

*Based on Hebrews 11:29 - 12:2, The Hall of Heroes*

Many of you have heard me say that the most pressing spiritual question of my adult life has been about how to live with any kind of integrity in a world that is so incredibly unjust.

One example of this question emerged in my early years as a pastor asked to officiate weddings before marriage equality was the law of the land and the practice of the church.

I agonized over “the right thing to do.” There was no doubt that I would officiate same gender ceremonies, that part was clear. Ecclesiastical disobedience, we called it, comparable to civil disobedience. We knew we could get in trouble, lose our jobs, and even be stripped of our ordination. But those were risks I felt obligated to take, to live with integrity in an unjust world.

The real question came around what to do when I was asked to officiate opposite gender weddings. It all boiled down to marriage licenses. I was deputized as an agent of the state to sign them for opposite gender couples. But the option did not exist for same gender couples. If I was not able to sign the legal marriage certificate of the same gender couples I married, was it ethical to sign the legal marriage certificate of the opposite gender couples? There had to be a way, I thought at the time, to extract myself from this injustice, to “stay clean” somehow, to maintain my personal and pastoral integrity through the injustice of it all.

When I brought this question to a mentor who is considered the grandmother of the LGBTQIA+ movement in the Presbyterian Church (Janie Spahr), she just shook her head and sighed. “Oh, Gusti,” she said. (You could almost feel her patting me on the head.) “The only ethical thing to do is to have marriage equality in church and society. Without that, nothing you do will be ‘the right thing.’”

I was stunned. And shaken. I really did naively think that somehow I could “get it right,” even when the world around me had gotten it so wrong. But I could not. Every choice was a bad one. Every choice perpetuated an injustice that had real life and death consequences. Purity was not an option. All I could do was make the best choices available to me in the moment, trusting in a spirit of grace and love, solidarity and survival, to bring about some kind of good from those choices.

The same is true of the “Hall of Heroes” listed in our Lesson from Hebrews this morning. We hear great stories of escape and freedom and prophetic witness and commendable strength. We also hear of drowning Egyptians and waging holy war, and putting foreign armies to flight.

How did anyone in this Hall of Heroes live with any kind of integrity in a world that was so incredibly unjust?

Take Rahab, for example, the only woman listed in this lineage as one who lived “by faith.” (Sarah gets an honorable mention but her faith is not mentioned.)

In a nutshell, Rahab’s story goes like this: She is a Canaanite prostitute, living on the edge of the city. Most

scholars think she lives on the margins, outcast from society. It is also possible that she lives with some personal empowerment, perhaps even functioning as a spy for the powers that be, trading secrets as much as she trades her body.

The city is on edge, having heard of the ancient Israelite advancement out of slavery in Egypt, through the wilderness, and now on the outskirts of their land, plotting an invasion. We know the story from the Israelite perspective. God liberates a people in bondage and prepares them to live in justice and peace in a land of promise and plenty, just across the Jordan.

The problem is, there are people already in that land. Including Rahab.

Joshua, the successor of Moses, sends spies into the land to scope out their weakness. They head to the brothel. (The text is not clear whether they use it “as a brothel” or simply as an out of the way place to stay.) Word gets out and the Canaanite king visits Rahab, asking for the spies’ whereabouts. Rahab says, Oh yeah, they were here, they went *that* way, if you hurry you might catch them. In truth, the spies are hidden in her house. And Rahab makes a deal.

I have heard of your god, Rahab says, who took the side of the oppressed in Egypt and led you across the Red Sea but pummeled the Egyptians. I have heard how your god is leading you into this land, and I want to be part of it. I will help you, Rahab says, if you spare me and my family when you take over. And they do. And she does.

It is possible that Rahab genuinely sees the god of the Israelites as a liberator of the oppressed, including herself, and joins the justice movement in rebellion against her own oppression by her own people. It is also possible that Rahab is a double agent, sees the writing on the wall, and does what she has to do to survive. The text is written by the victors. Rahab is their heroine. But imagine how the Canaanites would tell the story.

