

PRAYER TOO DEEP FOR WORDS<sup>1</sup>  
I Samuel 1: 4-20  
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens  
November 15, 2009

Last week I ended the stewardship sermon with these words: “A week from today, let Pledge Sunday be one of the happiest, most joy-filled times of the year, for we have it on good authority that *God loves a hilarious giver!*” For many here, Pledge Sunday truly is a joyful time. To give generously is a joyful event.

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We all know, however, that there are times when we come to church with a shadow hanging over us. The music of praise and gratitude strikes a discordant note, and we choke on the Doxology. Just as a national day of Thanksgiving seems to be squeezed out between Halloween and Christmas in our culture, the joy of gratitude seems to be squeezed out of some people. In those times we may speak the words of praise, but beneath those prayers is a deeper, unspoken prayer of anguish.

It is to those friends that I direct this sermon. If you find yourself in this situation, or if you have ever found yourself in this situation, I commend to you the story of a woman who was so deeply distressed when she went to the

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<sup>1</sup> ©Thomas R. McKibbens, November 15, 2009.

Temple that she could find no words to express her feelings. Her distress was deeper than words.

We may choose to see this woman, Hannah, as representative of the distress of all those who are voiceless in our society. She had no voice because in her culture she was considered non-productive. In that sorry system of polygamy a wife's value was measured only in terms of production. She was childless; she was not, in their view, a productive person. The other wife, Peninah, whose name means "fertile," was precisely that. She was perpetually pregnant. She was producing children faster than Hannah could count them. Therefore her *rival*, as the text labels her, was considered more worthy in that culture.

The story says of her husband, Elkanah, that *...he loved her, but....* He loved her...but! But what? But...she wasn't producing children, and that was her job in life. He comes across as a well-intentioned man. He pleads with her not to be sad. He plaintively asks if his love is not worth more to her than ten sons! Her unspoken but obvious answer, of course, was no, his love was not worth more to her than ten sons. But she couldn't tell him that, at least not to his face. She kept it bottled up inside her until that day when she wandered into the temple alone. At least she thought she was alone.

Eli, the priest, was there, but she didn't see him at all. She thought she was free to let all that frustration, all that anger, all that pent-up emotion out. She was in a holy place, and she was going to raise holy hell with God! She let God have it! She groaned out her distress and bitterness. Her words came tumbling out in unintelligible wails, and when she finally emptied herself of all her bitterness, she was left trembling in silence with a tear-stained face. Her mouth moved, her body shook, her hair was matted.

That's when Eli concluded that she was drunk. Think of that! Talk about blaming the victim! Here the religious establishment completely misread reality. It wasn't the first time, and certainly wasn't the last time, that a representative of religion would blame the victim. There she is, looking like a wreck, making strange sounds, and generally acting odd, and the religious establishment thinks it is her fault. "I don't know where you are keeping your booze," says Eli, "but you can pour it out." Hannah looks up at him through blurred eyes and says, "It's not booze I'm pouring out; it's my soul."

And that's the prayer too deep for words. We pour out a torrent of words in church. We have printed prayers, spoken prayers, sung prayers, and impromptu prayers. But beneath all those prayers is something even deeper:

*I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord, she says to Eli. I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation.*

## II

Thoughtful people wonder how to deal with their *anxiety and vexation*. Writer Timothy Egan calls it “the thousand points of pain among average Americans.”<sup>2</sup> Many people come to church burdened down with the consequences of those thousand points of pain.

Here we provide a holy place where we meet, experience beautiful music, listen to the wisdom of ancient scripture, sing familiar and powerful hymns, think and talk together, and give our offerings. Our gathering together also provides a means to reach down to those prayers too deep for words. The structure of worship provides a way for us to pour out our souls before God.

Notice, I did not say pour out our souls before each other. Worship is not exhibitionism. At its best, worship is like a deep well that reaches down to the river of need running deep beneath the surface of our lives. In our church life, we often think the real issues are the goals we set, the budget we propose, the programs we plan, the ministries we support, the building we maintain.

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<sup>2</sup> Timothy Egan, *New York Times*, November 11, 2009.

But I propose that none of those things are more important than the regular provision of a holy time and place where anyone, no matter how full of *anxiety and vexation*, can come to pour out their soul before God.

The fact that in this biblical story God responded to Hannah's prayer with the birth of Samuel is almost beside the point. Whether or not her prayer would be answered in the way she wanted, she was able to leave the temple with a sense of peace. She had presented her case before God, recognizing that she could not be in control of everything in her life. She was able to turn those things over to God to open up new possibilities for her future.

I simply want to assert that beneath all the spoken words in our service today, I hope you are able to reach down to that secret place in your heart, that place beneath all these words, and lift your own prayer before God. That prayer may not even be subject to the limitations of human language. It may be silent because there are not words to express it. In fact, my goal in this or any other sermon is not that you will remember what I say. There is no pop quiz planned for this sermon. My goal is that a sermon provide a doorway into that inner place where you can express your deepest needs to God and connect to the divine in new and deeper ways.

Like any good biblical story, there is a conclusion that brings it all together in the end. Little Samuel is born. He is the answer to her prayers. And in her gratitude she brings back to God the gift God has given her. In a tradition of her time and culture, she takes little Samuel to the temple to be raised by Eli for religious service and to become what they called a Nazirite. This, in effect, was giving up her old-age pension plan. He was her only son, and as a Nazirite he would not be expected to support his mother in her old age.

These strange customs of an age long ago may mean little to us, but the impulse of Hannah to express her gratitude by giving generously to God is part of our contemporary culture. We want some tangible way to express our thanks for blessings God has given us. I say this not so much as a part of Pledge Sunday, but simply as an observation. We give to the church...we make our annual pledge, not only to help the church and to meet a budget, but also to help ourselves. Deep down we need to pledge. It is a tangible way to express our thanks. There is a yearning to respond to God's gifts to us by giving back.

And lo and behold! She gives her son gladly to God to the tune of a hymn. It is called "Hannah's song," and it resembles another hymn of praise that would be sung centuries later by a young woman who was likewise

powerless and voiceless in her society. We will hear echoes of Hannah's song in Mary's song, known as the Magnificat and read every Christmas. Both songs celebrate a wondrous birth, enabled by God's sheer grace. And both songs see the power of God as transforming power in behalf of the powerless and voiceless of the world.

#### IV

So on this Pledge Sunday, 2009, we read the story of Hannah ending in Hannah's song, and we are reminded that both Hannah and Mary are part of a long tradition of mothers who are singers of new possibilities. They sing into existence new communities and new hope because they have found that God hears the very ones whose voices are not heard by the powerful elite around them. They represent the voices of those who do not enjoy multi-million dollar bonuses, those who have lost their jobs, their health insurance, their sense of place in the world.

It is to those who come to church with prayers too deep for words that we hear the voice of Hannah: *My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God*, she sings. If her heart could be lifted up in exaltation...if her strength could be exalted in thanksgiving...then I have no doubt that we can be lifted up in the same way.

No matter how deep is your prayer beneath all the words of worship, the ancient *sursum corda* says it right: “Lift up your hearts!” says the leader. And the congregation responds, “We lift them up to the Lord!” And in that lifting up of our deepest needs, God lifts up the strength we didn’t know we had.