

The Prayer Underneath

Mark 13:1-8

1 Samuel 1:9-20

I want to start with a question this morning. How many of you remember where you were and what you were doing one year ago this morning? Who among you remember what you were up to, say at 10:00, on the Sunday morning before Thanksgiving last year?

I figured that there would be at least two groups of people here this morning who would remember: Jo Anne, Sheila, and the choir ... and the Pastoral Search Committee.

At 10:00 a.m. last year, Sunday, November 20, most of the Pastoral Search Committee and Chey and I – and Chey’s mom and step-dad – were in the small sanctuary of the Kenwood Community Church, and one of the most important worship services of my life was just beginning. The service was a little bumpy here and there – and not a single one of the hoped-for children showed up that morning – but it was still an hour of sacred, blessed time.

Later that day, after our lunch with the search committee, Chey and I left Sonoma, and we flew out of San Francisco early the next morning. Despite all the wrestling and uncertainty I’d been through in the 3 months that led up to that November weekend in Sonoma, I knew before the plane touched ground again that I experienced God calling me ... here. I came to believe, fervently, that God was calling me to be here with you, even though I hadn’t even met most of you and had only begun to get to know the search committee gang of 13.

Now, I’m not talking about the weekend before Thanksgiving last year just because I think anniversaries are important, even though I *do* think they are very important. And I’m not talking about it just because I enjoy telling the stories about all the things that happened between August 10, when Chey and I first saw the notice about this church’s pastoral search, even though I *love* to tell those stories. And I’m not even talking about it because my installation as your pastor will take place here in just a few hours, although I am very excited about that.

No, in the midst of all those possible reasons for thinking and talking about last year’s pre-Thanksgiving weekend, I’m talking about it because I see us – you and me – in this morning’s reading from the Book of Samuel. I’m talking about it because I see us in Hannah’s story, and I see Hannah in our story.

When we first meet Hannah in the Book of Samuel, Hannah is a very unhappy woman. Her husband Elkanah loves her and reassures her of his love. But Hannah is childless, and she and her husband live in a time and place where a woman with no children is pitied at best – and scorned and mocked at worst. Elkanah’s other wife, Peninnah, already has *many* children, and she frequently uses Hannah’s childlessness against her, “provoking” and “vexing” her.

In her sorrow and anxiety, Hannah turns to God. She goes to the temple and begins to pray. She prays for a son, and she vows that if she has a son, she will dedicate him to serving God. At the temple, the priest Eli misinterprets her fervour and her moving but silent lips and accuses her of making a drunken spectacle of herself. And our sister Hannah, like a good number of women in the Bible, holds her ground with this man

of power and privilege and defends herself. Finally understanding the situation, Eli blesses Hannah and assures her that God will answer her prayer. Hannah then returns to her family and conceives a son, Samuel. And, in keeping with Hannah's promise as she was praying in the temple, Samuel becomes a faithful prophet and servant of God.

Now ... if you're wondering, right about now, just what I see of *us* in *Hannah's* story, I don't blame you! The parallels are not exactly on the surface. But that's just the point, or at least one of the points. In this ancient story, as in so many stories of *our* lives, the surface doesn't reveal what's underneath.

Here's what I find under the surface. I think there are at least two things that tie Hannah's story to the story of how the search committee and I came to spend a Sunday morning together one year ago today. The first parallel I find is a willingness to make a spectacle of ourselves, a willingness to do things that may seem foolish to other people – or even to ourselves.

Of course, I can't tell the search committee's story fully because I wasn't involved in it until close to the end. But there are some things I do know about their story ... and about their willingness to make a spectacle of themselves in one way or another. I know that they accepted the responsibility to do the work and to take the risks of being a pastoral search committee. They may not have known just how much work they were taking on, but, knowing the diversity of viewpoints and hopes and dreams within this congregation, I'm sure they *did* realize that it was not going to be easy. Then, as those 13 people stepped more fully into the process, they found that it was going to take an awful lot of work. And I'm willing to bet that the long hours and the intensity of their work and the slowness of the pace came together, in one form or another, and started to look like quite a spectacle to a number of folks. Maybe it even started to look like a *foolhardy* spectacle to at least a few people. It's easy for me to imagine a variety of someones saying to different committee members, "You're going to *another* meeting? You're doing all this for a *church*? You're only *how far along* in the process? Aren't you *done* yet??" So, yes, I'm willing to bet that they made a spectacle of themselves from time to time.

