

Lauren Baske Davis
June 6, 2021
First UCC Northfield
Sermon Series Week 2: “I’ve Been Meaning to Ask...Where Does It Hurt?”
1 Samuel 1:1-18

Content note: involves themes of loss and infertility

Scripture

There was a certain man of Ramathaim, a Zuphite from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah son of Jeroham son of Elihu son of Tohu son of Zuph, an Ephraimite. ² He had two wives; the name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children. ³ Now this man used to go up year by year from his town to worship and to sacrifice to the Lord of hosts at Shiloh, where the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests of the Lord. ⁴ On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; ⁵ but to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the Lord had closed her womb. ⁶ Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the Lord had closed her womb. ⁷ So it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of the Lord, she used to provoke her. Therefore, Hannah wept and would not eat. ⁸ Her husband Elkanah said to her, “Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?” ⁹ After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose and presented herself before the Lord. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the Lord. ¹⁰ She was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord, and wept bitterly. ¹¹ She made this vow: “O Lord 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. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head.” ¹² As she continued praying before the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. ¹³ Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk. ¹⁴ So Eli said to her, “How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine.” ¹⁵ But Hannah answered, “No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord. ¹⁶ Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time.” ¹⁷ Then Eli answered, “Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him.” ¹⁸ And she said, “Let your servant find favor in your sight.” Then the woman went to her quarters, ate and drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer.

Sermon

Where does it hurt? That is our theme for this week in our sermon series, “I’ve Been Meaning to Ask.” We’ve been doing this sermon series as we consider all that’s happened over the past year and more. We’re in transition as a church. There is division in our nation, continued racism, a climate crisis, and a pandemic that is still going even as good things—like vaccines, and options for where to worship in person—are happening too.

We’re doing this series because there’s so much to process between what we’ve experienced as a larger society in addition to what’s been going on in our more immediate lives.

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We may be running into each other again for the first time in a long time face to face. And we may be finding ourselves saying, “hey, by the way, I’ve been meaning to ask...” This sermon series imagines the questions we might ask if we want to have bold, honest and meaningful conversations. Last week, Pastor Wendy touched on “Where are you from?” The idea being that we are from many more places and contexts than we might initially imagine. Today, the question is, “where does it hurt?”

At one point in our lives, before Jon and I were considering having children ourselves, we knew 7 different couples who were experiencing infertility. 7 couples, 14 people in our lives who were experiencing infertility all at the same time. They mostly didn’t know one another; they were dear friends from college, work, music, seminary, etc.

I can tell you that I wouldn’t wish the pain that I saw in friends’ eyes—the suffering that exuded from their voices and body language—on anyone. It was often an invisible sort of pain. It was a horrible, lonely emptiness when all they hoped for was the joy of a child.

For some of the couples, it changed relationships—their own—and their relationships with others. It was an incredible amount of stress and grief, even in this time where families can be created in so many ways. For them, it was cycles of waiting, hoping, and loss, waiting, hoping, and loss, multiple rounds of it, whether it was IVF (in-vitro), a special medical procedure, or a foster or adoption falling through. That time shaped our perspectives. It made us sensitive to how people talked about how families were made, chosen, and defined. These friends lived with heartache, loss of expectation, wondering if a family would ever happen, while also experiencing the horrible hormone swings from the fertility drugs; monthly hope then terrible disappointment. Some wept privately at the sight of drooling and babbling babies. But more than anything, they felt the hiddenness, of the world not seeing their pain.

Our friends were hurting – in a way that our culture didn’t talk about very much. Through the wonders of medical interventions or adoption, families were created eventually for all of those friends over the next few years. There was still joy to be had. They all created families, though not the way some had originally imagined.

Hannah knew that kind of hidden pain. Hannah’s story in the scripture today, is in part, a story of waiting, hope, and loss. In an honor/shame society, Hannah had no children. “In a patriarchal society, where a woman’s worth is linked to her ability to have children, Hannah is particularly vulnerable. Though her husband loves her, she has no security for herself once he dies. ...She is scorned and belittled by her husband’s other wife and likely by the society at large.”¹ In a time in which reproduction and expanding the family was everything, the ostracizing, blaming, and shaming by others in worsened what was already painful.

Hannah was so heartsick, so sad that she couldn’t stop crying and she couldn’t eat. Have you ever felt that way? But then one day, Hannah wakes up and goes to the temple to pray. It’s almost as if Hannah had a sense that God was asking, “Where does it hurt?” So Hannah prays to

¹ Kathryn Schifferdecker, Commentary on Workingpreacher.org, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-33-2/commentary-on-1-samuel-14-20-4> accessed 2 June 2021.

