

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV

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Date: June 18, 2023, Year A, 3rd Sunday after Pentecost

Using "I've been Meaning to Ask" resources from *A Sanctified Art* (Week 2 of 4)

Text: 1 Samuel 1:1-18, Mark 5:21-43

Title: I've been meaning to ask . . . where does it hurt?"

Focus: As those who have experienced God's presence in the midst of pain and loss, we seek to provide safe places by acknowledging another's loss and demonstrating a willingness to listen.

The featured texts are 1 Samuel 1:1-18 about Hannah and her longing to have a child and Mark 5 with two intertwined healing stories about Jairus and his daughter and the woman with a hemorrhage.

Be sure to acknowledge the pain of infertility in Hannah's story, to which many contemporary people can relate—infertility, pregnancy loss, other painful family circumstances. I might want to do this at the beginning of the service—acknowledge Father's Day as a time which includes thanksgiving, but also feelings of loss and the pain reflected in this text.

First Reading 1 Samuel 1:1-18

¹There was a certain man of Ramathaim, a Zuphite from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah son of Jeroham son of Elihu son of Tohu son of Zuph, an Ephraimite. ²He had two wives; the name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children.

³Now this man used to go up year by year from his town to worship and to sacrifice to the LORD of hosts at Shiloh, where the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests of the LORD. ⁴On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; ⁵but to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the LORD had closed her womb. ⁶Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb. ⁷So it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of the LORD, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. ⁸Her husband Elkanah said to her, "Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?"

⁹After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose and presented herself before the LORD. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the LORD. ¹⁰She was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD, and wept bitterly. ¹¹She made this vow: "O LORD of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head."

¹²As she continued praying before the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. ¹³Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk. ¹⁴So Eli said to her, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine." ¹⁵But Hannah answered, "No, my lord, I am a woman

deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the LORD. ¹⁶Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time." ¹⁷Then Eli answered, "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him." ¹⁸And she said, "Let your servant find favor in your sight." Then the woman went to her quarters, ate and drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer.

Gospel Reading Mark 5:21-43

²¹When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. ²²Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet ²³and begged him repeatedly, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live." ²⁴So he went with him.

And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. ²⁵Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. ²⁶She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. ²⁷She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, ²⁸for she said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." ²⁹Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. ³⁰Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" ³¹And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?'" ³²He looked all around to see who had done it. ³³But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. ³⁴He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

³⁵While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?" ³⁶But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe." ³⁷He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. ³⁸When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. ³⁹When he had entered, he said to them, "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping." ⁴⁰And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. ⁴¹He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha cum," which means, "Little girl, get up!" ⁴²And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. ⁴³He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

Vignettes of Responses to Others' Pain

- **One person says:** "I'm so mad that my company forced me to retire. All those years of faithful service. . ."

- **Another responds:** “You should feel lucky. I wish I had as much free time as you.”
- **Is there a better way? Try Saying:** “Could you tell me more about that?”
- **One person responds to another:** “I know *exactly* how you feel.”
 - **If I were coaching, I might say:** Really? Maybe it would be better to listen first before declaring you know exactly how the other feels. Maybe you could allow a little space for this friend to describe how that feels instead of assuming you know exactly how it is.
 - How about “This must be a confusing time.” Or “You sound pretty frustrated—is that right?”
- A woman whose husband had just died at age 57 was told “You look terrible!”
 - “Gee, I really thought I looked great after 5 days of non-stop crying, but perhaps you have a point.”
- **One person instructs another:** “It’s time that you got over this.”
 - That sounds like minimizing—like, “It’s no big deal.”
 - Maybe the message received is even, “The one who you loved is no big deal—that’s why you should get over it.”
- **A person says:** “I can’t believe she’s really gone.”
 - **Another responds:** “Don’t cry; it’ll be okay.”
 - Maybe having a safe place to cry and express oneself is just what would be helpful.

Sometimes when people are in pain, others say things that aren’t helpful, even if that’s not what they intend.

How have people responded to you when you’ve experienced a painful loss? I imagine sometimes you’ve received helpful responses. At other times there have been responses, even if you assume they are well-intended, that have contributed to your pain.

