

Sermon Title: “Parenting as Total Dedication”

15 November 2015: 25th Sunday after Pentecost

FUMC—Arlington, TX 76011

Preaching Text: 1 Samuel 1:4-20

+++++

“The thing that impresses me the most about America is the way parents obey their children”

—King Edward VIII (1894 - 1972).

+++++

A great, perhaps unsung hero/heroine of scripture is Hannah—the mother of Samuel—the last of Israel’s great judges and also a prophet. As 1 Samuel begins, Israel dissolves in great trouble—from both inside the nation and outside. As one writer has put it, “The story of Hannah’s barrenness opens to the story of Israel’s barren future” (Bruce Birch, *NIB*, p. 959). Hear today’s lesson:

4 On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; 5 but to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the Lord had closed her womb. 6 Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the Lord had closed her womb. 7 So it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of the Lord, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. 8 Her husband Elkanah said to her, “Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?”

9 After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose and presented herself before the Lord. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the Lord. 10 She was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord, and wept bitterly. 11 She made this vow: “O Lord of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head.”

12 As she continued praying before the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. 13 Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk. 14 So Eli said to her, “How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine.” 15 But Hannah answered, “No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord. 16 Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time.” 17 Then Eli answered, “Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him.” 18 And she said, “Let your servant find favor in your sight.” Then the woman went to her quarters, ate and

drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer.

19 They rose early in the morning and worshiped before the Lord; then they went back to their house at Ramah. Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and the Lord remembered her.
20 In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, "I have asked him of the Lord" (1 Samuel 1:4-20).

This story begins with an excess of names—we might even say a “glut” of names. Nine proper names govern the first three verses. This is a story that oozes exact places and specific people. Elkanah heads a valued family. But if we pay close attention, we know that even in the best of families trouble lurks—polygamy a culprit in this case. Wife Peninnah has children, but wife Hannah does not. This detail is where the difficulty begins. Like Sarah, Rachel, and later Elizabeth, to be childless in this culture appears as a curse. In biblical terms, however, the curse of barrenness becomes an avenue for divine blessing. Thus, Hannah’s painful story of desiring a child, but having none, will later be off-set by the joy of divine intervention and human conception.

The scene shifts to Shiloh. The Bible mentions Shiloh often as the site of the Tabernacle, the cultic center of the priests from the family of Eli, the place Hannah prayed for a son, and where Hannah later brought her son Samuel to serve God. The Bible indicates that Shiloh was the seat of the national and religious leadership of the tribes of Israel before God established the Israelite monarchy. At Shiloh we see clearly the traits of the story’s primary characters. Elkanah is generous and gives Hannah a double portion for her sacrifice. The story reveals Peninnah, Elkanah’s fertile wife, as mean-spirited and detestable; a woman who “provokes” Hannah and mocks her barrenness. The annual sacrifice at Shiloh reveals Elkanah generous, but Peninnah cruel. Elkanah and Peninnah ping-ponged poor Hannah and her emotions.

Yet Hannah’s husband’s compassion did not console her. Instead she returned to the temple and prays to God for a child. Hannah prays so intently that Eli, the temple’s priest,

supposes her drunk and scolds her. But Hannah defends herself by sharing her painful dilemma with him. Do you remember Eli's words to her? "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him."

Our lesson's last verse tells how the Lord granted Hannah's petition and confers to Israel a leader for the nation's later trials. Thus, Hannah's prayer life is a model. She is also a model for the notion of total dedication—this with respect to desire for a child.

Hannah's prayer begins like many heartfelt prayers. It begins in tears. Hannah, despite having a loving husband, turns to the final refuge of the faithful—she prays to God. But notice while her prayer begins in tears, it does not end there. Rather it ends in a vow. She not only asks something of God, but she also pledges to God something of herself. She offers her unborn child as a living sacrifice.

This prayer and pledge is the essence of understanding total dedication. To know God as Lord is to both ask God for God's sovereign protection and God's mercy. At the same time, yielding to God's leadership is to pledge allegiance to God and God's kingdom. This Hannah does and becomes a model of desiring parenthood as total dedication to God and dedicating whatever unborn child may appear.

We live in a world that the words "total dedication" mean little for too many people. One of my preacher buddies told this story:

A college student walked into a photography studio with a framed picture of his girlfriend. He wanted the picture duplicated. This involved removing it from the frame. In doing this, the studio owner noticed the inscription on the back of the photograph:

"My dearest Tom, I love you with all my heart. I love you more and more each day. I will love you forever and ever. I am yours for all eternity." It was signed "Betty Lou and it contained a P.S.:

"If we ever break up, I want this picture back."

Who among us thinks this young woman might not have been totally committed? What I adore about Hannah (and this comes directly from our morning text) is that Hannah received several differing

responses from other characters in the story. From Hannah's rival wife Peninnah, Hannah receives an overabundance of ridicule, scorn, disdain, and derision. From her husband, about whom the account tells us Elkanah "loved her, though the Lord had closed her womb." He even tries to comfort her by saying: "Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?" Thus we could legitimately say that the response Hannah got from her clearly loving husband was a response of pity. Last Eli the priest at Shiloh—even as a professionally trained listener—offered Hannah a response of misunderstanding. He thought she was drunk. Leave it to the clergy to jump to conclusions. Despite ridicule, pity, and misunderstanding, Hannah never wavered and was true to her cause summed up in her sacred vow:

O Lord of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head.

Total dedication means we are true to our vow and commitment—no matter what. Hannah's desire was to parent a child. In her case Samuel grew up to be one of Israel's most able and noble leaders. As Gordon Atkinson once put it: "Fidelity to commitment in the face of doubts and fears is a very spiritual thing."

Hannah had obviously caught the Spirit of God.