

sermon-11/15/09 Newport Presbyterian Church
“Prayer and the Community of Faith”
I Sam. 1:1-20

Once again the lectionary has given us a passage that is fraught with difficulty. This text in Samuel raises troubling issues that are confusing, and sometimes hurtful. We need to see beyond some of the realities of that day to see the relevance for our day.

First, there is the whole issue of polygamy. One of the main characters in the story had two wives. That, in itself, makes this a tough passage for us to relate to in our times.

Then we need to come to terms with Elkanah, the husband of the story. He proves that, once again, some men just don't get it. One of his wives, Hannah, is childless. This was devastating for women in that day. It meant she had no worth in that culture. That makes Peninnah's teasing Hannah about her being barren even more despicable.

What does Elkanah do? He asks Hannah, “Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?” One should never ask a question like that when the answer could easily be, “No you are not!” Elkanah is setting himself up for hearing something he does not want to hear. Worse than that, his question is basically telling Hannah she should not be feeling what she is feeling. As one commentator put it, he is basically telling his distraught wife, “Suck it up and count your blessings.” Sadly, this is just one more instance of men behaving badly.

Then there is Eli, the priest, totally misunderstanding this poor woman praying desperately in the Temple. He accuses Hannah of being drunk. Basically he comes up to her and tells her to get out and come back when she is sober. Those who accuse the Church of being self-righteous and insensitive can point to Eli here. His actions are embarrassing for any in leadership in the Church.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, this passage has been so very painful for all those childless parents who desperately want a pregnancy. They, too, have prayed to God, poured out their hearts only to go unsatisfied. What are they to make of God apparently hearing Hannah's prayer and answering it by allowing her to become pregnant? Does God truly act in that way, choosing to allow some to become pregnant and others not?

As you can see, there is much to overcome in this text before we can let it sink beneath our defenses and touch our lives. But, it is worth the work to do so. This passage, in spite of its problems, is a touching, realistic, and extremely helpful and hopeful passage for us today.

First, we need to know something about Samuel. He is probably one of the top five important figures in all of the Old Testament. He belongs in the company of Abraham, Moses, David, and Jeremiah or Isaiah.

He was the last of the judges in the tribal confederacy before Israel became one nation, instead of separate tribes. He is the first of many prophets in Israel. He helped his country make the transition from that tribal confederacy to a monarchy where Israel was united as one nation under a king. It was Samuel who picked David to be King.

Here is this very important person in the history of Israel, and he comes from a very ordinary, dysfunctional family. He comes from a family where bickering, cruel teasing, and fallible partners are the order of the day. Many of us recognize that kind of family.

The Bible is saying God can use people from such humble roots to do some pretty amazing things. As one commentator put it, the roots of Israel's monarchy are "despair, barrenness, and humble prayer" all leading to the birth of Samuel, the catalyst for the monarchy. No situation in life is beyond the power of God's Spirit to create something new.

Next, we need to look more carefully at Hannah as she sits in the Temple praying. Listen to the words the various translations of this passage use to describe her prayer. She prays in bitterness and distress. She pours out her soul, speaking from the depths of grief and resentment, anxiety and vexation.

This is no friendly little prayer. Hannah lets it all hang out. She does not try to make it proper. She doesn't seem to worry about offending God. No emotion is off limits in her relationship with God.

While some of us find it hard to agree with the conclusion of this story, where God hears Hannah's prayer and grants her wish, we can still see that this prayer was appropriate and heard. It feels like many of the Psalms where anger and grief mix with praise and thanksgiving. And, those in Samuel's day would be amazed that God paid attention to this person of questionable worth in that culture. The birth of Samuel would confirm that God does indeed care for outcasts.

Finally, the role of the Church in times of despair and hopelessness is absolutely critical here. While Eli, at first, does not seem to be very compassionate, he does end up listening to Hannah's story. He listens carefully and then offers her a blessing.

What is remarkable is that Hannah's spirit changes after this encounter with Eli. The text says she no longer was sad, refusing to eat. She went home able to go on with her life. Remember, she still had not become pregnant. She did not change because her prayer was answered. She changed because she was able to pour out her soul to God, and then to Eli. She changed because she felt heard.

That is the role of the community of faith even today. We are to provide a safe place for people to bring their whole selves, their joys and their concerns, their despair and their hopes. It is in being able to share and be heard where healing begins.

This was brought home to me once again last week. Sandy and I went to Seattle University to hear Peter Storey. Peter was the Methodist Bishop in South Africa during apartheid. He fought that despicable institution. He was also the chaplain to Nelson Mandela when Nelson was in prison.

Then after apartheid was defeated Peter was part of the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions. In those commissions people who had been tortured, raped, or had family members killed by the ruling white party had an opportunity to tell their story. They spoke with the perpetrator of those heinous acts sitting in the room in front of them.

Some of those perpetrators who came forward and admitted their guilt were given amnesty. I found out not all were given amnesty as our papers seemed to imply. But at least a third of them were.

Some in the audience last week asked if this satisfied those who had been hurt terribly by the evils of apartheid. Where was justice if those who did terrible acts were given amnesty? Didn't those who were hurt want to see their tormentors suffer?

Surprisingly Peter said that just the act of telling their story in the community where their pain could be heard changed things for them. They did not, in many cases, need for the guilty to suffer in order for their own suffering to be relieved. This notion of justice was given a special twist in these Truth and Reconciliation Commissions. The end result was a much more peaceful revolution than this world has ever seen. And the Church was a big part of that.

All of this is to say, sometimes healing can happen when our desperate prayers are not answered in the way we had hoped, when the typical understanding of justice is not realized. Sometimes the simple act of praying to God, telling our story in the midst of our community of faith and being heard on a deep level, is enough. At least it is enough to carry on in spite of our grief and pain.

This troubling, complicated little text at the beginning of Samuel affirms some powerful hopes. God's Spirit can work through us despite the obstacles caused by humble, and even dysfunctional beginnings. Honest prayer and the role of the Church as it listens and blesses can make a huge difference in our personal lives, and in the lives of the greater community. May we let that message simmer in our hearts this day. Amen