

Holy Troublemakers and Unconventional Saints: Rachel Held Evans

Genesis 32:22-32

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At some point in our lives, I think almost all of us, experience something so devastating, so frightening or heartbreaking, that we find ourselves asking, “How could God let this happen?” For this week’s Holy Troublemaker and Unconventional Saint, it happened when she was ten years old. Beloved author, Rachel Held Evans, had severe eczema as a child - so severe that she couldn’t participate in gym class and often couldn’t get to sleep at night. Lying in bed with nothing to distract her, she was painfully aware of the itching and stinging from the red, oozing patches on her skin. Bits of her skin would stick to the sheets which would tear the sores open further. She tried to get comfortable but just couldn’t ignore the pain. On some nights, her parents had her take a bath in vinegar before bed because that was supposed to help. But to Rachel, it didn’t make any difference at all. She was just left smelling like vinegar.

Sometimes, as he walked down the hall, her dad heard her tossing and turning and came in to check on her. She would cry in his arms and ask, “Why did Jesus let this happen to me?” If God was good and cared about God’s people, why did she have eczema? Why did she have to go through day and night in pain? Why couldn’t she be like other kids?

One night, when she asked these questions, her father just said, “I don’t know, Rachel, but I know that God loves you”. That moment became pivotal in Rachel’s journey of faith. She couldn’t believe her father couldn’t answer her questions. He was a theologian, a seminary professor, and an elder in their church. How could he not know? Yet, in saying that he didn’t have an answer that night, he gave Rachel two gifts that paved the path she would ultimately share with so many others. First, even though questioning God was not permitted in their evangelical faith, he gave her permission to ask questions anyway. Second, that permission came with the assurance that no matter who she was or how many questions she asked, God would always love her.

For many of us, doubting and questioning is second nature, and we aim to be a church where people are safe to do so. But, for millions of millennials growing up in evangelical or fundamentalist churches, that wasn’t the case. What you were told in church was certain, true, and absolute. If you didn’t believe it, you weren’t saved. If you weren’t saved, you would go to hell. There was no place for questions. Yet, Rachel Held Evans publicly challenged these beliefs and shared what she learned in her writing. Her willingness to look beyond evangelicalism’s certainty is what makes her a Holy Troublemaker.

If you’re not familiar with her, Rachel Held Evans was an author and blogger who wrote about the intersection of faith and life during the first two decades of the 2000’s. Born in Birmingham, Alabama, she grew up in the Bible Belt in a conservative Southern Baptist church. She was the perfect example of an evangelical child. She won the Best Christian Attitude award three years in a row in school. As a teenager, she was president of the Bible Club at her high school and, since most people in her school were already saved, she witnessed to the Methodists to try to save them.

She dreamed of being a writer, so after high school she attended Bryan College and majored in English. During her college years, she began to doubt evangelicalism and its teachings, and she began asking questions, hard questions. “If non-Christians can’t be saved, are victims of terrorism just as bound for hell as their murderers? Are there not obvious similarities between arguments used to exclude gay people now and those used for slavery not so long ago?” Why does Paul say women should not be in leadership? Her faith began evolving and soon she left the evangelical church and, as writer James Burklo writes, “Rachel Held Evans became a careful and tender progressive Christian, loving the way of Jesus while leaving behind the toxic religion that hijacked his name.”

Held Evans began her career as a journalist, writing for the *Chattanooga Times Free Press* and then the Dayton, Tennessee *Herald News*. After several years, she left journalism and began blogging about her personal journey out of the evangelical church and into a faith that made room for questioning and for authentically following the teachings of Jesus. With her gentle wit and sharp insights, she quickly became a shepherd to a whole generation of evangelical young adults who no longer agreed with the conservative faith they were taught as children. Just as her father had years before, she gave them permission to question.

One by one, she examined and wrote about the doctrines of the evangelical church in light of what she read about Jesus in the Bible. As a self-proclaimed “Bible nerd”, she dug deep into scripture to find answers that made sense to her. Her favorite scripture story was the one that is our scripture reading today - Jacob wrestling with God. In her book *Inspired*, she writes, “if I’ve learned anything from thirty-five years of doubt and belief, it’s that faith is not passive intellectual assent to a set of propositions. It’s a rough-and-tumble, no-holds-barred, all-night-long struggle, and sometimes you have to demand your blessing rather than wait around for it.”