Pain Expressed in these Stories

There is pain in these stories in Scripture as well. And, just like these vignettes, sometimes people’s responses compound pain rather than extend comfort or reassurance. Responses can further isolate.

In the text from 1 Samuel, Hannah is the wife of Elkanah, who also has a wife named Peninnah (pih-NIN-nuh). Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children (1 Sam. 1:2). She has pain because of her losses.

- Peninnah used to provoke Hannah severely (v. 6,) and she did this repeatedly (v. 7)

- Hannah already has someone compounding her pain, mocking her.
- Did you see that Peninnah is even described as a “rival?” (v. 6).
- The impact on her was that she “would weep and not eat” (v. 7).
 - Her husband Elkanah seems to have tried to be helpful to her. The text does say that “he loved her” and provided for her by giving her a double portion (v. 5).
 - At the same time, he said to her, “Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?”
 - That sounds like another example of *minimizing*. “Oh, it’s no big deal! Why are you crying? You have me— isn’t that better than 10 sons?” As though the presence of one thing negates the pain of the loss which affects her deeply.

Another character in the story is the priest, Eli. Eli is in the temple and observes Hannah while she prays. The text describes her as “deeply distressed” and she is weeping bitterly as she is praying (v. 10).

Eli is observing her and watching her mouth or lips move. She is praying silently and so no sounds come from her mouth. Eli jumps to the conclusion that she is drunk and rushes to scold her as a “drunken spectacle” and tells her to “put away [her] wine, even though he sees no wine there (vv. 13-14).

Pain in the Gospel Text from Mark

There are two intertwined stories of pain and loss and healing in the Gospel text from Mark.

It begins with Jairus, a leader in the synagogue, seeking healing for his daughter. While Jesus joins him to go to his house, a woman who has been bleeding for 12 approaches him, though she is obscured by the crowd and goes unnoticed.

Let’s pause for just a moment at this description. She has been suffering from a hemorrhage for *12 years*. We pray regularly for those with cancer and other life-limiting conditions, for those with chronic conditions, and for caregivers. There are those among us who can identify with living with something for 12 years. Living with pain or health uncertainty or having the perpetual reminder of one’s caregiving responsibilities can be exhausting.

Her circumstance has some similarity to Hannah’s. One commonality is the impact of shame. Though there is nothing in either circumstance that suggests they are to blame for their circumstance, they each seem to bear some shame.

- Hannah is treated cruelly by Peninnah. She (Peninnah) is described as a rival, as though there is a contest or a superiority of one over the other. Perhaps others look upon Hannah as less of a woman because she has not borne a child.

- Shame and social stigma and ostracism permeate the story of the woman with a hemorrhage as well. It is signaled by not having a name in the story. She is “the woman with a hemorrhage,” as though her condition defines her. Religious and social norms would have labeled her “unclean,” and you can be sure that label adds to the shame. She is unnoticed in the thick crowd surrounding Jesus. Perhaps she is used to going unnoticed. There has been no one who has been able to help her. Even after countless visits to physicians and spending all she has, she is no better, but worse (v. 26).

“Make Space” or Speak Up for Oneself and Seeking Peace

Where is there hope or healing or peace or Good News in these stories?

Hannah speaks up . . . in prayer to God and in word to Eli.

Later in the story of Hannah, after we concluded reading at v. 18, Hannah becomes pregnant and has a son, whom she names Samuel. But notice that the change in her outlook doesn’t come from becoming pregnant and having a son.

She pours out herself in earnest prayer to God, acknowledging her distress and weeping as she prays.

She is changed after she has spoken up for herself to Eli, asserting that she is not drunk, but has been pouring out her heart in prayer out of her anxiety (v. 16).

Her change comes when she prays, speaks up, is acknowledged and heard, and receives Eli’s blessing of peace (v. 15-17). The text says, “her countenance was sad no longer” (v. 18). Hannah is more whole or more at peace upon speaking up and being acknowledged by Eli. Her peace doesn’t depend on her later pregnancy with Samuel or his birth.

