

At the Table in Shiloh

November 17, 2024 © Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

[1 Samuel 1:4-20](#), 1 Samuel 2:1-10, Hebrews 10:11-25, Mark 13:1-8

I would like to invite you into the opening scene of our reading this morning from the First Book of Samuel. A family has come down to the Temple at Shiloh. They have come to sacrifice.

The whole family comes. The father of the family is Elkanah. And he brings with him both of his wives Peninnah and Hannah. He has two because that is just how things are done in this world. And he also brings with him his sons and his daughters, all of whom are the children of his wife Peninnah because, it seems, Hannah cannot have children.

These, together with household servants and extended family make a very large company that goes down to Shiloh. And they bring with them the young ram that they have raised all year on their little farm. This animal has been part of their family ever since its birth. They have nurtured it, taken it out to graze and kept it safe from any predators.

Rambo

They have loved this animal. The children even gave him a name. Rambo they called him. But, at the same time, they have never forgotten that they raised this sheep for one purpose only: for this sacrifice.

It is a holy thing when this happens, when a living being gives its life so that a family can eat and be strong. That is why they do it so rarely – often no more than once a year. That's also why the animal must come to the temple. It is something to be done in a holy setting.

The Sacrifice

And so, they take the ram to the old priest, Eli, who inspects it and declares that it is healthy and fit for a sacrifice. The whole family approaches and lays their hands on the head of Rambo, giving thanks to God for this bounty and to the animal itself, as the priest draws the blade across its throat.

Later, after the priest has taken the animal and butchered it properly, the family gathers around the altar. Those parts that the family will not eat – the fat, the blood, a number of the organs and other bits – are burnt in the fire. That is how Yahweh, the God of Israel, joins the family in their feast. It creates a precious fellowship with God, making everything all the more holy.

Giving out the Portions

But then what happens? Elkanah, the patriarch of the family, is given the rest of the meat, all perfectly cut and arranged on a slab. And they take it and put it in one of the great cauldrons that are provided for the worshippers at Shiloh. They boil up the meat with various herbs and vegetables that they have brought with them to create a hearty stew.

Ah, but then comes that awkward moment. Elkanah, as patriarch, has the right to distribute the stew. After the priest has come to claim his portion as payment for safely slaughtering and butchering the meat, Elkanah takes the rest and carefully doles out the portions.



Into the bowl of his wife Peninnah, he carefully ladles one big scoop. Then he goes on down the line to his sons and his daughters and for each he measures out the same amount. Then he gives the same amount to each of the servants and workers and some extended family that have come along for the sacrifice.

Finally, he comes to Hannah. He smiles at her for a moment, but it is kind of a sad smile. There seems to be some pity in it. And then he takes out the big bowl, much larger than any of the others and places it before her. He fills it up with scoop after scoop of rich stew before finally filling up his own bowl in a similar serving.

An Emotional Table

Now, how do you feel sitting at that table? You smell the savoury broth and you long to dig in and scoop up the meat that you have been craving for months. You can hardly control yourself.

But hunger is not the only powerful feeling at the table, is it? You can practically feel the resentment seething from every person present as they cast baleful glances towards Hannah where she sits at her end of the table.

And Hannah, she is, if anything, more upset than anyone else. Large tears roll down her face as she stares at the stew before her as if it were poison. She knows she should eat it – that she needs the meat as much as anyone. It should make her stronger, healthier. Who knows, it might even make her fertile. But she doesn't feel as if she can stomach it.

How could she when she knows that it causes Peninnah, who could be like a sister to her, to hate her? How could she when she knows that it puts a distance between her and the children whom she could love and care for in other circumstances?

And worst of all is her husband sitting right beside her who, by the look on his face, thinks that he has done a wonderful thing. "Eat up, honey, he says as he shovels the food into his mouth. It's delicious!" She knows what he is going to say next because he says it all the time. It always makes her cringe.

"Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?"

A Dysfunctional Family

I know that the opening chapter of 1 Samuel is all about the birth of the Prophet Samuel and about how God brought it about and saved his mother Hannah from the shame and scorn of being an infertile woman. It is an amazing story full of hope and possibility.

But I don't think you can really appreciate the good news in that story without understanding just how messed up that opening scene really is. It shows us just how dysfunctional that particular family was. But it is also a reflection of how the human family often deals badly with the challenges and problems that come with life in this world.

Peninnah

I think that many of us, for example, are like Peninnah. She is a woman who is able to do the one thing that women were valued for in that society – she can have children. And she is valued for what she can produce.

