

BEING REHAB'S NEIGHBOUR

Once upon a time there was a great city, a “City of Palms.” The city was surrounded by two walls. An outer wall protected the community from external threats and the inner wall.

The space between these two walls wasn't very big, no more than 15 feet. In this space, there was a house. The home of a woman named Rahab, a prostitute.

Her house is in and on the margins. She lives her life in the margins. No one in Jericho it would seem wanted to claim her as neighbour, to welcome her to live inside the inner walls, to become part of their community.

It is not that they do not know who she is or that her home is there. It is that she is “other.” She is the problem. They need to distance themselves from her and her deficits, her and her sin.

The majority of people of Jericho, Rahab's neighbours have likely responded to her in one of a few less than helpful ways.

The economy of the sex trade from Rahab in Jericho to Canada today, does not exist in a vacuum. It exists like all economies because of a demand. There are likely people in Jericho who participated in Rahab's exploitation, who lured her, procured her, pushed her and turned her out into the sex trade, and there are those who frequent her home on a regular basis (to buy sex).

There are people within Jericho who see Rahab as the problem. Keeping her outside the inner wall and seeing her as “other” prevents them from having to engage. They believe Rahab's situation is caused by deficits and deficiencies that are personal and internal to her, they cannot risk having these deficiencies pollute their fine community.

They do not want to think about or consider any of the risks that led to Rahab's situation. For there could not, from their perspective, be any environmental hazards or external factors that contributed to Rahab becoming involved in prostitution. She could not have fallen through any cracks in the social safety net. There are no systemic oppressions in Jericho. She is not a victim to a lack of choice.

None of Rahab's neighbours seem to care about addressing the vulnerability she faces living between the two walls. Her vulnerability is their protection. Nobody in her community seems eager or willing to welcome her inside the walls, to embrace her in healthy ways, encourage or empower her. Perhaps, if they had, we would have a very different story.

Joshua sends two spies to gather intel on Jericho. Rahab's house in between the two walls is a strategic vantage point with minimal risks, two strange men do not stand out in a brothel.

The King sends men to Rahab's house with the order to bring the spies out. Whether they have had any prior interaction with Rahab, we do not know. But an attack on Jericho though would be dangerous for Rahab and all in her house, her life is at stake.

The God these two spies worship is a God who holds hope for Rahab. A God that brought the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. A God who cares about and protects the vulnerable and exploited.

Clinging to hope with all the courage and faith she possesses. Rahab hides the spies on her roof amongst stalks of flax and lies to the king's men sending them off in the wrong direction.

Then she goes up to the roof to negotiate with the spies and plead for her life.

From her mouth comes a proclamation of faith that is heartfelt and hope-filled. "I know God has given you this land. I know that God is with you. That God delivered you and dried up the water of the Red Sea before you. The Lord your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below."

I do not think Rahab is just saying this to spare her life. This is not some negotiation technique. Rahab is saying this because she believes it with all her being.

ARISE Ministry offers outreach, case management, and pastoral care to individuals involved in the sex trade and it is my deep privilege to serve as Executive Director. Some of the rawest, deepest, and truest proclamations of faith I have heard have come from friends involved in the sex trade sitting at ARISE Ministry's office, and telling us how they know God exists because without God they would not be here.

Recalling the ways they believe God intervened in life threatening situations. Bad dates who have used or threatened to use weapons, raping at knife or gun-point. Traffickers who have drugged, beaten, bound and left them for dead. The kindness of strangers who have called for help. God's own provision and perfect time. Stories about experiences of God's protection, mercy, and grace.

I'm not convinced that Rahab's reality is any kinder than that of the friends that ARISE journeys with. She has likely found herself in similar situations with bad dates who have threatened, raped, and robbed. Her proclamation of faith is born out of her own experiences of God's protection, mercy, and grace. From the hope it has provided her she has courage to say to the spies, "since I have been kind to you, swear to me by God, that you will be kind to my family."

Her primary concern is not for herself, it is for her family.