As for me, on the other side of the continent, I *know* I made a spectacle of myself a number of times. There were quite a few people in my life who witnessed my literal and figurative prayers to be shown the next step on my path in ministry, my prayers to find my first church as an ordained minister. And, although they knew I wasn't drunk, they still had reason, from time to time, to think I had gotten a little loony. First, I was confident that I'd be staying in New England, and then I wasn't. Next, I was confident that Chey and I would end up in the Rocky Mountains, and then I wasn't. I was confident, if that's the right word, that my search for a church would take at least a year or two, but then I was wrong about that, too. As I moved from certainty to doubt about some things and from doubt to certainty about others, I was a sight, and even my dearest friends had frequent reason to roll their eyes and shake their heads at the spectacle.

But, somehow, the search committee and I were able to keep praying – in our work, in our words, and in our silence – no matter how silly or misguided we might have seemed from the outside. We prayed, and we were led to one another and to that weekend last year, a beautiful weekend like this one, just before Thanksgiving.

And that brings me to the other parallel that ties our story to Hannah's story. You and I and Hannah were all praying for something quite specific. Hannah, of course, was

praying for a son. You, the search committee and the congregation, were praying to find your next minister. I was praying to find the church I would serve as minister. But let's remember that we didn't really *find* each other; we were *led* to each other. And having been led to one another by the Spirit of God, having *received* what we prayed for, we need to follow our sister Hannah and be willing to give back what we have received. We need to hold the gift God has given us with open hands, stretch out our arms, and ask the Spirit to bless that gift and use it as a source of healing and hope in the world.

This day of anniversary and installation invites us, as Margaret Guenther suggests in this morning's opening words, to peel the onion and strip the artichoke. If we go beneath the prayers that helped bring us together, we'll discover that *I* am not the answer to your prayers and *you* are not the answer to mine. We'll discover that, underneath it all, just as Guenther says, we were *and are* praying, not simply to find a minister and find a church. We were and are praying for God; we were and are yearning for God.

Now I'm sure not saying that our being brought together isn't something to celebrate. We're going to have us a fine time this afternoon, honoring and celebrating the fact that we are here, together. And I trust and believe that you share at least some of the joy I experience because we are on this journey with one another. But we will be as mistaken as the priest Eli was when he dismissed Hannah as a drunken fool, if we believe that we've been brought together simply so we can be together. We will be as mistaken as Jesus' disciples were when they seemed to mistake the size and grandeur of the temple for true strength, if we think we can *keep for ourselves* what we've been given, confining it within the literal and figurative walls of this temple, this sanctuary, this church.

Hannah knew that God would grant her prayer for a son, *if* she was willing to help that child grow into a faithful servant of God. Somewhere, underneath our prayers for a new minister and a new church, we knew our prayers would be answered, if we were willing to offer back to God what we received. As we celebrate, as we recall how we came to reach this day together, let us remember, and live into the truth, that we will get to keep the gifts we receive with and through one another, only if we are willing to give them away.

In giving them away, we will join God in loving and healing the world, and we will find our rest and our joy within the sacred center of the cosmos.

Amen.

©The Rev. Nancy Alma Taylor
First Congregational Church of Sonoma, UCC
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And now go forth into the world to serve God with gladness.
Be of good courage

Hold fast to what is good
Render no one evil for evil.
Support the fainthearted
Comfort the afflicted
Help the weary
Honor all people
Love and serve God

And may the love of God, the grace of Jesus Christ,
And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you
Now and always