

“Hannah’s Prayer”

Sermon on Sunday, November 18, 2018

Based on 1. Samuel 1

A lot of people will gather at the Thanksgiving table this week. They will devour insane amounts of food. They will cook more turkeys than the wild can supply. They will chop veggies, wash cranberries and re-use old family recipes. It is also rumored that the liquor stores will have a good week, bottles of wine and stronger beverages flying off the shelves for our national holiday.

Which made me think of a fun fact. Twice in the Bible, people who are praying are mistaken for having had too much to drink. Did you know that? Today we are introduced to this woman Hannah who, on the threshold of the Temple of Shiloh, is praying to get pregnant, which can be a very difficult thing to deal with, even now, in the age of fertility treatments. Emotionally raw and unhinged, she is pouring her heart out to God, moving her lips, mumbling words no one could understand. And the priest in charge, Eli, makes one quick assumption. “Put away your wine,” he says. “Don’t you know this is a house of God?” He thought she was drunk.

The other incident occurred on the day of Pentecost and is better known. The Apostles were filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, and began to speak in many languages. You can imagine how that sounded... Probably like a bunch of Eagles fans after last year’s Super Bowl win who had too much to drink! Luke wrote that folks thought Peter and company were intoxicated at 9 o’clock in the morning (hey, not even Eagles fans are that bad...). The apostles spoke in tongues, acted strangely and saw weird things like tongues of fire. But no, the Bible says, they were in a state of ecstatic praying.

It does make you wonder what prayer really is. I mean, when we picture people who are praying, we don’t have images in mind that could be mistaken for drunkenness, right? We may picture a person entering a church, kneeling, lighting a candle perhaps. We may think of a public worship service like the one we have this morning with carefully written prayers that people read and bring before God. We may think of people folding hands, lifting their arms to heaven, opening a prayer book. None of my mental images of prayer relate to anything remotely resembling drunkenness. Nor do my mental images of public drunkenness resemble anything like prayer. But, my guess is that the problem here isn’t my understanding of drunkenness, but rather my limited, elitist, snobby understanding of prayer. Do I understand how raw and imperfect and messed up we can be when we come before God in a state of desperation?

This woman Hannah, the mother of Samuel, the heroine of today’s first reading, is a teacher of prayer in the most unconventional way. What she teaches us is this: prayer doesn’t have to sound pretty and it doesn’t have to look pretty, it just has to be genuine, a voice rising from the bottom of your heart to the ears of the one who created the universe and all that is in it. We too often make prayer to be something that has to be formal and perfect, and guess what? Most of us are scared of the formality. Ask someone to offer a prayer before a meal, and all of a sudden a room full of chatter falls silent; there is an awkward pause, until someone mercifully agrees to do it, usually retreating to a somewhat familiar prayer, just to be safe. We are so afraid of saying it wrong! It reminds me a little bit of a movie scene from “Meet the Fockers,” a

comedy in which Ben Stiller alias Gaylord Focker is asked to say a table prayer in front of the family and he mumbles his way through it most awkwardly, ending up with some phrases reminiscent of the 60's musical God Spell. At one point he says, "And we thank you oh, sweet, sweet Lord of hosts for the...smorgasbord you have so aptly lain at our table this day, each day. Day by day, by day..." And when he is done with his attempt at religious wordiness, mom says, "Oh that was such a beautiful prayer!" And you see the face of Robert de Niro who is the dad in that scene and his facial expression says, "Yeah, right!"

Let us be honest: praying in public can be difficult. I am considered a professional, but let me tell you, I have mumbled words at times or searched for the right things to say in public at a wedding's official table grace in front of more than a hundred people, and on other occasions. Sometimes you don't feel like praying and forcing yourself to use words at those times can result in pretty interesting word concoctions. Not that it will harm us. It may just remind us that we are not as spiritual as we would like to be. It may just humble us a little bit. And you can always say, "Look, I was not as bad as Ben Stiller was in 'Meet the Focker's'." I mean, nobody is.

So, now that I have thoroughly discouraged those of you who are prayer-shy to begin with, let me attempt to give you some reason to be bold. First, you don't start praying in the public, just like you don't start driving on a highway. You first pray at a place of your choice, in your own words, in your own mind, in your own setting, you feel your way upwards to God. Secondly, some beautiful prayers have been written, and there is nothing wrong with using them, especially if your spiritual tank is empty. Third, always trust your emotions and your feelings. If Hannah teaches us one thing in her moment of desperation, it is to be real and to trust your emotions. She is pouring her heart out to God and if we can do that, words don't matter.

Hannah is praying for a child. She's praying from the very depths of her longing. Standing there only steps away from the Ark of the Covenant she has no time for grammar or stilted awkwardness. And you know what else? I take a lot of time to write and re-write prayers for Sunday morning services every week. Ask Lisa in the office. She has to make all the changes and corrections on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. I want those prayers to be as meaningful and real as can be. Yet, I tell you the most meaningful prayers on Sunday morning are those when people burst out from a full heart, sometimes an anguished heart, sometimes a heart full of joy and offer their prayer to God during our worship time together. The words don't matter. The grammar doesn't matter. Trust me, if you need to get something across to God, you will and everybody can relate. That's Hannah's Prayer, Hannah's way of praying and searching God.

It may not look good. It may show you with reddened eyes and tears rolling down your cheeks, but it is real. Given the right circumstances, sometimes you might even look drunk. Because the relationship that we're offered with God is a real one. A genuine relationship. And when we're excited we're to gush out like Hannah breaking out into song. And when things are falling apart, we're to gush out like Hannah at Shiloh. In short: we are children of God, we are at home when we worship. Where can you be real, if not when you are at home, in the company of all the saints, together with people like Hannah? So let us pray! Amen.