There's a young woman I have gotten to know over the years. She was lured into the sex trade as a young teen. She went a party hosted by some older guys. The party went on for a few days and when she decided she'd had enough and went to leave they recited her address to her and told her all the horrific things they would do to her little sister if she left.

She stayed. She'd do anything they said so long as they left her sister alone. The dangers and hurts she experienced herself were justified so long as her sister was safe. The bit of money her pimp let her keep went towards making sure her sister always had food, shelter, and clothing.

Rahab is concerned about the safety of her family.

The spies make an oath with Rahab, "our life for yours!" they say. She lets them down through a rope from her window that put them on the outer side of the city wall. She tells them what way to go to avoid being found by the king's men.

When they are convinced of their safety, the spies return to the Israelite camp and tell Joshua all that's happened.

Several chapters later right before the Israelites are about to destroy all of Jericho. Joshua tells the spies to go bring Rahab and her family out to honour the oath and save them.

Rahab and her family are spared. The oath is honoured.

There is no expectation beyond that. She is the epitome of an outsider for the Israelites – she's a woman, a foreigner, and a prostitute. She isn't their neighbour, she isn't their kin. She is "other."

The beginning of the Gospel of Matthew is a lesson in genealogy. The family tree from Father Abraham to King David to Jesus is given. There she is in Matthew 1:5 the mother Boaz, and Great, great grandmother of King David. She is also Ruth's mother-in-law, which is an amazing thing to reflect on but another sermon for another day.

Rahab's life was reclaimed. She found a new community. She was given neighbours. She found belonging. She was embraced.

Her gifts and her strengths were celebrated and honoured. She was held up for her faith, her courage, and her hospitality.

What an amazing thing community is! What incredible power it has to reclaim and transform lives!

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is one we know well in the church. Jesus tells this story in response to this question, "Who is my neighbour?"

In and through this story, Jesus breaks down the barriers and unpacks the meaning of neighbour, it is not about your geographical location and physical proximity to someone else. It is rather seeing the needs of someone else, beholding their humanity and responding. Being a neighbour means showing mercy, love, and care to the hurt and vulnerable.

ARISE Ministry journeys with individuals like Rahab, women involved in the sex trade. Individuals who are vulnerable and marginalized. Some of our participants have grown up in Toronto, but the vast majority have been trafficked to or through Toronto, from all of the province, country, and around the world. Sexual exploitation and the sex trade in Toronto, is not a Toronto centred issue, it is a national one. Ending sexual exploitation in Canada involves all of us. Prevention starts at home by being good neighbours, and caring for at-risk youth.

ARISE participants have had neighbours like the priest and Levite who were less than helpful – participating in their exploitation, blaming and deficitizing, or apathetically turning a blind eye. Neighbours who could have welcomed, might have provided safety, belonging, embrace.

ARISE Ministry seeks to enter into those margins to welcome, to empower, and to embrace. We are grateful for Armour Heights Presbyterian Church for welcoming us to use their manse and continue to discern what it is to be Rahab's neighbour.

This ministry belongs to all of us. The whole Church, all of us together are invited to participate in God's mission of love in the world, and that's all about welcoming, embracing, and loving. It is about being good neighbours.

God continues to reach out in love. To enter into the margins, the vulnerabilities, and the deficiencies of humanity and embrace us with divine love.

Miroslav Volf, reminds us of the great lengths God goes to embrace us in all our "otherness" and transform our lives with love. He talks about the need to embrace and love the other in relation to God's love. He says:

We are created not to isolate ourselves from other but to engage them, indeed, to contribute to their flourishing, as we nurture our own identity and attend to our own well-being. Finally, for Christians, the most important reason for being willing not only to live with others but to positively embrace them is the character of God's love as displayed in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ died for all human beings because he loved them all.

In and through Jesus Christ, his life, his death, his resurrection we are welcomed, we are embraced, we are reclaimed, we are loved.

Go out into the margins. Tear down the walls. Let love reclaim others. Let love transform you.

Encourage. Empower. Embrace.

Build Community. Be a neighbour.

Amen.