

“What’s Prayer Got to Do with It?”

1 Samuel 1:4-20; 2:1-10

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I have a love for the Gospel of Luke. It has my favorite passages of Scripture—the annunciation and the Magnificat. It, more than any other gospel, centers the stories of women. Women are important players in the story of Jesus’ life and ministry, and I think Luke does the best of the four gospels in showing that. Luke also has my favorite parable—the parable of the persistent widow. Jesus sits down with his disciples and tells them a “parable about the need to pray always and not to lose heart.”¹

There is a widow who each day makes her way to court. She is determined that she will see the judge to demand justice. She is determined that justice will be granted unto her. As we know from last week, widows often had nothing. If a woman’s husband died and she had no sons to care for her, she was likely left destitute. Widows were the most marginalized because in that society, a woman’s livelihood depended on her relationship to a man. None of this deterred the widow and still every single day she went to the court to demand justice, even though the judge continued to deny her plea. Eventually the widow wears the judge down, and he grants her justice saying, “I will grant her justice, so that she may not finally come and slap me in the face.”

And this, is how Jesus tells the disciples to pray—with persistence and determination.

This is how Hannah prays. Like the widow Jesus tells the disciples of in Luke’s Gospel, Hannah persistently prays for a son. Year after year she makes the trek to the temple with her husband Elkannah and his other wife Peninnah. The passage tells us that every year, Peninnah provokes her, mocking her because Hannah has not been able to conceive and bear a child. Peninnah falls into the trap of scarcity, the trap of women getting pit against each other. Peninnah believes that Hannah’s pain is her triumph. Peninnah believes that Hannah’s loss is her gain. We here today know that is not true, but Peninnah didn’t. All she knew was that her livelihood and life were tied to her ability to bear children, specifically sons. She thought it was a competition, something to win, but all Hannah wanted was a son to love.

All Hannah wanted was a son to love and so year after year she prays to God in the temple and year after year she goes back home only to be devastated again. I do not know what it is to experience the pain, weight, and grief of infertility. I do not know what it is to pray persistently for a child and for the prayers to go unanswered. I do not know what that feels like and I do not know why it happens. But if this has been your reality, I am so sorry. This passage has problematic ways of speaking of infertility, and often stories in the Bible can reduce people to whether or not they have children. So let me say, God does not “close anyone’s womb.” God does not cause pain of that kind. God is not some divine puppet master causing harm to some

¹ Luke 18:1

and not others. God is love and God sits in the pain and grief with you. God holds the weight with you.

This year at the temple, Hannah could not take Peninnah's provoking anymore. It broke her. But still, she went back to prayer. She had prayed the prayer so many times. She was so emotionally exhausted. Her voice was practically gone from crying, and so she mouthed the words. She promised to give the child she prayed for back to God. The child would live in the temple in service to God. The only sounds she made was the breath leaving her mouth as she moved her lips. All Hannah had left in her to pray was exhaled words. The priest Eli thought she was drunk. When she explains to him what is going on, he blesses her. Hannah returns home and she conceives and bears a son and names him Samuel, which means God has heard.

This morning we heard the song "The Mother" by singer/songwriter Brandi Carlile. It's a song and, I believe, a prayer about becoming a mother for the first time, and for the child who made her a mother. When Brandi and her wife Catherine found out they were having a baby girl, they decided to name her Evangeline, meaning "the good news" or "the gospel." Brandi prays over Evangeline, singing, "When we chose your name we knew that you'd fight the power too." Like Hannah dedicates and names Samuel to a life in service to God, Brandi and Catherine dedicated their daughter to working against the powers and principalities of this world with her own name representing the gospel of love and justice.

When Hannah brings Samuel to the temple to dedicate him back to God, she prays again. And this prayer is different than the first. This prayer is a song, it is a song of joy and praise. It is a prophetic song of hope and promise. It is a song about who God is and how God is at work in the world around us.

Hannah's second prayer reminds me of Tracy Chapman's 1988 anthem, "Talkin' Bout a Revolution." It's one of the singles from her self-titled album. It's an album of reflections on abuse, poverty, crime, working class life, race, and love. The song reminds the listener that the lives she is singing about on her album and in this song in particular, matter. Those in the welfare lines, at shelters, in unemployment lines, poor people, they matter. They matter and despite the message that the world tries to reinforce, they do have power. Even if all they can muster is a whisper like Hannah in the temple praying to God that she would have a child, there is power in a whisper.

*Don't you know
Talking about a revolution?
It sounds like a whisper*

If you've heard the song, then you know that it builds. Tracy exhibits the power in a whisper, and the power of what happens when the whispered prayers accumulate: the tables turn.

*Poor people gonna rise up
And get their share
Poor people gonna rise up*

And take what's theirs

And finally the tables are starting to turn

Talkin' bout a revolution

'Cause finally the tables are starting to turn

Talkin' bout a revolution

Hannah's prophetic prayer, her prophetic song, shows the way that God turns the tables on injustice. Hannah sings that God raises up the poor from the dust, God lifts up the needy from the ash heap. God breaks the bows of the mighty and strengthens the feeble. God fills the hungry. God will protect the faithful. She's talkin' bout a revolution where the tables have turned.

A revolution, the turning of the tables, cannot be done without prayer. Prayer is essential. Prayer is a pillar of our work and our call as followers of Jesus. Prayer can be many things. It can be a whispered plea. It can be a prophetic song of joy. It can be a moment of silence where all you do is breathe in and out and try to remind yourself that you are still breathing. Prayer can be marching in a protest. Prayer can be calling your elected official to demand change. It can be playing an instrument or listening to your favorite album. Prayer can be a hike. Prayer can be a conversation.

Prayer is a way for us to connect with and be in conversation with God. There is no specific one right way to pray. Hannah and Brandi and Tracy and the widow all show us different ways to pray. But prayer is essential, and prayer is important, and prayer matters. It's why we have a weekly prayer meeting. It's why we pray in worship every week. God hears us and draws near to us when we pray.

When Jesus told his disciples the parable of the persistent widow was about their need to pray always and not to lose heart, it's because he knew they had a hard road ahead of them. We all know that following Jesus is not easy, and sometimes in our work and pursuit of justice it is really easy to lose heart.

But the promise we hear from Jesus and the promise we hear from Hannah in her prayer is that God is at work. God hears our prayers and God will grant justice.

Pray always and do not lose heart my friends.

Amen.