

"What Is a 'Saint'? The Story of Rahab"—All Saints Sunday

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"By faith. Rahab the prostitute did not perish. With those who were disobedient. Because she had received the spies in peace." Hebrews 11:31

Oh, I can just hear it, imagine it now. Somebody meeting me at the door after worship today. *"I am a visitor to your church. I came last week, too. I heard Jesus' story. About that younger son. Going off to the distant country. Loose living. His older brother says he's off with a prostitute. Then I come back this week. Friendly people. Good worship. Next thing I know. You're talking about a prostitute! Again!"* This visitor would have a point!

Well, it is shocking. Here we are in the midst of a traditional reading for All Saints and we come across the name of one involved in a very *unsaintly* of professions. Rahab the prostitute. How dare the writer of Hebrews? We have young people here!

Noah; yes! Abraham; yes! Sarah. But *Rahab*? One can imagine including the name of, *"Rahab the..... Sunday school teacher."* Or, *"Rahab. The President of the Church Council."* But Rahab the prostitute, the harlot?!? Sort of takes the honor out of sainthood, doesn't it?

Well, here's the story from the book of Joshua, (Chapter 2). Joshua has led the army of Israel right to the border of the Promised Land. And he sends a couple of spies into Jericho to scout out the situation. And, as sometimes happens, they end up at Rahab's place in a seedy section of Jericho.

Well the King of Jericho got word that *spies* were roaming around and he sent messengers to arrest them. They went to Rahab's place. And she *lied*. Batting her heavily mascared, false eyelashes, she said, *"Ah, yes. A couple of Jewish boys were here earlier in the evening. But when the gate was shut, I think they left. You better run quickly. Maybe you can catch them."*

She had hidden the spies on her roof. She told them: *"I've heard about your God. The Lord your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below."* Later that night. She let the spies down off the roof with a rope. And she only asked them that they spare her family, her household, when the walls of Jericho came tumbling down.

And then she tied a red thread in her window to identify her house when the invaders entered the town. When they entered Jericho, the people of the red thread house, in the red-light district were the only ones spared when Jericho was leveled.

A prostitute! A liar! What a seedy sort of saint! And yet, if you know anything about the Bible, you know that Rahab was not alone in her seediness. Drunken, naked Noah. Abraham with his squabbling family. Conniving, old Sarah. Murderer Moses. Lustful David. Persecutor Paul. A bunch of reprobates! Women—and *men!*—of ill repute. If people like them can be saints, anybody can.

Who is a "saint"? The Old Testament calls Israel a nation of saints. *"You are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord has chosen you to be a people for his own possession. Out of all the peoples that are on the face of the earth (Deuteronomy 14)."*

Now why choose Israel? Well, maybe because Israel was more virtuous,

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more pious, than other nations? No! The Bible is clear. Deuteronomy. *"It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love upon you. And chose you. Because you were the least. The lowest. Of all nations. It...is...because. The. Lord. Loves you."*

It was out of *love*, God chose Israel. Biblical writers bend over backwards to say that God's choice was not due to an achievement of Israel's part. Israel played the prostitute *many* times. Idolatry, going their own way, infidelity, pride were all chalked up to Israel's account. Whatever is meant by the phrase, *"a people holy unto God,"* it must mean something more than pure and spotless.

A person is called, *"saint"* in the Bible, not because that person has lived such a virtuous life or a Committee gets together and votes him or her some Ms. or Mr. Moral High Ground. No. A Biblical saint is a matter of what God does with ordinary people. A person is called *"saint"* in the Bible. Because God has something for that person to *do*. Saints are people who are called by God to do God's work.

Karl Barth says, *"A person is sanctified in the Bible when that person is dedicated to the service of God by God's separation, claiming, commandeering, of him or her for service."*

And that's what happened to Rahab. On a typical day. Going about her typical business in the world's oldest profession the old girl got *"commandeered"* for God.

The New Testament shares this definition of saints. *"You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation,"* declares First Peter to the first Christians. *"That you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light (2:9)."* God wants to make something out of these people. *"Once you were no people but now you are God's people,"* says First Peter (2:10). And that's how the New Testament can refer to the *whole* church! As *saints*. Like Israel before it, out of a bunch of nobodies come somebodies; made *saints* by God's gracious choice.

