

Sacrificial Love
The United Church of Broomfield
December 19, 2021

1 Samuel 1:19 – 2:10 (Women's Lectionary)

Hannah and Elkanah rose early in the morning and bowed down and worshiped before the HOLY ONE OF OLD; then they turned back and went to their house at Ramah. Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and the HOLY ONE remembered her. And it was with the turning of the days that Hannah conceived and gave birth to his son. She called his name Samuel (God hears), for she said, "From the GOD WHO HEARS have I asked him."

Now the man Elkanah went up along with his whole household to offer to the HOLY ONE the yearly sacrifice, on account of a vow. Yet Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, "[Not] until the child is weaned, then will I bring him, that he may be seen in the presence of the MOST HIGH and remain there perpetually. I will present him as a nazirite in perpetuity, for all the days of his life."

Her husband Elkanah said to her, "Do what is best in your eyes, stay until you have weaned him. May the FAITHFUL GOD establish the words of your mouth." So, the woman remained and nursed her son until she weaned him. And she took him up with her after she had weaned him along with a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour, and a jug of wine. Hannah brought him to the house of the EVER-LIVING GOD at Shiloh and the boy was just a little boy. Then they slaughtered the bull, and they brought the boy to Eli. And Hannah said, "My lord! As you live, my lord, I am the women, the one who was standing beside you in this [place] to prayer to the GOD WHO HEARS. For this boy I prayed; and the FAITHFUL GOD gave me my asking, what I asked from God. Therefore have I bequeathed him to the GRACIOUS GOD; all his days will he be a bequest to the GOD WHOSE NAME IS HOLY."

So, she left him there and she bowed down and worshipped the FAITHFUL GOD.

Hannah prayed and she said, "My heart exults in the HOLY ONE OF OLD; my horn is listed up in my God. My mouth [opens] wide against my enemies, for I will rejoice in my victory. There is none holy like the MOST HIGH, none besides you; there is no rock like our God. Speak proudly no more, multiplying pride, nor let arrogance come from your mouth; for the AGELESS GOD is a God of knowledge, and by God deeds are accounted.

The bows of the mighty are broken, yet the feeble gird on warrior-strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, yet those who were hungry are fat. She who was barren has birthed seven children, yet she who has many children languishes. The CREATOR OF ALL kills and gives life; bring down to Sheol and raises up. The GRACIOUS ONE makes poor and makes rich; brings low and also lifts up. God raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from heaps of human waste, to seat them with nobles and inherit a seat of honor. For to the CREATOR belong the pillars of the earth, and on them God has set the world.

God will guard the feet of the faithful who belong to God, while the wicked perish in shadow; for it is not by might that one prevails. THE HOLY ONE OF SINAI! Those who strive against God shall be shattered; God thunders against them from heaven. The FOUNT OF JUSTICE will judge the ends of the earth; God will give strength to God's ruler, and exalt the power of the anointed of God."

If you watch television, even a little bit, you've probably noticed that for Halloween AND now for the Christmas season oddly enough, the Harry Potter movies are airing often, almost every weekend. As we celebrate this fourth Sunday of Advent, the Sunday of Love, I thought about how sacrificial love is demonstrated in the Harry Potter movies. For those of you who haven't read the books or watched the movies, I apologize that I might get a little technical for a moment. Also, if you haven't read the books or watched the movies, what have you been doing!?

"The seventh book, Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, echoes three important Christian themes. The first of these is sacrificial love. ... Harry's destined goal throughout the series, and his final task in The Deathly Hallows, is to destroy Voldemort [the villain], who in a worldly attempt at immortality...has split his soul into eight parts, placing them in objects called horcruxes. In The Deathly Hallows, Harry has [a] metaphorical Garden of Gethsemane experience, face-to-face with his destiny, when he sees the memories of Severus Snape. In those memories, Dumbledore tells Snape that in order for Voldemort to be destroyed, Harry must die because Harry has a piece of Voldemort's soul in him – [his scar is a horcrux], and furthermore, Voldemort himself must kill Harry. Harry understood at last that he was not supposed to survive. His [purpose] was to walk calmly into Death's welcoming arms. Along the way, he was to dispose of Voldemort's remaining links to life [the horcruxes], so that when at last he flung himself [the last horcrux], across Voldemort's path, and did not raise a wand to defend himself, the end would be clean, and the job that ought to have been done at Godric's Hollow would be finished: Neither would live, neither could survive."¹ Sacrificing himself, Harry would defeat the villain and make it possible for everyone else to survive in love and goodness.

From our reading today, Hannah's story is one of many biblical stories of sacrificial love.

Preceding the reading, we should recall the beginning of Hannah's story...

- * Elkanah had two wives, Hannah and Peninnah.
- * Peninnah had given Elkanah two sons.
- * Hannah was barren.
- * Hannah's barrenness didn't bother Elkanah for he loved her dearly, but it bothered Hannah, especially since Peninnah was cruel and taunted her mercilessly and endlessly about how God refused to bless her with children.
- * The family went to Shiloh to worship and while the others ate and worshipped, Hannah went to the temple and presented herself before the Lord. She prayed and made a vow, "O Lord of hosts, if You will indeed look on the affliction of Your maidservant and remember me, and not forget Your maidservant, but will give Your maidservant a male child, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and no razor shall come upon his head."
- * She cried and sobbed uncontrollably – so much so that the priest Eli thought she was drunk. But, after hearing Hannah's explanation of why she was crying, Eli blessed her and her prayers.