Fast forward to today and immigrants love the story of Rahab. The ancient Israelites were fleeing bondage and persecution and had nowhere else to go. They see the Canaanite Dream on the other side of the desert and make their way en masse, crossing whatever border they have to cross, no matter the danger, for a chance at life and freedom. Rahab welcomes the stranger, no questions asked, protects them from xenophobic prosecution, and sacrifices her own people in order to give them a home. The Sanctuary Movement of churches and synagogues and cities offering shelter to migrants fleeing persecution finds a soul sister in her story. Like Rahab, we will risk it all to welcome the stranger.

Sex workers love the story of Rahab. A woman on the margins, just like us, who will do what she has to do to in order to survive and keep her family safe. Full of pluck and spunk and street smarts and a strength most people do not even know how to call upon in times of trouble. AND she is listed in Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus! Take that, all you puritans about sexuality.

But colonized people take issue with Rahab. Africans, colonized by European powers take issue with Rahab.

Indigenous Americans, also colonized by European powers, take issue with Rahab. Palestinians — although it is a controversial thing to say, I will say — have been colonized, definitely take issue with Rahab. This is a classic scenario of the oppressed becoming the oppressor. Colonized people see in Rahab the politics of collaborating with the enemy, aiding the colonizer at the expense of the colonized. She could be compared with Pocahontas or Sacajawea, in this country: heroines for us White folks, but seen quite differently from an indigenous perspective. Rahab aids the colonizer at the expense of her own people.

It is a complex story, with a complex heroine who navigates overlapping survival imperatives through choices that have no clean outcome. Rahab, herself is trying to survive. The ancient Israelites are trying to survive. The Canaanite community is trying to survive. And the original audience of our Lesson from Hebrews is trying to survive within their own context of authoritarian assault.

What is the right thing to do? they are all asking. How can we live with any kind of integrity in a world that is so incredibly unjust? How do we live as teachers and school administrators when funding is threatened because of our commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion? How do we live as federal workers when our patriotic national service is co-opted and weaponized for autocratic purposes?

How do families in Gaza choose between starvation or risking death for a bag of flour? How do parents at our border choose whether to stay in danger or risk everything in migration? How do immigrant parents in this country choose between following the law to deportation or going into hiding to protect their families? How do we love our enemies, as Jesus says we must, when our very survival is at stake?

This is the context, the author of our Lesson from Hebrews today is trying to say, of what it means to live “by faith.” In systems of deep injustice, every choice is compromised. No one gets to stay pure. Faith means running - with perseverance - the race that is set before us, not the one we wish we were in.

The writer of Hebrews does not praise Rahab because she finds a morally pure path. There isn’t one. The writer praises her because she acts with courage in the midst of impossible choices. She aligns herself, as best she can, with survival and with solidarity. That’s what faith looks like for her.

Rahab’s story insists we do not get to revel in neat hero/villain binaries. Instead, we are forced to reckon with the complexity of actions taken under duress. We are called to compassion for all who are caught in the binds of survival. And we are compelled to resist weaponizing ancient stories to justify contemporary violence — as the story of Rahab has been for both Jewish and Christian colonizers ever since.

Rahab faces a world where no choice is clean. Her act of survival is messy, complex, compromised, and still our Lesson calls it an act of faith. Not as purity. Not as getting it right. But as choosing a path that preserves life, even as it costs. As acting in solidarity with the vulnerable, even though others get hurt. And as trusting the steadfast love of God to meet us all with grace in our compromises.

Like Rahab, we find that survival as an act of faith means moving through danger, loyalty, pragmatism, and

hope, with a deep trust that somehow, some way, God really is doing the best God can to work it all together for a good we may not see in our lifetimes but is still held forth as the ultimate promise.

And we look to Jesus, the one human in history, who, with God's help, endured the cross — the most compromised survival choice of all — and turned it into life, surrounded by a truly great cloud of witnesses, and counting it all as joy that we get to run this race together.