

“Thank You Again and Again”

Third Sunday of Ordinary Time, Proper 28

I Samuel 1:4-20, Hebrews 10:11-14,19-25, Mark 13:1-8

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Proper 28, November 18, 2018, dedicated to the honor of Gerry and Marty Worth, our 2018 Lay Leader Award Honorees, to the memory of Jan Cook, Nancy Jeffrey, Bill Wright and Mary Weaver who have passed to eternal life and always to the glory of God!

“Thank You Again and Again”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Samuel, the son of Elkanah and Hannah, is born into this world as one dedicated to God. His arrival is an answer to prayer as Hannah struggles through barrenness to birth this “special change agent” of God’s into life. Samuel becomes a light to the nation Israel between the long journey of exodus and exile to monarchy and the rule of King David. Samuel is

the pivotal person in the Hebrew Scriptures whom God chooses to carry God's nation through chaos to clarity. But it is the faithful prayers of Samuel's mother, Hannah, that touch the heart of God and brings about Samuel's conception and birth.

This is a story about Five People and One God. Elkanah is a man with two wives, Penninah and Hannah. Although he loves Hannah deeply, he seems rather indifferent to her painful condition. Penninah has sons and daughters. Hannah is barren. Year in and year out, Penninah verbally abuses Hannah for her barrenness. She openly humiliates her, especially when they go to Shiloh to bring offerings to the Lord. Hannah weeps in sadness as she is unable to conceive and bear a child. But, out of her pain and in her absolute faithfulness, she prays for God's blessings.

At the temple's entrance, we meet Eli, the aging and increasingly feeble priest who presides over the temple in Shiloh, who in time will raise the young Samuel as his own understudy. Of course, Samuel is our fifth character, the central figure of this unfolding saga. **Hostility in Penninah, Indifference in Elkanah, Prayerful Faith in Hannah, Aging Devotion in Eli and Newborn Light to the Nation in Samuel** are all wrapped in this one story.

But, more than all of this, today's scripture is about the power of prayer. Let me share some lessons learned from this powerful story of prayer.

First lesson, in the darkest times, the hiddenness of God's love is revealed. Hannah's prayer is that God would grant her a child. Her promise is that she will grant God this child as well. God is not absent in this story. God is hidden and then revealed.

Throughout the Biblical narrative, we find that God arrives in the darkness night, in the times that seem like nothing is right. God appears to the humble and the barren, the distressed and the distraught. Almost like the desert, a land that appears only to be lifeless and dry, God is in the green oasis that appears out of nowhere. God makes a way in the wilderness. God makes a way where there is no way.

I have to tell you, I worry about us at times. I worry that we get stuck in "bottom lines" and fail to see the life and possibilities all around us and within us. We see barrenness and proclaim it as reality. God sees hiddenness and the oasis of possibilities. Too often, we are so busy frowning that we forget the lines on our heads were designed for smiling instead. God is always creating new life out of old ideas.

The question is, do we have enough faith to pray like Hannah? Do we trust enough in God to reveal what is hidden, instead of proclaiming it dead and gone? I pray that we be dedicated to God and come to know the hiddenness of God. Let us pay attention to the hiddenness of God revealed.

Second lesson, Hannah's prayer is all about receiving and returning grace. She needs no intercessor for her prayers. She takes her concerns directly to the Lord! Hannah walks past Eli and into the temple to pray. She shows a lack of decorum (and in the process) a lot of dedication! Rather than stopping by Eli's feet with incense and sacrifices, Hannah enters the temple, goes straight to God and prays that God will deliver her a son. With her prayer of the heart, Hannah goes right to the heart of the matter.

Hannah's name means "grace." She is the embodiment of grace. There can be no mistaking her prayer as a prayer from the heart of grace. How many times have you felt like you need to receive God's grace? How many times, having received God's grace, have you felt – like Hannah – that you need to return God's grace? In this prayer from "Grace," we hear that Grace will return grace when grace is received. What a powerful image for prayer! How often in our prayers, we want something to happen for us! In our darkness nights, we want God's delivery service to arrive with a neatly-packaged answer.

But, how often do we return thanksgiving to God? When we “get” do we “give?”

Third lesson, in Hannah’s prayer there is a trustful innocence. She doesn’t adjust her prayer asking God to take away her sadness or her pain. She doesn’t demand of God that God give her what she wants “or else.” At the center of Hannah’s life is prayer. At the center of her prayer is trust in God. At the center of God is love and grace. She enters the fullness of love and grace and returns to God what has come from God. She gives back love and grace.

Fourth lesson, Hannah has a “prayer life,” not just a prayer. When I was growing up, one of our favorite phrases when we were angry at friends or family was “get a life.” I must have screamed it at my parents more than once. It was an angry way of saying, “you don’t have it together” (and conversely, “I do!”). It was a form of arrogance of which I am embarrassed and ashamed at times. But, “having a life” really matters. And Hannah has a life! She has a prayer life.

We talk a lot about being spiritual, praying and doing the right thing. I can’t tell you how many times I have turned on my television and seen someone smiling and telling me that all I need to do is pray and God will give me whatever I ask for. I find this half true. God gives me gifts each day. That part is

true. But, the gifts are recognized and received out of a life dedicated to God in prayer. This doesn't mean that I always get what I ask for. Rather, God provides me with what I need!

