commandments (1 Kings 11:11). You and I are subject to judgment on these same points.

What is that covenant? What are those commandments? Some scribes asked Jesus the same question. That is when our Lord said that our agreement with God can be summed up in loving God and loving neighbor (Mark 12:28-31, Matthew 22:34-40, Luke 10:25-28). All of the gospel writers included this basic truth.

Solomon was a king with a kingdom. Each of us has a life and a "lifedom." We are called to the same values and truths as was Solomon. In our free will, we choose ways we will (and ways we will not) honor the God of that "lifedom." It is measured in our love for God in every way we can love and it is measured in how we love our neighbor. Solomon was a mixed bag. What about you?

What Someone Else Has Said:

Francis S. Collins, (*The Language of God*, First Press) has written: "Knowledge itself has no intrinsic moral value; it is the way in which knowledge is put to use that acquires an ethical dimension."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Holy Spirit, touch me with love..."

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August 20th - Text: Mark 7:24-30
“A Persistent Woman: The Syrophenician Mother”

This week's focal text stirs a number of questions: Why did Jesus go so far from His usual region? (v. 24)...Why did Jesus not want anyone to know where He was? (v. 24)...Why did the Gentile woman seek out the Jewish rabbi? (vv. 25-26)...Why did Jesus hesitate to offer healing? (v. 27)...Why did the woman talk back to Jesus? (v. 28)...Why did Jesus heal the woman's daughter? (v. 29-30)

One conclusion I draw from all this: Just when we think we have Jesus all figured out, He strikes out in a new direction! He brings alive the words of Isaiah 43:19: “Behold, I am about to do a new thing.” When we follow our Lord, it is never “business as usual.”

At the heart of this situation is the dialogue between Jesus and the mother of the sick child. It would surely help to know Jesus' tone of voice and facial expression when he suggested that His mission was first to the Jewish community, not to the “dogs.” (v. 27). Was He teasing? Was He testing the woman's faith? Was He introducing a conversation starter?

The Syrophenician woman was equal to the occasion (v. 28). If Jesus was teasing, she picked up on the joke. If He was starting a conversation, she took the next step. If He was testing her faith, she came up with an expression of belief. Bottom line: the daughter was healed.

No matter how we interpret this text, one thing is clear: Jesus has opened doors that others might close. I am left to wonder which doors do I keep closed? Who are the people that I think must be off-limits for God's love? Indeed, who are the people that I choose not to love?

August 27th - Text: John 13:1-30
“Flawed Character: Judas”

How would you like to be named “Judas”? It's not very likely that you'd plant that name on your new baby! It was a fairly common name in New Testament times; it was simply the Greek version of “Judah,” one of the tribes of Israel and a beautiful portion of the land of the Israelites. This week's focal text looks at the one sometimes called “Judas Iscariot.” (Some students of the Bible think the name “Iscariot” was added by biblical writers after the death of Jesus; the word “Iscariot” means “betrayor” or “assassin.”)

This man had evidently been one of the most trusted disciples. After all, he was given the role of treasurer (John 12:6). When Jesus told His followers that one of them would betray Him, they had no idea which one it might be (John 13:22). Evidently, even though Judas had pilfered from their common treasury (John 12:6), no one suspected that he might betray the Lord.

Even after Jesus identified Judas as the one who would turn Him over to the authorities (John 13:27), some of the disciples still thought Jesus was simply sending Judas off on some errand (John 13:29). The writer of the Gospel of John is clear that it was Satan that now made disciple Judas become betrayer Judas (John 13:27).

There is, of course, a lot more to the story of Judas [thirty pieces of silver (Matthew 26:15), the betrayal of Jesus (Matthew 26:48-49), the suicide of Judas (Matthew 27:5) or perhaps the accidental death of Judas (Acts

This is, of course, a story of healing, but it may well be that the deeper message is the universality of God's love. Jew. Gentile. Agnostic. Atheist. Call the roll and there is no one left out. God loves even those with whom God disagrees! John 1:16 has captured the breadth of such a claim: “From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.” There is joy when the response to that grace is “Yes.”

What Someone Else Has Said:

In S T Kimbrough, Jr.'s book of poetry (*The Struggle to Believe*, Resource Publications), the poet has written: “The love we find is to be shared,/... and nothing is with it compared./...It's for the humble, rich, the poor/...and all may of this love be sure.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “God, Your love reaches into places and people beyond my understanding. Fill me now with a healing presence that I might learn to love others, even the others who are ‘other’...”

1:16-18]), but the challenge of this episode is to ask ourselves when we have been willing to turn against Jesus.

Have I betrayed Him when I chose worldly values instead of His servant values? Have I betrayed Him when I identified as part of His inclusive family in the Church and yet found ways to make some more valuable than others? Have I betrayed Him when I listened more to the cultural power brokers than I did to His message of love?

My name may not be “Judas,” but I am as tempted as the disciple with that name. And what about you?

What Someone Else Has Said:

Reinhold Niebuhr (*Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic, Living Age Books*) wrote: “...the author is not unconscious of what the critical reader will divine, a tendency to be most critical of that in (others) to which (one) is most tempted (one's self.)”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Master, let me walk with Thee. Keep me from magnetic sin which attracts me...”

We appreciate your patience while we work on improving our processes.