

Edina Morningside Community Church  
United Church of Christ  
Rev. Howard K. Bell  
November 15, 2015  
*Remember Me*

During our interim ministry time together, and particularly in the last few weeks, I have focused much of my preaching on the financial challenges that we have faced this year and may face in the future. I have felt called to assure that everyone was made aware of the importance of the pledges for 2016 that we have just today brought forward and dedicated. Last week I suggested that this faith community is facing a life-threatening situation and I described some of the concerns and challenges that we face. However, I was ready this week to move on from doom and gloom. I was done with it. Then what scripture text does the lectionary give me for this week? Hannah's barrenness! However, when one engages the text, there is always more to be groomed. Hannah's barrenness calls her forward to deepen her personal relationship with God, calls her forward to ask that God might remember her, calls her forward to express her faithfulness to God, calls her forward to conceive a son and to devote her whole self to her faith community – the Hebrew people – by giving up her son for service to God through the temple. So, I guess the image of barrenness can lead us to fertility and fruitfulness.

I pray that I have not been neglectful in my praise and thanksgiving for all the gifts of time, talent and resources that all of you have contributed in the past – including this year, this month, this week, this day. This faith community has been blessed by so many gifts throughout its history. Thank you for all the sacrifices that many of you have made to assure the vitality of this community. Thank you for who you are and for all that you give to support God's mission through this church. This is a day to express gratitude for the rich history of this church. For all who have served here as pastors; for all who have served in lay leadership; for all who have inspired us with music and singing; for all who have taught our children stories of faith; for all who have guided our youth; for all who have offered care and support to one another; and to all who have invested time, talent and resources to serve those in need. Thanks be to God for these gifts.

Hannah asked, in her prayer, that God "Remember Her" (I Samuel 1:11). The text says that God not only fulfilled that request, but also "opened her womb" so that she might bear a male child as she requested. Hannah has indeed been remembered throughout the history of the Hebrew people as the mother of Samuel. Let us now "Remember Her" (I Samuel 1:11) today as we engage more fully in Hannah's story as a story of deep and abiding faith in God. In the first couple of verses of today's text we learn that Hannah is facing very difficult circumstances in her life. First of all, she is barren. She also experienced several challenging relationships. The first is with her husband, Elkanah. The text tells us that Elkanah did love Hannah even offering her double portions on the day of sacrifice, despite her being barren. Commentators are not in agreement about how we should interpret these comments from Elkanah: "*Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?*" (I Samuel 1:8)

Commentator, Kate Matthew's Huey says. *"Elkanah's profession of love for Hannah just for her own self sounds remarkably modern, and is perhaps a glimpse of what marriage is, at its best, in any culture or time. Or could it be, as several writers observe, that his response to Hannah's suffering exhibits insensitivity, or worse, self-absorption? ... in any case Elkanah's self-esteem is in great shape, if he thinks he's worth more than ten sons to his wife."*<sup>1</sup> Clearly, Hannah does not take much comfort from these words since she proceeds to the temple *"deeply distressed...and wept bitterly"* (I Samuel 1:10).

Another of her troubling relationships is with Penninah. Penninah is also a wife to Elkanah and is highly fertile offering many sons and daughters to Elkanah. However, since Elkanah continues to profess greater love for Hannah, Penninah expresses her jealousy by provocation and irritation, throwing Hannah's barrenness into her face at every opportunity. In particular, the text tells us: *"So it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of Yahweh, she used to provoke her."* (I Samuel 1:7)

The third challenging relationship for Hannah comes from the religious leader, Eli. Eli is overseeing the temple. He misinterprets Hannah's state of great distress as a sign of drunkenness. Eli said to Hannah: *"How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine."* (I Samuel 1:14) Some interpreters believe that Eli was prejudiced against Hannah because she did not come directly to Eli with her request that God allow her to have a male son. Hannah passed him by at the entrance to the temple and made her plea directly to God. Finally, after convincing Eli that she was speaking out of great anxiety and vexation rather than drunkenness, Eli declared that the God of Israel had granted her petition.

The petition that Eli says God has granted is in response to this prayer from Hannah: *"O God of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death."* (I Samuel 1:11) In Hebrew the word nazir, means "consecrated one", therefore a nazirite was a person who was "set apart" for the service of the Lord.

Today's text concludes with these words, *"Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and God remembered her. In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, 'I have asked him of Yahweh.'"* (I Samuel 1: 19b- 20) In chapter 2 of I Samuel we learn that Hannah made good on her promise to God. After weaning Samuel, she left him at the temple.

The part of Hannah's prayer that resonated most deeply with me, are the words, "Remember Me" (I Samuel 1:11). Hannah did not ask for recognition. She did not ask for power or a leadership role. Ultimately, she did not even ask that she be allowed to participate in the nurture, growth and development into adulthood of the male child that God provided her. Most important in Hannah's life was for her to be in relationship with her God. She prayed that God might remember her. By remembering her, God

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.ucc.org/worship\\_samuel\\_sermon\\_seeds\\_november\\_15\\_2015](http://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_november_15_2015)

acknowledged God's relationship with Hannah. God had faith in Hannah to bear a leader of the Hebrew people. God had faith that Hannah would allow her son to be used, completely, in service to God.

What lessons can we discern from this story of Hannah for our faith community today? First of all Hannah, was the person in this text who was most faithful. Even though she was barren; even though her husband may have been self-absorbed or at least insensitive to her emotional needs; even though she was emotionally abused by Penninah; even though she was prejudged as a drunk by Eli; she did not lose sight of her relationship to God. Let us not lose sight of our God's role with us in this faith community. Hannah believed that God could perform a miracle and give her a male child. Let us look for the miracles that God might perform here on Morningside Rd.

Commentator, Marcia Mount Shoop, offers this interpretation of today's text: *"This story is... a story about being spiritually awake. Strength and influence spring from this intense awareness of God's unique power and sovereignty. It is Hannah's humility and honesty that seem to get her somewhere, not her station in life... Her connection to God transforms her even before she conceives."*<sup>2</sup>

These characteristics of Hannah that Shoop identifies, may also be characteristics that we need as we move into our uncertain future. May we face any concern we have over our being barren. May we overcome the challenges we face. May we also seek most to be in relationship with God. May we be spiritually awake. May we give over the life of this community to the unique power and sovereignty of God. May we be honest and humble in our seeking to fulfill God's mission and not our own. Therefore, may this faith community move into our future committed to be faithful to God. May we desire most of all to be in relationship with God in all that we are and do. May we, as a faith community, pray these words to God, "Remember Me." May God's faith in us guide us into our future. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ).