

## “Most (Un)likely to...”

May 21, 2017

Faith of Our Mothers series – 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter – Graduation Sunday

### **SING v. 1-2** of *Remember Faithful Rahab* by Edith Sinclair Downing:

*Remember faithful Rahab  
who harbored Hebrew spies  
by using devious methods,  
invention, intrigue, lies.  
Along with Egypt's midwives  
Rahab defies the king.  
She lets men out her window  
from which hung a red string.*

*When Joshua led the army  
destroying Jericho  
her family took refuge  
in her house, lying low.  
Rahab becomes the midwife  
for a new Israel,  
convinced that now God gives them  
this land where they may dwell.*

Most of the time, when we hear about Rahab, we connect her name to what she was known for. Usually it's "Rahab the prostitute," not "Rahab the faithful woman" who helped the Israelites. Believe me, it's a big deal that Rahab gets any attention at all, but if we're honest, she's probably not the first person on anyone's list to be considered for "Most likely to be used by God for incredible things."

Today we're blessing our graduates and praying for them, and it made me think about 23 years ago when I graduated from high school - in 1994. I got out my old yearbook and looked through it. We had a Senior Hall of Fame where we voted on who was "Most Likely to Succeed," "Most Respected," "Most Talented," and the like. Those titles may mean something for a time, but it's interesting to compare what happened in our lives. Our "most likely" lists aren't always accurate.

And certainly when it comes to thinking about who's the most faithful or most likely to follow God, many times we're surprised. Sometimes we're disappointed that the one who was brought up in the church seems so disconnected from God and faith. Sometimes we're surprised that the person we never thought would come close to God becomes the one who is deeply faithful and ready to share the transforming power of God's grace.

And if we're honest, we're surprised because there's a part of us that judges others very quickly. We forget that God's ways are not our ways. We forget that God works in ways we can't imagine or understand. We forget that grace, by its very nature, isn't fair, and ebbs and flows throughout our lives. We shouldn't be surprised, but we are.

I had that experience of surprise and conviction earlier this year when a person who had struggled for years showed me how God's grace had become real in his life. At his mother's funeral, he offered a witness to his faith and a tribute to his mom by playing a hymn for her. It was incredible, and one of those moments when God spoke

to me: “See, you don’t always know how I’m working. You never know how I might show up.”

Last week, we talked about Deborah, the judge. Today we backtrack into Joshua - after Moses has died and the Israelites are led by Joshua into the Promised Land, but before the time of the judges. God is the ultimate ruler, and the One who gives victory.

It is 40 years after the Exodus, and the Israelites are trying to regain control of the Promised Land. Joshua sends two men into Jericho - a city with high walls - to check out what they’re up against. Scholars believe that Rahab’s house is situated right at the entrance, and so the spies go there first. There are some scholars who say that Rahab was an innkeeper – not a prostitute. Whether it’s a brothel or an inn, her home is a place to get information. People were in and out often.

The kicker is that when the king’s men come and demand that she turn over the spies, Rahab lies to them (and ultimately to the king!) and says that they’ve gone away. Meanwhile, they’re hiding on her roof under the flax that’s been drying there. It was harvest time.

After the king’s men leave, Rahab makes a deal. And her reason is founded on the fact that she’s heard about how God brought the Israelites out of Egypt. She’s heard about how they were able to defeat two Amorite kings. Their God must be powerful, and she demands that they spare her life as well as her entire family - parents, siblings, and their families.

I bet Rahab surprised these men. Whatever her place in life, if she was a prostitute, it’s possible that her situation was one of poverty and maybe indebtedness. Either way, she was not an Israelite. She represents all those who were poor and standing against the power of the king.

She was an unexpected part of the victory for the Israelites. And as far as the cards she was dealt? Foreigner, judged by her past, intelligent, courageous, resourceful, loved her family, quick-thinker, negotiator, offered radical hospitality, and was open to considering God’s power to save.

Taking the whole picture of who Rahab is, it’s notable that her name lives on. How many of you have ever done a family tree? We tend to skip over the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew, chapter 1, but Rahab shows up there. After Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, and a few others, it says, “Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab, Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth, Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David.” Rahab is a part of the line of David!

In the early church, Rahab is remembered by the author of Hebrews as one who has faith. Chapter 11 begins: “Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for.” Rahab is remembered for welcoming the spies - for putting her faith into action.

And she’s mentioned in the book of James, too. Again, she’s remembered for exemplifying that phrase “faith without works is dead.” She’s considered righteous

because she saves the spies and protects them. Even more, she's the surprising one whose faith shows in her actions. For people of faith throughout the ages, Rahab is the most unlikely to be a part of God's plan, and yet she is!

For graduates and for all of us, Rahab offers some lessons on faith and life. We have moments when we have to advocate for ourselves and our loved ones. We have times when we have to do things we never expected to do. Rahab faced unexpected moments with great faith and with courage. She took risks for the sake of others and ended up bringing hope to her whole family.

Maybe it's easy for us to be "wowed" by Rahab's faith, and we should be, but we also have to confront our tendency to hang onto other people's pasts. We're good at remembering the baggage that people carry or the gossip we've heard about them. We allow it to forever define them.

That's what I had done to the man who played at his mom's funeral. I had decided that he was who he was, and there was nothing more to say. We're not so good at allowing people to move beyond where they've been and see how God can transform lives.

Rahab made me think of those who are caught in difficult positions - seeking to do what they can to help their families - working multiple jobs and trying their best to make ends meet. She made me think of those who are caught in modern-day slavery, whether it's sex trafficking or labor trafficking. You might know that we sponsored the cost for a woman to attend a survivors' retreat through the Hope Project here in Muskegon with the goal of being a part of offering healing and hope for women who have been mistreated and abused. How is God transforming them, and how do we allow for God's grace to show up?

We struggle to get past our judgments of other people when it comes to their past, and we do it with ourselves, too. Sometimes we get caught up in thinking that God can't or won't use us because of what we've done. Our past is too much to overcome. Our present is too messy. Our future is too uncertain. God can't possibly want us or call us into relationship.

We're not faithful enough. We don't have the right gifts. We don't have enough knowledge. We're worried that we don't have enough experience. We're too young. We're too old. We didn't grow up in church. We grew up in the church. We look around and compare ourselves to others instead of celebrating that God calls us to love and serve right where we are.

Friends, each of us is someone whom God can use for God's good purpose. We're not labeled and categorized by God. We're embraced and welcomed to be God's people. We're called beloved children of God - no other label. God sees the gifts that we have and calls us to use them to give God the glory.

There's a quote that's attributed to John Newton who was a slave ship captain and later wrote the words to "Amazing Grace." He said, "I am not what I ought to be, I

am not what I want to be, I am not what I hope to be in another world; but still I am not what I once used to be, and by the grace of God I am what I am.” Others have modernized the language a bit: “I may not be where I want to be, but thank God I am not where I used to be.”

I don't know if Rahab carried the label of prostitute as a way to show God's power to transform a person's life - or if it was because it was a way to discredit her role. It does challenge us to consider those we might label today - and how we might be open to the power of God to change lives.

It's not so important what Rahab did as it is who she became - by the grace of God. Rahab reminds us that God uses us no matter our past and God offers us a new future. God isn't so concerned with who we've been, where we've done, or what we've done, but promises to transform us into who we can be by the power of grace and love that never end.

We don't need to be qualified. We need to be available and faithful. You, me, and every person isn't the “most unlikely.” We are God's beloved called to live the faith we claim, to do what God calls us to do, and to believe in God's power to transform and make things new.

Thanks be to God! AMEN.