Fifth Lesson, develop a prayer life don't just randomly pray when you are desperate or in despair. Each of us needs a "prayer life." That's right. We need a life of prayer. I try each day to live a life of prayer. I pray when I wake. I pray when I drive. I pray when I have a minute to pray. I pray at least 10 times each day. Some prayers are long. Some are short. But in a life of prayer, prayer grows right out of the life you are experiencing or living.

For example, when I pass Riverside Hospital each morning, I pray for the people in Riverside – the patients, the doctors, the nurses, the staff. I pray for the servants of God inside that huge and seemingly ever-growing multiplex with the white cross on the eastern wall. The cross – for me – beckons me to prayer. It is a simple prayer - "God bless and keep the people of Riverside Hospital, the sick and the dying, the healers and the helpers. Amen."

Further down the road I do the same as I pass by the OSU Medical Center, the James and Ross Heart hospitals. I lift up prayers for the students, staff and professors I know at OSU. But, that spreads to other colleges, schools and workplaces.

Prayer has a way of taking off! The prayers are more like “good thoughts” than well-developed words. But petitioning God to bless you is at the heart of my thinking on the drive (sometimes spiced and sprinkled with less prayerful words about the drivers around me . . . I am working on that! God is working on me!).

At a workshop led by Jackie Dean years ago, all of us were given tools for prayer and shown ways to put together a place of prayer in our homes. Find a place where you pray each day and go there and place yourself in that place and offer God (at least) 10 minutes of our day and your heart. In time, you will find that prayer is your life! You will awaken to the spirit of God in new and awesome ways.

Sixth lesson, Prayer should not intimidate you. Prayer should liberate you. Feel it and let prayer become real. I love what L.M. Montgomery writes in *Anne of Green Gables*,

“Why must people kneel down to pray? If I really wanted to pray, I’ll tell you what I’d do. I’d go out into a great big field all alone or in the deep, deep woods and I’d look up into the sky--up--up--up--into that lovely blue sky that looks as if there was no end to its blueness. And then I’d just feel a prayer.”

Feeling a prayer is as real as saying it aloud!

Seventh, step into the heart of God when you pray. We don't need to see ourselves as the leading characters in our lives. But we do need to see ourselves as people living a prayer. We need to place God at the center of all that is alive within us. The late Eugene Peterson, who passed away one month ago, said it well, *"We shouldn't be led to see God in our stories but our stories in God's."* Peterson goes on to say that we should refocus our lives around prayer. When we refocus our lives in prayer, we will shift from saying, *"God is in my heart to saying, I am in the heart of God."*

Imagine, this...if each of us saw ourselves "in the heart of God" that would create a true thanksgiving experience. Because, in the heart of God, we become more focused on grace, on hope, on love. In the heart of God, we take our negative, pessimistic pettiness and watch it transformed into endless possibilities. Only in the heart of God can such things truly happen.

The prayers which weave through our worship each week should be only a few threads of our prayers each week. The true weavings of prayer are woven on the loom of our lives. Line by line, step by step, we move through life in prayer. I pray that you become more and more a "prayer in a person" rather than "a person in prayer." Get a "prayer life" and this will become true.

Finally, find your voice in prayer. That's where Hannah finds her voice. Hannah has been abused by Penninah and neglected by Elkanah. Her silence is deafening as our story begins. In prayer, she becomes a woman with a buoyant, confident, grateful, efficacious voice. She finds her voice energized and hopeful as she speaks aloud to God her hopes, her dreams, her needs. In the chapter that follows this one, Hannah breaks into song and sings "Israel's most dangerous song," a song that inspires Mary and the Magnificat. It is a song we pray today without noticing the radical and discomfoting transformation it expresses. The mighty are brought down. The low are lifted up. The lives of women on the margins are transformed by God. In the end, Hannah finds her voice and change takes place.

Prayer can never ONLY be a private and pietistic exercise. Prayer changes history as well as her story in this story! Hannah's prayer has launched liberation movements and has opened the doors for the poor in synagogue and church.

Out of her dedication to God, Hannah changes history. It is fair to say, were it not for Hannah's prayer, Samuel might not have come charging into this world. Without Samuel, David doesn't get chosen and anointed. Without Hannah's radical prayer of thanksgiving, Mary's Magnificat and Jesus' birth in this world may not happen. Do you see how prayer works?

The power of prayer transforms one life, one family, one moment in time and in time the power of prayer transforms the world. Prayer can never be taken lightly or treated loosely. **Find your voice in prayer.**

In the end, Hannah births Samuel, whom she dedicates to God. He is raised by Eli in the temple at Shiloh. Hannah and Elkanah go on to have five more children after Samuel. Jewish Midrash tells that each year, Hannah and Elkanah would return to Shiloh with their other children to visit Samuel. Each year they would take different routes to Shiloh and visit with other priests and their families. They would bring them food, listen to their stories, and pray with them. They would encourage them in their ministry and care for them as servants of God. In the end, the woman named “Grace” truly received grace and returned grace for generations and generations. May the same be said of us.

Thanks be to Hannah! Thanks be to God!

I pray that our prayers of thanksgiving grow out of the heart of God and guide us now and always. I pray that our prayers may always be increasing and in time become unceasing. I pray for you never give in to despair and through the power of prayer you come to know the transformational power of God’s love

and grace. Travel well and receive your travelers this week with grace and truth. Amen.

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