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God with overwhelming sadness, telling God where it hurts. She prays so directly, so fervently that her lips move but she makes no sound, and the temple priest, Eli, ignorantly mistakes her for being drunk.

I could be wrong, but maybe Eli wasn't accustomed to the raw grief she was exposing in the temple. But then again, neither are most of us. We are pretty good at hiding our hurt. Maybe we're afraid that we're the only ones who are hurting. Or we're afraid that in sharing our hurt some power will be taken away and we'll be dismissed or ostracized. In fact, though, it is *in* the sharing in a brave and safe space that there is real power. Where does it hurt? Where does it hurt for you? The truth is, everyone is dealing with something deeply personal and hard. Everyone. The situations aren't the same, the people aren't the same, but everyone I know is living or has lived with something tough.

Hannah's story, though, isn't just about her pain. It's also about doing something with it. It's about hearing God tender voice asking, "Where does it hurt?" and answering honestly.

Yesterday, the Northfield Library organized a first ever Pride in the Park event, celebrating the beautifully diverse community that is made up of LGBTQIA+ non-binary, gender-fluid folk. It was a gorgeous, vibrant event.

But Pride's origins were also a result of the Stonewall movement, spurred by police violence. Pride's roots are celebratory today, but they are rooted in protest, in the gay liberation movement. Pride is rooted in saying out loud what hurts, and not standing for it. There's no question that the church as a whole has perpetuated a lot of pain over the years. It was important for churches to be there as a way of acknowledging the pain that churches have inflicted upon LGBTQIA+ people.

Mandy Everhart and Amanda Pettis Eastvold stood at our First UCC Pride in the Park table, welcoming people, and offering apologies—an idea one of them borrowed. Our sign was this:



(it reads, "Our church is sorry for all the hateful things done in the name of God.")

You see, we weren't explicitly asking, "where does it hurt," we were acknowledging that the pain exists and has roots in the church. We were opening a small door to say, "oh I am so sorry." We offered pocket apologies in addition to our sign. They read: "**We know that the Church has hurt many people. On behalf of the churches who have hurt you, we are so sorry. You are a beloved child of God. You deserve so much better. We respect and accept you lovingly, exactly as you are. We are here if you need us.**" ~First UCC Northfield."

What if we could be as honest as we are in community about our own lives? What if we, like Hannah, could share our hurts with God and with each other as freely? I have told some of you that I wish we could all wear not just name tags or Zoom names, but pain tags too. Naming where it hurts for us. So that as a community, we could get to see that everyone else is carrying

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something heavy and painful. Everyone. Maybe not now, maybe not later, but we all have painful things in our lives that shape us, that are difficult to speak about aloud. It would be a way of saying... "oh honey. you too? Where does it hurt? It's painful, isn't it. I'm here with you."

Hannah's story reminds us that God asks us, tenderly cares, and listens. When Hannah left the temple after praying, she went home. And all we know from our scripture today, is that something has shifted. At the very end, it says, Hannah ate and drank. Where before she was so inconsolable that she couldn't eat and drink, Hannah goes home and eats and drinks. That's how healing happens so often, I think, in little incremental bits, that when put together over a long time, become a process of moving through the pain.

My friends, where does it hurt? There is so much pain and change we have experienced together, in addition to pain and suffering we have experienced from unique situations in our lives. We experienced two pastors departing, and just after that, went into a global pandemic. There is political division. There are vaccines, and there is also social-emotional, spiritual trauma that we have experienced to varying degrees from the pandemic. We may be in different places. But we all know pain. It doesn't spare any of us.

The good news is that that's true of healing too. We may be instruments of healing to one another. We've got to name the pain to begin to move through it. Where does it hurt? Maybe you will think about that this week. Maybe you will journal about it. Maybe you will call a friend at church or elsewhere as you say, "I've been meaning to ask...where does it hurt?" or "I've been meaning to say, I need to share where I hurt." We are living in a spectacular moment of potential right now—how can we help one another heal, trusting in a God who cares and will respond? Ask yourself or someone else this week, "where does it hurt?" Or share with someone you trust about where you hurt. We may be surprised at how naming it, how in the feeling through it, we are able to work through it. May we find that the tender love of God is there too. Amen.