

Sermon - Holy Troublemaker & Unconventional Saint - Rachel H Evans
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Olivet Congregational Church, UCC
August 21, 2022

SCRIPTURE

Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-12

The Meaning of Faith

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

The Faith of Abraham

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, ‘as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.’

Luke 13: 10-17

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, ‘Woman, you are set free from your ailment.’ When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, ‘There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.’ But the Lord answered him and said, ‘You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to

give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?' When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

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Jesus noticed the woman who walked into the synagogue that Sabbath. She was hunched over and unable to stand up straight. Luke tells us that a spirit had crippled her. We don't know what her physical ailment was exactly, but I imagine that her suffering for 18 years had left her discouraged, like she had a heavy weight on her shoulders.

Now, this woman did not seek Jesus. She did not call out to him saying, "Jesus, heal me" or try to touch his garment to be healed. No, she was just going to synagogue, probably not expecting to be noticed. I imagine this woman was simply trying to quietly find a seat. I imagine that after being bent over for 18 years, most people had even stopped noticing her condition.

But not Jesus. Jesus noticed. Jesus called her over to himself. He told her she was free from what ailed her, placed his hands on her and cured her. She excitedly stood straight up and immediately praised God. She was so grateful, she could not contain herself. The healing of that woman was cause for celebration.

But. But. But Jesus had healed her on the Sabbath. A good Jew does not do work on the Sabbath. That's what the leader of the synagogue reminded the good Jews in the synagogue. The leader became indignant. This woman had been ill for 18 years. What would another day have mattered? The leader of the synagogue made it a point to tell the crowd that Jesus could have done his healing work on any other day. There were six other days that Jesus could have healed this woman.

This infuriated Jesus! He called out the leaders of the synagogue for the simple jobs they do on the Sabbath- bringing their ox or donkey to get water - while chastising him for healing on the Sabbath. How dare they put rules over healing! He called the leaders hypocrites.

For Jesus, the important thing was to heal this woman. He set her free from her condition, from her bondage. For Jesus, healing was more important than rules, especially those rules that would oppress a person or prevent a person from being whole. For Jesus, seeing that woman and relieving her suffering was what he was called to do – treating her with love was paramount. For Jesus, doing the work of healing is essential every single day because God’s love is there every single day. God’s love is paramount. That is the key to Jesus’ faith, to our faith.

Rachel Held Evans was a Christian author whose books described her struggles with her faith. Her story is the one I will share with you this morning as our Holy Troublemaker and Unconventional Saint.* I first learned about Rachel Held Evans while attending a retreat for Sunday school teachers and faith formation leaders. During one of the services, an attendee asked for prayers for Rachel Held Evans. She was in the ICU on a ventilator and the doctors did not know what caused her illness. She was only 37 years old; a wife and mother of two small children – one of them about 3 years old, the other not yet one year old.

That day I learned that Rachel Held Evans was an author who shared her faith journey in her books. I later found and read her books, three of which are entitled:

Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again
Searching for Sunday; loving, leaving, and finding the church
Faith Unraveled; How a Girl Who Knew All the Answers Learned to Ask Questions

You see, as a child, Rachel grew up in an Evangelical Christian Church. Her father was a pastor and even taught in a seminary. Growing up, Rachel struggled with eczema, which was a very painful rash especially in the creases of her joints. It kept her from doing things. They treated her rash by applying vinegar to it, which made it more painful and made her smell awful. She would cry in her bed at night.

Rachel did not understand why God, who was supposed to love people, made this happen to her. One night her father heard her crying and asked her why she was crying. So she asked her father why Jesus let her have eczema. He told her he did not know why she had eczema. But he did know that God loved her.

Rachel was surprised that her father did not know the answer. But she was also comforted to hear that her father, a pastor and a teacher about God, could not know something and still have faith. She was also reassured that God did love her. She said, "My dad taught me that night that I don't have to have God all figured out to have a relationship with God. You can wrestle with the Divine. At the same time, my dad also gave me a solid foundation in which to wrestle. What he did know for sure was that God loves me."

Rachel even found comfort in the Hebrew Bible story of Jacob wrestling with a stranger that ended up being God, realizing that it was ok to wrestle with her questions and ok to wrestle with God. She stated, "God is truly okay with that."

As Rachel grew, she wrestled with other questions that arose for her related to her church and her faith. And her writings reflected her honest and sincere questions and doubts; questions and doubts which innumerable others identified with. She especially questioned any of the ways that church teachings or actions did not reflect the teachings, actions or love of Jesus. She rebelled against church teachings against LGBTQ individuals, actions that prevented women from assuming leadership positions in the church, and any of the ways the church could reject a person or make a person feel unwanted. She reminded people that Jesus would be found at dinner with outcasts and those who are rejected by society. She said, "This is what God's kingdom is like: a bunch of outcasts and oddballs gathered at a table, not because they are rich or worthy or good, but because they are hungry, because they said yes. And there's always room for more." Rachel wanted people to know that they are all loved by God.

Rachel did not recover from that unknown illness. When she died, shock and grief followed. People from around the world who had read her books shared their stories of how Rachel had inspired them with her writings. Women went into ministry. LGBTQ individuals felt accepted and loved by God. People who had turned away from God felt able to return to God. A good friend even took outlines and drafts of children's books that Rachel had penned and used them to co-author a beautiful children's book, "What is God Like?". It reflects Rachel's belief in the love of God that is present through the diversity of people and creation, but that it's also ok to question and keep searching. The final lines of that book are *"But whenever you aren't sure what God is like think about what makes you feel*

*safe, what makes you feel brave, and what makes you feel loved. **That's what God is like.*** **

While doctors could not heal Rachel from her illness, Rachel's truth and her words were healing for countless people. Her truth about God was that we are all loved by God who loves us for who we are – just as we are.

In the letter to the Hebrews, we are reminded that faith is “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” That by God's word our world was created. And by God's word Abraham and Sara, an old barren couple, had children. And though they did not go where they were going, they left their home and set out for a promised land - because God told them to go and they had faith. And their descendants, as God promised, their descendants were as numerous as the stars because they hoped and had faith.

Jesus was appalled that the Pharisees would oppose his healing of the hunched over woman. The important thing for Jesus was that the woman be “set free from this bondage.” Whether it was blindness or leprosy or a withered hand or being hunched over with “a spirit that had crippled her,” or being possessed by demons, or being a vulnerable child or widow, or an ostracized tax collector – Jesus healed or broke bread with them all in love. Jesus loved them. All of them.

As Christians we are called to do the same. Like Rachel Held Evans, we are called to speak truth – the truth of Jesus, the truth of Jesus' love for everyone. We are called to reassure parents of transgender children that they are loving parents and not criminals. We are called to tell LGBTQ individuals that their marriages are sacred and that their children should be able to proudly speak about their family with love. We are called to tell our Muslim brothers and sisters that, like the Good Samaritan, they are good and caring neighbors. We are called to tell immigrants that they are not aliens, but they are beloved children of God, and that we welcome them as Jesus would welcome them.

As Christians, we may not always know where our faith will lead us. But we do know who we are called to follow and whose way we are called to live. Our faith calls us to follow Jesus and to live in such a way that we reassure people that they are loved by God. We are called to love like Jesus loved. Amen

* Akers, Daneen. Holy Troublemakers & Unconventional Saints. “ Rachel Held Evans” (U.S.: Watchfire Media, 2019.) pp 166-171

Rachel Held Evans and Matthew Paul Turner. **What Is God Like? (U.S.: Convergence Books, 2021)