

Coram Deo
Soli Scriptura, Soli Deo Gloria, Soli Deo Gracia
Sermon preached at
Stouffville United Church on
the Rev. Capt. Dr. John S. Niles MSM CD

“Second Chances”

September 29, 2024

Joshua 2:1-20

This is a bittersweet time of the year – sweet because of the fact that we have entered the happiest time of the year – children going to school. And it is a bitter time of the year because it is the season for charity golf.

Last week I again was entered into a clergy charity golf tournament. The problem is that, because it is a clergy and charity golf tournament I had no way out – who can say no to a charity. And yes, for the fourth time I won most honest.

I knew it wasn't going to be very good day when my wife handed me a bag with 25 extra golf balls just in case I needed them. Such confidence was underwhelming!

It was Mark Twain who said, “Golf – it's just a great way to spoil a nice walk.” Now, I have to admit that I have never quite understood the whole idea of golf. Yet, I have finally discovered why men love to golf so much. The realization came to me when I finally hit a shot that went further than 20 feet and didn't get lost in the nearest bush. As I got back into the golf cart with my fellow golfer, I realized that it is the only place on earth that you can still drive a vehicle, drink alcohol, smoke a cigarette, talk on a cell phone and carry a club that hits things, where you won't be arrested and put in jail.

And if you arrive at a place on the course where you don't have any of these things; they have someone driving around in a cart who will bring it to you. Why would one want to be anywhere else?

My problem is I don't drink, smoke and couldn't hit a ball to save my life. Yet, as a friend once said that I'm not sure I totally agree with, “A bad day of Golf is better than a good day at work.” So I haven't yet, thrown the clubs out, and might consider giving it a second chance.

Sometimes we all need second chances.

The Israelites were being given a second chance and their success depended on a person who needed a second chance – Rahab the prostitute.

We are told that she protected and hide the Israelite spies from the authorities and did so at the risk of her own life because she wanted to change her future. Everyone needs a second change.

I

Sometimes we all need a second chance. And this means that **our present choices, not previous circumstances, determine our future.**

“Then Joshua son of Nun secretly sent two spies from Shittim. “Go, look over the land,” he said, “especially Jericho.” So they went and entered the house of a prostitute named Rahab and stayed there...But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them...” (Josh 2:1-7)

A young man, an avid golfer found himself with a few hours to spare one afternoon. He figured if he hurried and played very fast, he could get in nine holes before he had to head home. Just as he was about to tee off an old gentleman shuffled onto the tee and asked if he could accompany the young man as he too was golfing alone. Not having any reason to say no, he invited the old fellow to join him. To his surprise the old man played fairly quickly. He didn't hit the ball far, but moved along quite consistently and didn't waste time. Finally, they reached the ninth fairway and the young man found himself with a tough shot. There was a large pine tree right in front of his ball, directly between the ball and the green.

After several minutes of debating how to hit the shot the old man finally said, “You know, when I was your age I played this course many, many times. Even had a lie similar to yours. Back then, I hit the ball right over that tree.” With that challenge placed before him, the younger man gave it his best. He took a mighty swing, hit the ball up, and right back down. He'd hit it directly into the top of the tree trunk and it thudded back to the ground, not more than a foot from where it had originally been. Taking a deep breath, he tried again. Same result. Another deep breath, another try, same result. In frustration, he exclaimed, “How did you ever get the ball over this tree?” The old man replied, “Well, when I was your age that pine tree was only about three feet tall.”

Too often we don't move forward to claim our future because we continue to do the same things in the same way we did in the past.

Rahab's past choices had damaged, but not destroyed, her future prospects. Yet, at some point she made a decision to stop doing the same thing in the same way.

Do you know what the definition of insanity is? It is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result.

Rahab wanted a different result and so changed what she was doing. She finally figured out that her past mistake was an error, but not the end. She knew she could not reverse the past; but she could rewrite her future; for every saint has a past, every sinner a future.

II

Sometimes we all need a second chance. And this means that it is not our past circumstances but our present choices and secondly, our **personal confession** that determines our future. *Before the spies lay down for the night, she went up on the roof⁹ and said to them, “we know that the LORD has given this land to you and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you.”¹⁰ We have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. (Josh 2:8-10)*

A little boy went out to the ball field by himself, wearing his baseball cap and carrying a bat and ball. In his eye was the look of steely determination. He was so full of confidence that he

put his bat on his shoulder, tossed the ball into the air, and said, “I’m the greatest batter in the world” But he swung and missed. “Strike one,” he said. He picked up the ball, looked it over, and then threw it into the air again. As he watched the ball descend, he repeated, “I’m the greatest batter in the world.” But once more he missed. “Strike two,” he said with a puzzled look on his face, and he stopped to examine his bat to make sure there wasn’t a hole in it. A third time he picked up the ball, adjusted his cap, and tossed the ball into the air. As the ball went up a third time he repeated the refrain: “I’m the greatest batter in the world.” He swung with all his might, but he missed for the third straight time. “Strike three. Y’er out” he said with the emphasis of an umpire. But instead of being discouraged, the boy began to jump and shout across the ballfield: “Wow What a pitcher. I’m the greatest pitcher in the world.”