She also recognized that you don’t wrestle with God and walk away unchanged. In an early blog post, Held Evans wrote, “It is said that after Jacob wrestled with God, he walked with a limp. So, it has been with the Bible and me. I have wrestled with the Bible, and it has left me with a limp. But I am glad...I have wrestled, and I love the Bible more now than I have ever loved it before. I love it more than when I demanded that it answer all of my questions, more than when I forced it to fit my cultural categories, more than when I tried so desperately to make it all resolve, more than when I pretended like it never bothered me. I have wrestled with the Bible. I have spoken my fears out loud—about the genocidal conquests in Canaan, about the slaves, about the “untouchables,” about the seven days, about the concubines and sister wives, about the instructions on silence and submission and head coverings. I have lived in the tension, and I live in it still.”

Rachel Held Evans wrote countless blog posts and five books. In her writing, she was a passionate advocate for people who had been pushed to the edges of the church - women, LGBTQ+ folks, disabled people. She directly addressed teachings which excluded others from God’s church or from leadership in the church. Her first book, originally titled *Evolving in Monkey Town* because she lived in Dayton, Tennessee, home of the famous Scopes Monkey trial, was a compilation of all she had learned through her transition in faith.

A few years later, she took on the topic of biblical inerrancy when she wrote *A Year of Biblical Womanhood: How a Liberated Woman Found Herself Sitting on Her Roof, Covering Her Head, and Calling Her Husband Master*, which was a New York Times bestseller. This was an

account of what happened when she spent a year attempting to be the woman the Bible, when read literally, told her she should be.

She had just started a fifth book, when she died suddenly at age thirty-seven. After her death, hundreds, if not thousands, of people - mostly from more conservative traditions - posted stories under the hashtag, *#becauseofRHE* about how her writing influenced them. With her books and blog posts, she freed them from the inner tension that came with doubting the church of their childhoods.

Naturally, her writing and popularity drew the attention of conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists. To them, she was a heretic. The Washington Post once called her “the most polarizing woman in evangelicalism”. After her death, conservative blogger Seth Dunn wrote, “her influential writings no doubt led many sinners astray or, at the very least, provided false assurance to those living in sin that they stood justified before God. The Lord takes no pleasure in the destruction of the wicked. The death of Rachel Held Evans is not an occasion for joy but for mourning. We should be in serious prayer for her family and loved ones, who have to mourn without assurance that they mourn with hope”.

Yet, hope is what I find most compelling in her writings - especially given our world today. So, as I draw to a close, I'd like to share with you an excerpt from a sermon she gave at the opening of the first *Evolving Faith* conference, a conference she founded with her friend, Sarah Bessey.

She said, “An evolving faith is one that survives by adapting to change: change in circumstances, change in the culture, change in one's own heart and mind, change in relationships. An evolving faith is one that can survive the divorce, the doubt, the disillusionment, the coming out, the exposure to new ideas, the betrayal of a church, the betrayal of *the Church*— the troubling biblical text and all those unanswered nagging questions about religion and science and heaven and hell that keep you up at night. An evolving faith can survive those things precisely because it can adapt to change, because it embraces those seasons of building down and tearing up, of planting and uprooting, of death and resurrection.

You have every right to be sad. You have every right to feel disappointed and betrayed. You have every right to feel angry. You may not have noticed it, but I'm angry, too. Here's the thing: I would rather be angry than apathetic. I'd rather be sad than cynical. I'd rather lean into all of this hurt and frustration and confusion and doubt than numb myself in an attempt at self-preservation... (If) we numb ourselves to the pain of this present moment, and to the inevitable grief that comes with a changing and evolving faith, then we will numb ourselves to all that remains beautiful and hopeful and good and wise and resilient in this world and in one another. When we numb in an attempt to protect ourselves from disappointment and risk, we stop taking action. We stop turning over tables. We stop marching with Black Lives Matter. We stop showing up for the hurting and the lonely and the sick. We stop taking the risk of following Jesus even when there's no guarantee. If our faith is going to survive in this environment, it's got to be tough enough to take a beating and tender enough to be moved, to be changed, and to take the risk of love.”

May it be so. Amen.