There are many people just like that. In this society, where everything seems to be measured through productivity, there are many who seem to have decided that their entire self worth is measured by how much they earn or their place on the corporate ladder or their relative wealth.

But there are perils that come with such a way of thinking, aren't there? Peninnah may have fulfilled her purpose as seen in that society, but she doesn't seem particularly happy.

Indeed, we are told that she torments her husband's other wife, Hannah. She **"used to provoke her severely, to irritate her,"** it says, **"because the LORD had closed her womb."** Is that kind of aggression indicative of someone who has a happy, well-balanced life? Of course not.

Putting Others Down

And haven't we all met people like that – people who seem to have achieved success as this world defines success, but they love to rub other people's nose in it. Why? Because they are trying to make themselves feel good by putting somebody else down.

Here is a life tip for everybody. If you need to put somebody else down to feel good about yourself, there is something wrong. There is something deep inside that is making you feel inadequate.

And we know what is making Peninnah feel inadequate, what she produces may be valued, but she is not valued for who she is. She is not loved.

And how many people in the world today are caught up in that mad scramble to earn love through what they produce. And no matter what you do, no matter how good your work is, it will never be enough. Peninnah, sitting at that table, is symbolic of the flaws of a society that values productivity over everything else.

Hannah

But then there is Hannah at the table too, isn't there? And she hardly seems better off. She has the love. Her husband claims to be devoted to her. So, what is missing for her?

She lives in a society in which women are really only given one way to contribute. And she is not able to contribute in that way. And so, though she is loved, she has been robbed of a sense of being significant.

The two women in this story are miserable because some of their most essential needs are not being met – the need for love and the need for significance. And the really odd thing about that is that they each have the one thing that the other wants most.

Looking at What Others Have

It is so easy, isn't it, when you are struggling in yourself to look at something that somebody else has and to be jealous – to think that, if only you had what they have, your life would be okay. But the mere fact that neither of these women is okay puts a lie to that way of thinking.

The solution is rather to work on yourself – to aspire towards what is truly meaningful to you, to be sure. But it is also to recognize that the reason why you *feel* inadequate is not because you *are* inadequate but rather because the expectations that have been placed upon you are baloney. How much happier would both Peninnah and Hannah have been if they had just realized that.

Elkanah

And let us now turn to the third so-called adult at the table – Elkanah, the patriarch of the family. I've got to say that I am not particularly impressed with his efforts to improve anything about the whole situation. His favouritism to Hannah only sets her apart from everyone else who might give her support.

And when he says, **"Am I not more to you than ten sons?"** it makes *me* cringe so I'm sure it did Hannah too. He essentially dismisses her needs and self-centredly thinks that he can fulfill her on his own. That, let me tell you, never helps somebody who is struggling.

Dealing with the Real Issues

So what is wrong with Elkanah? Why is he such an abysmal failure at bringing peace and functionality to his family? It is because he does not deal with the real issues at the table. He does nothing to address Peninnah's bitterness and anger – apparently thinking that, if he ignores it, it will just go away.

And when he sees Hannah's deep sadness, he does not help her to address the unrealistic expectations that society have put upon her. He does not even bother to assure her that her worth and value are not dependent on meeting these expectations. All he does is essentially try to make her put on a smiley face by bribing her with extra portions of meat and professions of affection.

Healing the Malfunction

May I suggest that if you ever find yourself giving some leadership to a family or other group that is malfunctioning in any way, do not follow the example of Elkanah. Don't make it all about yourself. Don't just try to deal with the surface issues – with the appearance of things. Don't assume that serious issues will just go away if you don't talk about them. Dig in. Get to the heart of the matter and the real hurts and wounds that people are carrying.

I'm not saying that it will be easy. It might well feel much more uncomfortable before it starts to feel better. But it is worth the effort and the discomfort.

And so, we have three people feasting at Shiloh. None of them are happy; none of them are fulfilled. And I will bet that each one of us can find ways in which we, at some point in our lives, would have identified with at least one of them, if not all. They are a reflection of the dysfunction of this world and its ways.

Where is Hope?

And where, you should be asking me, where is the hope? The hope is found in getting past our habit of ignoring problems and hoping they'll go away, in a willingness to get to the heart of what is really dragging people down. It is found in honest communication. And it is found in God.

When Hannah goes to God and God finally gives her the thing that she desires: a son, it is not just the end of her infertility that heals her life. It is also her encounter with a God who hears her and is willing to overturn the entire system that had subjugated her. God saves her by turning the world upside down:

“The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn. The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up. The LORD makes poor and makes rich; he brings low; he also exalts. He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honour.”

And that is where the real hope is found. That is what we celebrate in the season that is to come.