

(Apologize for how this might come off to the ladies: women can be very cruel to one another!)

In most of my different work throughout my life, I've found that **women talk behind each other's backs, can play mean tricks on others, will pick fights, and try to out-do others with dress, makeup, actions** – especially when there are men around!

A caveat: this seems to **happen most with younger women**. Thankfully, **with age comes wisdom and self-confidence** that rises above any of this foolishness.

Examples: Our story today of Hannah, and even a story for modern time. (My story about sterilization, regret, baby shower with everyone pregnant but me, not being “a member of the club” and feeling left out).

I'm not sharing this piece of my personal history to get sympathy – I made that decision with a fair amount of counseling from my doctor and my pastor.

But, I won't lie to you and tell you that I lived comfortably with the decision my whole life – **I've had more than my share of deep, grief-filled moments when I realized I missed something that connects me not only with other mothers, but with the continuity of life and family** – especially when you are with a partner who holds your heart and you know you would have a loving family life.

So, I can truly identify with Hannah and her sense of being incomplete because **“God closed her womb” – her shame – her embarrassment – her grief - at being barren**.

She's married to a man named Elkanah who loves her, and who is also a little clumsy at trying to make things better for her. He **gives her more food** (does he want her to be fat??? Does he think that will make her happy??)

He even **hints that her feelings about being childless aren't that important** when it comes to real love (“...aren't I enough for you to love?”). This is definitely a “Mars/Venus” moment – as dear as he might be, **he doesn't get it**, and she's not buying into it.

In Hannah's time, **the primary role – the central identity – of any woman was to bear children and continue the family name and lineage**.

Since she shared other wifely responsibilities with another woman, **her status in the household was greatly reduced** because she couldn't hold up her end of the marital bargain. So, not only did Hannah **suffer her own, deep grief** at being without children, but we hear that she also **suffered cruelty** at the hands of her sister-wife...and **her shame ran deep**. She cried deeply – **her heart was broken because she knew she wasn't complete as a woman and a wife**.

We don't have many details about Hannah's personality, so **we don't really know how she handled this relationship with Peninnah**. We do get a sense that she may have **kept in the background** at these functions where the whole family was required to be in attendance. She recognized her place, and I'm sure her feelings were hurt, **but it doesn't seem that she was vindictive toward Peninnah**.

We do know that **at some point, she felt enough frustration and pain** that she went to the one place where she found peace – instinctively, **Hannah knew where to go and who could make her feel better**. She went to God's House to pray.

In the Jewish tradition, women and prayer are tightly woven together. Hannah is considered the role model for how a woman should pray in Jewish households. **Prayer is the spiritual method in which they connect to God**.

In an article called **"The Jewish Woman's Path to Spirituality"** by **Tziporah Heller**, we find that

***"...the Talmud tells us that because God loves the prayers of the righteous, the matriarchs were created barren so that they would have to pray for children...Hannah's prayers, as narrated in the first chapters of the book of Samuel, contain within them the very core of Jewish prayer structure.***

***1. She prayed silently. The central prayer of every Jewish prayer service, the standing prayer known as the Amidah, is thus recited under ones breath. Although our lips move, no sounds are heard. This signifies the reality that God hears our thoughts and does not need them verbalized. The need to use speech in prayer at all is related to the fact that we are affected by the sound of our words, and they help delineate our thoughts for us. Speech also makes the interaction all the more real to us. Hence our prayers are verbal, but in deference to Hannah's insights into prayers true nature, they are silent.***

***2. The text explicitly makes note of Hannah's prayer as being an outpouring of her heart. It is all too easy for prayer to be said by rote, with the focus on completing the service rather than its genuine essence. Hannah taught us that prayer must be a connection between oneself and God. This means prayer must be more than just saying the words; you have to mean it.***

Today, **Jewish women still pray at least once a day...a prayer of their own design that includes praise for God, a request and thanks to God.** Psalms tend to be the Scripture chosen for these silent prayers; a woman who is called to tend to a child, or answer the phone or listen to a friend can more easily return to her place in a Psalm. It's a worthy practice...

Once Hannah found herself in the temple (and in the presence of Eli, who watched her from afar), **she released all her deep feelings with sobs and groans** – grief from years of **feeling left out, of feeling angry** at her life situation, and **of trying to live in a household with a mean-spirited sister-wife** come out of her very soul.