On All Saints Sunday, we remember the saints. But this All Saints Sunday, let's be sure to remember *all* of them. Rahab the prostitute and all the rest. Because what looks like seediness to me or you, seems to look like potential saintliness to God. Maybe God passes over the nice, pious, sweet people. The ones we regard as so *"saintly."* Because maybe nice, pure, sweet people won't get their hands dirty. Can't always get the job done, especially when the jobs that need doing are as tough and demanding as the ones God takes on.

Although Rahab lacked a bit in the area of conventional sexual morality, she was a survivor. She wasn't born yesterday. Rahab had been in business long enough to know how to take care of her own and therefore proved very helpful in looking after some of God's own.

Who do you think about when you hear the word *"saint"*? Maybe you think of a Sunday School teacher who taught you in the third grade whose image of spirituality challenges the Rahab image of saintliness. But I would say, that anybody who can teach a 3rd Grade Sunday School class without losing it and is

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still is able to form a few 8 year-old Christians along the way is to be praised for more than mere sweetness and piousness.

And that's how saints get made. Saints are made by listening to God. And then...saying... "yes." Trusting *God* to know who ought to be saint.

Philip Hailie, in his book *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*, tells one of my favorite stories about this very thing. It's an inspiring story of how one little village in the French Alps, Le Chambon saved its Jews during World War II.

Hallie went there after the war to interview the survivors and he wondered what *inspired* them. What motivated these people to risk it all for strangers? He discovered the source in interviewing one old woman who had faked a stroke when the Nazis came to her house looking for the Jews she had hidden underneath her chicken coop.

What was the source of her courage? She said: "*Pastor always told us. 'There is a time in every life when Jesus comes to you! And asks you to do something for him.'*" "*The day the Nazis came to our village, we were having worship in the church. And the soldiers came and surrounded the sanctuary with their arms folded. In the middle of the sermon, Pastor Trocme looked at us with a twinkle in his eye. And said: "Little children. I've often told you that in every life Jesus comes and asks you to do something for him.....And we all know what we had to do."*

Rahab was minding her own business. Looking after things in her place in Jericho when the Lord, through two scared spies, asked her to look after God's business. And she said "yes." And so she is listed among the heroes of faith.

The Epistle of James says that Rahab got to be a saint by her good work. And that's part of the story. But I think the author of Hebrews has it more right. It was *by faith* that Rahab became a saint. *Faith*, that God could use even somebody like her.

No matter what you might think about her profession. No matter what your misgivings concerning her morals. One thing you have to hand Rahab. She got the job done. Maybe she had misgivings. Maybe she wondered if the Lord might have chosen a more important person. A holier one for such work. Maybe.

Well, whatever her misgivings, Madame Rahab put them aside and went on about God's business. And in Matthew's Gospel, she is listed among the ancestors of David (Matthew 1). Which means she was an ancestor of Jesus. And she is more than a skeleton in the closet of Jesus' family tree; she is part of the family of the one who said to his own unlikely, ordinary disciples many years later. "*Remember.....You didn't choose me. I chose you. So that you. Might go. And bear fruit* (John 15:16)." I think Jesus would want Rahab to be *right here*. After all, he was often found eating with prostitutes and sinners.

Well, he was complaining that he hadn't been able to sleep that something was tugging at him, something deep inside. There was like this voice. When I asked him to be more specific, he said he just couldn't get those pictures of hungry out of his mind. It was as if he was supposed to say something, to *do* something. "*Ah. Could the voices. The voices you say you hear late at night. Could they be God?*" I asked. "*Ridiculous,*" he said. "*Me? I'm no Joan of Arc. I*

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mean, Pastor. You don't even know the kind of stuff I've been into." "Oh, excuse me," I said. "Excuse me. I shouldn't have mentioned it. It's just that. I mean God has used stranger people before."

This All Saints, let's remember all the saints, *all* of them. Including the odd ones. The good little bad boys and girls among them. The unsuspecting ones. The Rahabs and the Abrahams and the Sarahs and all the rest. Who listened to God and said, "yes." And so point the way. For the rest of us. I mean. If they can be saints. *Anybody* can!!!

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