

# Sermon Text For January 24, 2021

Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

*Joshua 2:1-7, Philippians 1:12-19*

*“If they aren’t against you, they are for you”*

You may not realize that we find ourselves on the Sunday where we celebrate the week of Christian unity. Somewhat ironic that as we find ourselves more divided than ever we are called to celebrate Christian unity. There have been times that I have been approached by people who wanting to get in my good graces talk about other churches as rivals at best or enemies at worst. I always respond that other churches and other pastors are never enemies to us, they preach the Gospel. We only have one enemy, and that is Satan.

When we were in Italy we worked side by side with the 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventist Church to begin a work with immigrants as they were flooding into the country. When we were in Florida we worked side by side with the Baptist church to bring healing and unity in a community that was divided by a railroad and by race. In Moscow we worked hand in hand with the Roman Catholic Church to establish shelters and medical clinics and soup kitchens. Here, my closest friend and person that I reach out to is a Mennonite pastor who is also facing similar challenges that we face here at First Presbyterian during this time.

Often we see that stress and difficulty can cause us to want to circle the wagons. This is no different from this time that we find ourselves in Covid. There is a tendency and a desire to circle the wagons and draw away from relationships and work that could benefit the community during this time and just find ways to keep things within us and our family and our church. But I have learned over my ministry that Jesus can be proclaimed even more and with more power when unity is found among churches and among believers in Jesus Christ. If our purpose is to proclaim Jesus Christ then we must do it together and not look for avenues of escape which would cause us to fracture and harm the Gospel.

Our readings this morning reflect a pairing of unlikely colleagues in the Scripture. We find a prostitute together with men of God working to ensure that the legacy and the continuity of the nation of Israel exists. We find an imprisoned apostle and those who dislike him preaching the Gospel and bringing people to Christ even while they are not on the same page, and even more, probably don’t respect or like each other. Today we will see, if they aren’t against you, they are for you.

**READ**

This story of Rahab has always been a puzzle to me because I can't wrap my mind around the fact that she told a lie to the men of the king and that it was this lie which allowed the Israelites to escape and make it to the next level to conquer Jericho. But if we can get past that, and we must, then we will begin to see a bit of a strange partnership that takes place. We find the story unusual because we see that the men of Israel who had come to spy out the land ended up in the home of a prostitute, and everyone knew that they were in the home of Rahab, the town prostitute. The soldiers go to her home because they knew, as everyone knew, that the spies were in the home of Rahab. That causes us to pause and we get easily distracted from something that is even more unusual.

God uses a prostitute to help the men of God. God could have chosen anyone to serve God's purposes, and yet God chose Rahab, someone today we would never imagine could be used by God for any reason at all. Remember, Rahab, the town prostitute, is also in the ancestral line of Jesus our Savior. So whose idea was it to join these forces together? Whose idea was it to lay the Son of God in a manger in a dirty stable? Whose idea was it that God's servants must be put in prison and executed for their faith? Whose idea was it that only the good die young and how you act and what you believe doesn't draw a straight line to your success or your safety?

God demands that those who love him, a Rahab and a man of God called to do God's mission, must work together regardless of what they think of the other person or of their preferences for with whom they work. This is a great lesson because there could come a time in this church where you are called to proclaim the Gospel through a ministry to seniors and you might be working side by side with someone who feels very differently about abortion than you do, or social justice, or any other issue. That is the beauty of a family, that is the beauty of this family. Our focus and our emphasis is on proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Can we still do it if we are working side by side with someone who feels very differently about an issue that we feel very passionate and emotional about? God says we must. Paul actually addresses this concept of if they aren't against us, they are for us.

I was asked to be on the steering committee for an event in March that is focused on pastors and leaders in the church. It is put together by Water Street and it is called Compelled by Love. The purpose is to get church workers, pastors and leaders in churches, to work together as a group, as a community, to address the real possibility of living out Christ's commandment of loving our neighbors. We are together Compelled by Love. Our guest speaker is someone Peter Greer who founded Hope International here in Lancaster County and he wrote a number of

books and his latest is *Rooting for Rivals*. He speaks about the importance of churches who traditionally may have seen each other as rivals, working together to the point where we are cheering for other churches to succeed in their ministry. I have always said that we must pray for the health of all the churches because strong churches makes a strong community.