Rahab’s change and transformation didn’t “come out of the blue”. Like the Israelites, she too had to make a decision to risk failure for the promise of a better future. And to do so, she had to first change her *attitude about her past and present circumstances* and then *announce her confession about her desired future*. She had to believe that she was more than what she did, and more than what others, or even she herself, thought she was. She had to believe that things could be different even for her. Her attitude had to change before her present state of affairs would.

That is where the “rubber meets the road”. Too often we just don’t believe it. We don’t believe that things can be different. We don’t believe that things can be better for us. We don’t believe; so we don’t receive.

Rahab recited to the Israelites their own history – she had to have been thinking this through for a long time to have been able to have done so in this dangerous situation. She reminded them of how the Lord had saved them from themselves, their sin and their own self-destruction; by drying up the Red Sea and bringing them out of Egypt forty years earlier. She reminded them of how they defeated the Amorite kings. In doing so, she confessed her faith in the God of Israel and her belief that He was giving them a second chance, even as she hoped for one herself.

On some level she had started to believe that her situation could change and that it wasn’t fated for her to remain where she was, but that it was her faith, and not her failures, that would determine her future; and she was right.

While we were away in Louisiana traveling and listen to some great Zydeco and Traditional jazz, I was reminded of the story of Thomas Dorsey who was a black jazz musician from Atlanta who was known in the early 1920’s for the suggestive lyrics he combined with original music and a wild life. Then God touched his life and in 1926 he began to write spiritual music. In 1932 times were hard for Dorsey as they were for nearly everyone trying to survive the depression. The most difficult night of his life came one night in St. Louis when he received a telegram telling him that his pregnant wife had suddenly died. Dorsey was filled with grief and his faith was shaken, but instead of wallowing in self-pity, he expressed his agony the only way he knew how. He wrote this song:

Precious Lord, take my hand, Lead me on, let me stand.
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn.
Through storm, through night, Lead me on to the light;
Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home.
When my way grows drear, Precious Lord linger near.
When my life is almost gone; Hear my cry, hear my call,
Hold my hand lest I fall. Take my hand Precious Lord, lead me home.

In spite of Dorsey's checkered past he experienced God's presence during that crisis. That song which came out of his pain and grief has comforted and challenged thousands of people since then because if we are honest, most of us have had a moment, or two or three when God's presence was all that could get us through.

III

Sometimes we all need a second chance. And this means that it is not our past circumstances but our present choices and our personal confession, and finally our **perseverance to change** that determines our future.

"When we heard of it, our hearts melted and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below. 12 Now then, please swear to me by the LORD that you will show kindness to my family, because I have shown kindness to you. Give me a sure sign 13 that you will spare the lives of my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and that you will save us from death." (Josh 2:11-13)

Rahab put her past behind her; and believed that a better day was coming. It is no wonder that the New Testament writers commended her faith in the book of Hebrews (Heb 11:31) and her faith and good works in the book of James (Jas 2:25).

The life of Rahab is important because she changed her life, married Salmon later had a son named Boaz (Matthew 1:5-6), who became a rich landowner and was known as a gentle and trustworthy man who married Ruth who was as you may not know, an ancestor of Jesus. (Mt 1:5-6).

It all began because she, a prostitute – an outcaste, a marginalized person, one who didn't belong and one who looked down on herself as much as others did – was willing to accept the offer of a second chance and change, believing that a better day was coming she changed what she could.

As Reinhold Niebuhr has said, "God grant me the serenity to accept the things that I cannot change, to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference."

There are some things we cannot change. The past is one of them. Once we accept this and put our past behind us – whether they were the good old days or the gaud awful days – moving forward in the right direction is made easier.

A man and his wife had just moved to town, and he was coming home from his first day at work. As he's driving down the highway, his cell phone rings, and it's his wife. "George, I just had to call you and tell you to be careful. I just heard on the radio that some nut got off the on ramp and is now driving the wrong way down HWY 401!" "It's worse than that!" said George, "I'm driving home on the 401 and it's not just one car. It's hundreds of them!"

It was Lao Tzu who said, "If you don't change direction, you may end up where you are heading." You think about that. Amen.