That brings us to today's reading.

"Hannah's barrenness was the ultimate weakness for women in the Bronze Age. She had nothing going for her except the tender love of her husband, Elkanah. She was taunted by her rival, Peninnah, whose cruel words

¹ Richard Denton, "The Christian message of Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part 1," *Tolle Lege*, <http://blog.dartmouthapologia.org/show/440>.

twisted like a knife in her gut. Hannah did what the helpless do: “Hannah got up and presented herself before the Lord... Hannah was very upset and couldn’t stop crying as she prayed to the Lord.” Anguished prayer is weakness splayed all over the floor. Eli the priest observed her, and assumed she was drunk. Then he took pity on her. Or perhaps he realized he was witnessing what every priest longs to see: a soul entirely abandoned to God. He blessed her. And then this woman, with no natural strength in her womb, conceived and bore a son, Samuel.

The mind-boggling wrinkle in Hannah’s story, though, isn’t the seemingly miraculous birth. What staggers us is that she kept an outlandish promise she had made in her desperation she pledged to give that child right back to God.

She could easily have reneged on the deal once she cradled her precious son in her arms, nursing him, giggling with glee over his arrival. He was all she’d ever wanted. And in those days, a son was your social security, the one a woman needed to care for her in old age. But she took the boy to Shiloh and left him there to serve in the temple as an apprentice to Eli. What more poignant words are there in all of scripture than these? “So now I give this boy back to the Lord.”

The world says, “grab the gifts you can, hang on to them, accumulate strength and resources.” But Hannah, instead of clinging tightly, opened her hands, and let go of the best gift ever. She made a decision, kept her promise and did something that (then and now) would be described as foolish and stupid, not loving. (She chose to have faith and trust in God. She chose to love in a way that “sacrificial” doesn’t begin to adequately describe. She chose to love her child and her God by returning to her weak, vulnerable state. “So now I give this boy back to the Lord.” Such is a kind of holy love the world will never understand.

After his election, Pope Francis chose to lead in love by handing back the powers of the papacy he’d just won, riding in a Ford Focus instead of the papal limousine, moving into a guesthouse instead of the Apostolic Palace, and wearing a simple cassock instead of regal finery.

Henri Nouwen, priest, professor, writer and theologian, left a faculty position at Harvard to live in a L’Arche community in Canada, where his job was to care for a single, severely handicapped young man named Adam.

In March 2008, a Starbucks barista, 51-year-old Sandie Andersen, was talking with 55-year-old, long-time customer Annamarie Ausnes, who told her that she needed a kidney transplant. Ausnes said that her husband and son were not matches, so she would have to wait for a donor. Without hesitation, Andersen offered to have a blood test to see if she matched the customer. The great thing is that she ended up being a perfect match. Andersen donated her kidney to Ausnes and in a few weeks, Ausnus was expected to be 100% back to normal.

Imagine all the obscure people who have loved so sacrificially that most people have never heard of them. We will never know of all of the amazing and loving sacrifices that people make all of the time.

Love is often best done by letting go; refusing possessions, control or manipulation, and living life as an offering to God. It can be minor or grand. It can be uncomfortable or pleasurable. But loving sacrificially - always yields great immeasurable results, like contentment, gratitude, and the flourishing of others.

In Wendell Berry’s novel about a Kentucky farm mother, Hannah Coulter, who muses, “The chance you had in life is the life you’ve got. You can make complaints about what people, including you, make of their lives after

they have got them, and about what people make of other people's lives, even about your children being gone, but you mustn't wish for another life. You mustn't want to be someone else. What you must do is this: 'Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks.' I am not all the way capable of so much, but those are the right instructions."

To love selflessly is to let go of fantasies and selfish wishes, resentments and any sense of entitlement or deserving. How counter-cultural! We can love sacrificially and extravagantly and still be content; we already have enough, and so we are freed for joy and love. Who wouldn't want such a feeling?²

What are WE being asked to sacrifice?
How are we being called upon to love?

"When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son." (Genesis 22:9-10).

"For God so loved the world that God gave God's only Child, so that everyone who believes in that Child may not perish but may have eternal life." (John 3:16 NRSV)

"Then (Jesus) said to them all, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me." (Luke 9:23)

"For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." (Mark 8:35)

To love like Christ

- be kind to others even when we don't think they deserve it. We can help others out of the goodness of our hearts and put a smile in their faces.
- pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people" (Ephesians 6:18)
- "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love." (Ephesians 4:2)
- "...love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." (Matthew 5:44)
- And remember to be gracious and merciful and love yourself, so that you may "love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22:29)

May we embrace Hannah's story and make it a part of our hearts, for she is an amazing matriarch and example of hope, peace, joy and love.

AMEN

² Howell, James C. *By Now You're Weak Enough to Lead*. www.ministrymatters.com. 2021 Nov. 14. – adapted