The Woman with a Hemorrhage is Persistent

The quality I admire in the woman with a hemorrhage is determination or persistence. She won’t give up. She’s been to all these doctors and used all her resources and nothing seems to help. . . But she’s heard something about Jesus (v. 27), and in her faith, she reasons that just touching his cloak will bring wholeness (v. 28).

A couple other things to notice:

- The power of touch is a counter to the stigma and ostracism or isolation which she has endured, which take the pain and discomfort of her physical condition and pile on to make it even worse.
 - What’s communicated in the power of touch which signals, “I’m with you; I got you, I’m here for you.”
- The second thing is how Jesus responds to her. Though he has not visually seen her, he immediately knows that “power [has] gone forth from him” (What an

interesting phrase.) The disciples are baffled and comment on the size of the crowd—how could Jesus have sensed or known anything, with this huge crowd pressing in on him.

- The woman approaches Jesus to “tell him the whole truth.” With courage, before Jesus and surrounded by this crowd, she speaks her truth (v. 33).
- He responds by calling her “daughter” (v. 34). The woman without a name, but known by her condition, who has experienced isolation and social stigma, has now been seen and acknowledged and called “daughter,” a beloved family term.

Listen More, Speak Less

Pastor Brittany Fiscus van-Rossum is the one who offers the reflection on this week’s two texts in the devotional booklet. She is the pastor of Mercy Community Church in Atlanta. It’s a distinct community which includes people who are unhoused as well as housed and meets in public places or borrowed space.

In a video reflection on the text, she talks about the intersection of these texts, the desire to say just the right thing, and how the beloved community can reflect the presence of God.

She says, “As a pastor to a community of many people who are experiencing homelessness, there are some days when I struggle to find the right compassionate words.”

Maybe this might be encouraging to hear—that even a pastor with education and training and experience who is drawn to this form of ministry and has gifts for it—even she experiences fatigue or frustration or struggles for the best response.

We started out the sermon by saying that sometimes people’s responses compound our pain. Pastor Brittany is saying that no one of us gets it right all the time. That’s an expression of grace.

But here’s the next part that she says:

If we are to be people who bring peace and healing, it’s going to happen through listening, through relationship, through being present with one another, bearing witness to pain, because that’s who our God is.”

Sometimes that impulse to say just the right thing comes from our desire to fix things. We don’t want to see our friend in pain and so we think we can say just the right thing to take away that pain. It comes out differently than we intend—it comes out as minimizing or dismissing the pain that is truly present.

- “Don’t cry” or “Don’t worry; it’ll be okay” sounds too much like “Your loss was no big deal.”

Thoughts on A Better Way

One of the things I like about the way the folks at *A Sanctified Art* framed this week's theme is that posing this part of the conversation as a question creates space for the other person to respond as they wish or as they feel safe or comfortable to do so. **"I've been meaning to ask. . . where does it hurt?"** (at least when asked with genuine curiosity and a demonstrated willingness to listen) opens the door.

"I've been meaning to ask. . . where does it hurt?", when posed in this way, is a whole lot different than "I know *exactly* how you feel" and then launching into one's own story instead of listening.

Remember that Hannah experienced wholeness (or "her countenance" changed) when she was seen and heard and acknowledged and her pain was acknowledged. Can we listen to others and acknowledge their pain and loss and resist that nagging urge to fix things?

And if you ask and then display a willingness to listen, you have opened the conversation or created space for a connection. It may be that the other person chooses not to openly talk about that pain—they get to choose—but you have at least created space for them to consider it. And maybe their response is more "Not right now" rather than "No, and not ever."

The folks from *A Sanctified Art* call this **"Holding Space,"** which is a way of coaching us to listen in patience, allow silences to linger, let words and their impact sink in. We resist the urge to allow our own discomfort to cause us to change the subject or quickly move on. At the same time, no one is forced to speak. We seek to create opportunities, we **"stay curious"** as active listeners, and we **respect boundaries** and a person's choice about what they may wish to say.

Where's the good news in these passages?

We all experience pain and loss. That can provide us with the capacity to respond with compassion to the pain of others. May we know the presence of God in our own pain and loss that we can respond to others by creating space so we can authentically ask, "Where does it hurt?" and demonstrate our willingness to listen.