

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, November 15, 2009, Pentecost 24, dedicated to Fisher Blaine Ferguson, born this week to Kathleen and Jason Ferguson, to Rev. Charles Peterson as he begins his ministry at Trinity Lutheran Church ELCA, to the men and women who died or were injured in the massacre at Fort Hood, Texas, and always to the glory of God!

“Dedicated to God”*

I Samuel 1:4-20; Mark 13:1-8

I Samuel 1:4-20 is a story of five people and one God. Today, I hope we open ourselves to be more dedicated to God as we witness the power and presence of God in this amazing story. Two significant books of the Bible rest in the care of Samuel. May we learn his story and walk more fully in God’s ways.

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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. He is the pivotal person in Old Testament 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.

I said this was a story of five people and one God. Elkanah is a man with two wives, Penninah and Hannah. Although he loves Hannah deeply, at times 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 bare a child. But in her absolute faithfulness, she prays for God's blessings in the midst of her intense pain.

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 the unfolding saga. Hostility, indifference, faithfulness, aging devotion and newborn light to the nation are all wrapped in our story today.

We learn in this story of Samuel's birth what it takes to be dedicated to God. I lift up four qualities of dedication to God each one of us can take away today.

First, 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 look at budget sheets and bottom lines and fail to see the life that teeming all around us. We see barrenness and proclaim as reality. God sees the hiddenness and the oasis of possibilities. We are so busy frowning

that we forget the lines on our heads were designed for smiling instead. God creates 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? Let us be dedicated to God and come to know the hiddenness of God.

2. 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 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." And 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?"

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.

3. 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 a way of saying, you don't have it together (and conversely, "I do!"). Well, 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. But, God provides me with what I need!

What do we NEED each day? First, we need 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 multiplex with the white cross on the eastern wall. 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. 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 and Sarah Reed two weeks ago, we 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.

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 in us. Eugene Peterson says 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.*"

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, Hannah finds her voice in prayer. 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. And what about David? What about Jesus? The power of prayer transforms the world. It is not to be taken lightly or treated loosely.

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 God for Hannah and her witness of prayer and faith. Amen.

** Some material from the UCC "Stretch Your Mind" Web site, i.ucc.org, was used in preparing this sermon.*

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