So who is our rival around here? According to Paul just Satan. As he writes to the church in Philippi, which he loves, he speaks about those who may be envious of us and may consider him a rival. In Galatians and in I and II Corinthians he has not some very nice words about them, simply because they were preaching a message which was not Christ. When we speak about a rival we thinking of wanting to be better than someone else for whatever the reason. When we think about ambition we are thinking of people who do things just for themselves and their own goals.

Paul in Philippians uses these terms but he celebrates that those whom we might consider in the past as rivals are actually now co-workers in the spreading of the Gospel. That is the primary goal of all that we do. Look at vs. 12, he says that his imprisonment has actually helped to spread the Gospel. In vs. 13 he states that even the soldiers are coming to know Christ. So already being in prison which would seem like a barrier to spreading the Gospel is actually helping. He also states in vs.14 that those who are disciples of Jesus Christ are able to see his suffering and instead of being in fear, they proclaim the Gospel with even more courage.

Notice the difference where Jesus when he was arrested all of his disciples scattered in fear. Here, when Paul's disciples and those who believed in Jesus as a result of his work, when he gets arrested they launch into spreading the Gospel with even more courage. They are emboldened. In vs.18 he states what does it matter, what motives does it matter when the message is the same. If you look at vs.15 some may be proclaiming out of envy, others out of ambition, others just wanting to increase Paul's suffering in jail. But who cares? What does it matter? Jesus is being proclaimed, and then in vs.18, In that I rejoice, Christ is proclaimed, yes, and I will continue to rejoice.

Once again we are surprised by joy as Paul speaks about those who might consider themselves his rivals he considers as co-laborers in the field. Jesus had the same message to his own disciples. Go to Luke 9:50 and here you find his disciples complaining because there was someone casting out demons in Jesus' name but this person wasn't in their group, in their clique, one of the 12. He tells them: "Do not stop him, for whoever is not against you is for you."

When I think of church and as we do church, are we strangers to that sense of pleasure over the failure of another's programs or the decline of another congregation? If you left a church and are attending another, do you wish that church you left to not do well, so that you can justify your own actions? In a culture which demands we think in terms of winners and losers, even a God who desires that all win is served by persons who think heaven will be sweeter because there is a hell. May God save us from that approach to life.

Someone else's success does not have a negative impact on us, but someone else's failure can. We should be rooting for all folks especially our rivals. As we continue to face Covid together we see over this time that it has exposed a lot of underlying realities that many of us never imagined existed. The battle over masks has come and almost gone by now, but it left its mark. Whether we are in person or not continues to be a very volatile and emotional subject. Why is the youth group meeting and we aren't in person here. Why is preschool meeting and we aren't in person here. Why is AA meeting and we aren't in person?

Sometimes motives can be questioned. Our motive during this time has always been to keep us safe even while balancing how do we still maintain our ministries while keeping safe? If by not being in person for worship we have saved the life of one person, it has been worth it for this year, even if people have left the church as a result. We have tried to be consistent through this time, and as I have told you from the very beginning, we have not always been as consistent as we would like to be. There are times that we have made mistakes, and for that we are sorry and we repent. We don't want to make the same mistakes over and over again, so we need to be told.

But we are not rivals, and even if we were, we should be rooting for each other. Our underlying goal for all of us is exactly what Paul states, and that is proclamation of Jesus Christ. This proclamation should be strengthened as we come out of this time, not weakened. The joy in which we ought to find ourselves has to be centered on that proclamation and not on any of the side issues which have arisen during our time apart. We continue to be different and unique people. Nobody can understand what you are going through except you. Teachers have their own experiences, farmers have their own experiences, pastors have their own experiences, business men and women have their own experiences, first responders and essential workers have their own experiences. We can't think that our experience ought to define everyone else's. No one group is an island unto themselves. We are all in this together because all of our main focus is on preaching the Gospel.

So that we can with Paul be able to say as he says in vs.19, For I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, I, or we, will be set free. Amen.