

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 25th Sunday After Pentecost, Nov. 15, 2015

How Much Are You Willing to Give Up?

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1st Samuel 1:4-20; 2:1-10

Have you ever wanted something very badly but were denied it?

Were you ever taunted by someone who had what you desired?

With children, this often happens. One child wants a toy to play with but another child gets to it first. When the first child tries to get it back, the response is “Nyah, nyah, ne nyah, nyah – You can’t have it. It’s mine and there isn’t one for you”

I recall a scene from the movie “Fried Green Tomatoes” about a wealthy woman driving her Mercedes into a parking lot at a shopping mall. She saw that only one parking space was empty and she started to pull into it when a young man in a sports car suddenly cut her off and zipped into the space. She asked him why he did that and he said “Because I could” and taunted her with today’s all too familiar hand signal.

The woman backed up her Mercedes and then accelerated forward several times at full speed crashing repeatedly into the sports car totally decimating it. When the young man realized what happened and asked her why she did it, she said “Because I could.”

Taunts aren’t generally this blatant, nor do they often result in such precipitous action, but they can nevertheless hurt the person being taunted very deeply.

Such was the case in our scripture readings with Hannah and Peninnah. They were the two wives of Elkanah. Why did Elkanah have two wives? He apparently loved Hannah very much but she was barren and unable to give him a son. Very likely he took Peninnah as a second wife for that reason. Peninnah did have children with Elkanah and she taunted Hannah about her barrenness and made Hannah’s sorrow even more of a nightmare than it otherwise might have been. Hannah was bitter and depressed and the depression was reinforced every year when Elkanah took the family to make a sacrifice to the Lord at Shiloh. Shiloh, or Seilun as it is known now, was the home of the Ark of the Covenant during the time of the Judges. While the text does not say so, the sacrifice was probably on the occasion of the Feast of the Tabernacles which

commemorated God's care of his people during the Exodus. It was a joyous event which also celebrated God's blessing on the year's crops – but it was not joyous for Hannah.

Sacrifices made during the festival were not burnt offerings, sin offerings or guilt offerings in which the offering was destroyed in a fire or used by the priests. Rather they were peace offerings which were shared by the priest and the family making the offering. It was, in a way, similar to our joyous meals at Thanksgiving.

Depending upon which Biblical translation you read Hannah is either given an extra large portion of the meal because of Elkanah's love for her or, despite his love, was given the same amount as everyone else because God had kept her from having children. The various translations are inconsistent on this point but the meaning is clear.

Elkanah always asks her if he does not mean more to her than would ten sons. He deeply loves her and this question is one of great meaning. In those days and in that culture a woman never felt fulfilled unless she had at least one son. Ten would be an incredible achievement.

Nothing Elkanah could say would comfort Hannah. Her barrenness overrode Elkanah's love and she descended into depression and grief. She did not want to eat.

Then, one day after the sacrifice and the meal she went to the temple and prayed fervently to the Lord that she would be given a son – that her barrenness would be taken away. She asked for a son and vowed that, if her prayer were answered, she would give him in service to the Lord. She prayed in silence but, as I suspect some of you do, she moved her lips while praying even though she made no sound. I know that I do that at times. The Lord does not need to hear you audibly. He knows when you are praying and what you are praying for.

Hannah's asking for a son and promising that if God granted her prayer, she would give the son back to God shows a level of devotion which is almost mind boggling. Few of us would be likely to pray, "Lord please give me what I desire and I will give it back to you." But similar actions are not unprecedented in scripture. Consider the passage in Luke where the poor widow put all she had, two small coins, into the offering at the temple.

Betsy reminded me about a story told by a pastor at our former church in West Virginia. He said that if his grandmother met someone in need and all she had was a

dime and a penny, she would give that person the dime, keeping only the penny for herself. Hannah was willing to give both the dime and the penny in return for the joy of being able to give birth to a son.

As Hannah prayed, Eli, an aging priest, observed her lips moving and assumed that she was drunk and just mumbling. It was a feast day and heavy drinking on those days was not uncommon. He had undoubtedly observed drunken people in the temple before and he confronted Hannah.

She told him that she had drunk no wine or beer and she poured out her sorrow to Eli. He told her that the God of Israel will hear her prayer and answer it. Indeed the Lord did. She had a son who she and Elkanah named Samuel.

Hannah's promise to the Lord could have been nullified by Elkanah if he desired not to give the boy in service to God. Under the law, a wife's vows could be nullified by the husband once he learned of them. The husband could nullify the vow and the Lord would release her from the obligation. Since sons were so important in that culture, Elkanah understandably might have done that. Elkanah clearly loved her too much to do so.

When Samuel was still a toddler, Hannah kept her promise to the Lord and took Samuel to Eli to be raised in service to God – and indeed he was. He went on to become the last of the Judges and the one who became a reluctant king-maker – the one who anointed David as the future king of Israel.

When Hannah gave Samuel to Eli she prayed a song of praise and thanksgiving to God. Her song is often referred to as the "Magnificat of the Old Testament" because of its similarity to Mary's "Magnificat" in Luke. Hannah's magnificat is the canticle from 1st Samuel 2 which we read this morning instead of our usual Psalm. Mary's magnificat is expressed in the hymn which we just sang. Both women sang because they each were destined to give their first born sons into God's service, service in ways neither woman could ever have imagined.

Walter Bruggemann¹ comments that, *"This narrative stands poignantly as a counter affirmation of what is to come. Israel's new life emerges out of barrenness by the power of God. That power is inexplicable, but also irresistible. That power is evoked, summoned and triggered by lowly Hannah, who had no virtue, no claim, no capacity, only a stubborn insistence addressed to Yahweh and a readiness to yield back all good*

gifts.”

Ted Smith of Vanderbilt Divinity School stated that *“Hannah has always been more than the ‘type’ of the righteous, barren woman who ultimately conceives a child. She is never less than a mother but always more. She is a model for what it means to live faithfully in days that seem Godforsaken. She is a model for Israel and, Christian preachers might say, for the church in our time.”*

Think of that – *“A model for the church in our time.”* Hannah was ready to yield back her gift to God. She was a model we could all emulate. Can we live as faithfully as she did even when we are being taunted? Even when we are hurting deeply inside? Are we willing to yield back to God the good gifts that we have received?

Hannah did and she was rewarded sevenfold, eventually giving birth to seven children.

What will be our reward? I trust that as Christians, we know the answer to that question.

Amen.

1. Walter Bruggeman, First and Second Samuel, John Know Press, Louisville, 1990