Sitting in the synagogue on an off-day, **Hannah begins to pray...silently, intensely, buried in her own thoughts.** This is a **private, heart-to-heart conversation that only a woman who truly believes the other party is listening can pray...she holds nothing in, and she even does something that most people wouldn't dare to try with Yahweh...she makes him a deal!**

□ ***“Oh, God-of-the-Angel-Armies, if you'll take a good, hard look at my pain, if you'll quit neglecting me and go into action for me, by giving me a son, I'll give him completely, unreservedly to you. I'll set him apart for a life of holy discipline.”***

Now **Eli, a priest of the old regime of Israel** (who's trying to hold it all together with the people under the careless work of the Judges in the time before the Kings come to straighten it all out,) watches her with great curiosity – **he sees her lips move but doesn't hear anything and he assumes she's drunk.**

You have to wonder **why he's jumped to such a conclusion** – doesn't he know the family? What would make him think such a thing? Maybe he thinks she's like so many of the Jews in this time – remember, **this takes place during the time of more casual beliefs in the Jewish history.** Anything goes with inter-marriages, with behavior and carousing, with how they see their relationship with any god. **Eli's own sons, who are also priests, have been acting out of their covenant with God (described in earlier verses in Judges) – he's had enough of these Jews who don't revere God.**

**So Eli scolds her – “Sober up! Stop this drinking!”**

And **Hannah stands firm** – she knows she’s in the right place for the right reason, and **she doesn’t back down** or **crumble** under his authority. “No, Sir! I’ve come to God to share my heartache – I’m not drunk. I’ve had a hard life, and I needed to tell God about it.”

It’s to Eli’s credit that **he recognizes her devotion and simple trust** that God will intervene for her. **He blesses her and sends her on her way with a smile.**

Hannah begins to eat and live normally with her family and husband, and soon, **she’s pregnant with a son who will be Samuel, whose name means “God has heard”**...God answers Hannah’s prayer and she follows through with her promise in a big way. **Samuel becomes a key to the beginning of the “redeemed Israel.”** He later will **sit at the foot of Eli and become the prophet who anoints Saul** as the first King of Israel.

This is a major turning point in the history of the Jews and of Christians as well.

According to a commentary by Ted A. Smith, a professor of ethics and society from Vanderbilt Divinity School in Nashville,

***“Samuel represents a new thing that God is doing. Samuel's birth is clearly a work of God, a fresh kindling of the spark of Hannah's faithfulness. God has remembered the covenant, just as Hannah prayed, but not simply reestablished the old religious and political orders. Samuel will go on to play the decisive role in legitimating the new order that will culminate in David's kingship...That Samuel bridges the two eras is crucial. Samuel is the earthly mediator of whatever legitimacy the monarchy has. He provides both continuity with the past and connection to the will of God. He has the authority to anoint Saul king of Israel...”***

Hannah begat Samuel – Samuel chose Saul, Saul begat David....and at the other end of this lineage comes Jesus. This is big.

**And it happened all because Hannah prayed to her God out of trust and absolute belief that God was listening.** In the middle of the chaos of Israel at that time, and the chaos of her family life, **she knew that God could fill her bountiful heart,** and her prayers were answered.

Hannah’s action is a **model for all of us** and for what we hope to do in our time with our faith...**a simple belief and trust that God is at the center of everything** is a good place to start. And **dialog with God** – private, heart-felt, honest – **can bring us to our own crossroads of faith.**

Who knows how God will answer those sincere prayers?

I told you at the start of this message that I identified with Hannah and the sadness she felt with being barren. I can also tell you **that I absolutely believe as she did, in the power of putting your life into God's Way, and trusting that God will deliver what you need when God's ready to share it with you.**

**God has walked with me through many situations and challenges to bring me to this place and time.**

A year ago, I found myself praying to God for direction and strength as we made some serious changes in our leadership – **we had our own form of chaos**, and as your moderator, I felt the weight of the unhappiness and discontent of the people in our church. **But I knew God was still with us, and those prayers for our church, plus my own prayers requesting to serve God somehow have been answered.** Can you believe what's happened in one short year?

So here's our lesson for today...

We need to be like Hannah – **we need to love God, to trust God and to ask God to hear us, because when God responds, anything can happen.**

We know this is true, because like Hannah, **we can speak from experience.** God has answered and continues to answer our prayers...

How amazing and awesome is that?

Amen.