

“I’ve Been Meaning to Ask: Where Does it Hurt?”

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1 Samuel 1:1-18

Mark 5:21-43

When we hear Hannah’s story, we see several characters and their role in the pain Hannah feels. First, there is Hannah herself, and the pain she feels when her body cannot produce a child. Besides the possible longing for the personal fulfillment of experiencing motherhood, having a child— and preferably, a son— was a cultural expectation of women, and not only that, it marked a religious fulfillment of a covenant with God, that the people of Israel would “be fruitful and multiply.”

So Hannah felt pain from the limitations of her own body. But Penninah, the wife with whom she shared a husband— Elkanah— took Hannah’s pain, and amplified it, by provoking Hannah severely, irritating her, and acting as a rival. And we don’t know how much Penninah did this purposefully. I have had friends who have struggled with infertility and pregnancy loss, and everything from Instagram posts of friends playing with their babies, to getting invited to baby showers can be irritating. My friend Erin, who had gone through several miscarriages, even got mad about the baby bunnies she saw in the spring. She said they were mocking her.

Elkanah— the husband to both Hannah, and Penninah, may have seen Hannah’s pain. But his response was to feed her. Each time he sacrificed at the temple, he gave Hannah a double portion of what he gave to Penninah and his sons and daughters. But his pity didn’t fulfill Hannah’s need; food can’t fill an empty womb— and if Penninah was in fact taunting Hannah, this special attention from their husband probably fanned that rivalry.

Even when Hannah presented her pain before God, with fervent prayer— her lips moving but making no sound— the priest, Eli, dismissed her. Rather than recognizing someone bearing their pain before God, or listening to find out what was going on with her, he assumed she was drunk, and shamed her.

But Hannah stood up to him. She told him she was not drunk; she was pouring her soul out to the Lord. She spoke of her anxiety and troubles. And, she stood up to the priest, telling him *not* to dismiss her, and *not* to treat her as worthless.

I see this as a pivotal moment for Hannah. She knew she had worth— regardless of her status as childless, and as a woman. Regardless of her pain. I wonder if that is the moment when her prayers finally broke through, and God saw that a woman who could speak up in the face of someone much more powerful than her would be a good one to parent Samuel, who would become prophet to kings of Israel— and who would need to speak hard truths to them when they

failed to listen. God had plans for Samuel, just as God has plans for baby Cade and his big sister.

Who among us, in our relationships, finds yourself like Penninah? Are we ever the people—intentionally or not— who are the cause of someone else’s pain? Even those of us who have the best intentions can sometimes be in that position. Whether it’s as simple and thoughtless as making an offensive remark without thinking through our words first, or fanning flames of a family feud that leads to years of estrangement, it is possible that we are sometimes the ones that others pray to God for deliverance from. That is a humbling thought, and a good reason that when we make our prayers of confession before God and one another, that we try to think of our actions might be seen through another person’s experience. Certainly there are also times when our actions can cause someone else’s pain, not because we did anything *wrong*, but because the other person is carrying with them something that actually is not from us, but still gets activated by us. It’s a lifelong journey for me to listen, and try to find clarity on what belongs to me, and what does not belong to me.

Sometimes we are like Elkanah. Our care for people in pain is to try to distract them so that they don’t see or feel their pain. Elkanah supplied Hannah with double amounts of food. Now, I’m not saying that our Deacons bringing a meal to people who are going through hard times isn’t good care. Jesus showed us, after all, the sacred power of a meal, time and again. But when we tiptoe around someone else’s pain, offering something to soothe without offering a listening ear, we miss a real opportunity at connection, and even healing. Henri Nouwen said, “When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives means the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand.” One thing I have learned in ministry is that asking someone who has lost a spouse or a loved one about how their grief is doing— months or years after the funeral— is often a relief for them to have the chance to talk about what they are feeling, what they are missing. So often, well-meaning people don’t bring the loss up, because they don’t want to make the other person sad. But the truth is, a grieving person never has their mind far from their loss, so giving them a chance to talk about what hurts can actually offer a valve to release a little bit of their pain, if you are willing to help hold it for them, and help normalize what they are feeling.

Another thing that we may do is mistake someone’s pain for something else. Elkanah saw Hannah weeping and praying in the temple. But instead of noticing her pain, he came up with the story that she was drunk, and he shamed her. Even if she *was* drunk in the temple, that would also likely be a story of pain that should be listened to— what would drive a person to show up in a house of prayer like that? We do not always want to know, so we do not always ask.

Our reasons for not coming too close to someone else’s pain do not all come from not wanting to add more abrasion to it. Sometimes, we fear that someone else’s pain may rub off onto us, and so we keep our distance. This is a fair concern, and I do believe we need to make healthy boundaries for ourselves, mindful of what we can and can’t give. There was one person in a

place where I used to live, who always asked for much more than what I am physically, emotionally, or mentally able to give. I used to avoid that person at all costs. But something I figured out is that I could think of one thing I could give that person, and give it generously—without resenting the person who wanted more, or feeling guilty that I could not give more.

Even Jesus felt the transference of someone else's pain. When the woman with the flow of blood rubbed up against only the hem of Jesus' garment, he felt the power go out of him. But he did one thing he could do. He listened to her. And so, he saw the woman's tremendous faith. He welled with compassion for how her gynecological disease has ostracized her from society. Perhaps, if he knew that one day blood would flow out of him, too, he felt some empathy, too. Maybe listening to her not only restored his power, but increased it by the power of her faith and her courage in reaching— for after that, he was able to go to the daughter of Jairus, another hurting person, and raise her from the dead.

In this sermon I have explored a lot about how we meet other people's pain. It's sometimes easier to look at others' pain than to examine our own. But I've been meaning to ask, what about your own pain? Where does it hurt for you? Are you guarding and hiding it? Are you looking to other substances or distractions to cover it up? Has someone shamed you for how you feel?

I've been meaning to tell you how courageous you are, for coming to church. For presenting your pain before God— you do know, right, that whether you intentionally present it or not, God already knows your pain? You can't hide it. That's a start to something transformative. Now, I'm not a slick preacher who will promise you that God will wash away all pain, bring your loved ones back to you, or heal you from your diseases. *I can't promise that.* But I can promise that the body of Christ is here with you, in the formation of the church. These people can surround you and listen and touch you if you are willing and yes, even bring you a casserole. There is healing power in that presence. There is Jesus Christ in that presence.

Not only that. Jesus gave us a Source that will always be with us. The waters of baptism, which flowed over Cade's tiny head, flow for you too— not just in the one-time moment of baptism, but for your whole lives. They promise to move you from death, to life. They do that by cleansing from sin and shame. They do that by adding buoyancy so that your pain will not sink you. They promise to carry you from the place you were, to the place God is calling you to be. They offer the possibility of new birth. Remember your baptism, and how much that claims you as a beloved child of God.

I've been meaning to tell you: you are not alone. You are never alone.