

1 Samuel 1:1-18 ~ Mark 5:21, 24-34

"I've Been Meaning to Ask... where does it hurt?"

2nd of 4-part Series: "I've Been Meaning to Ask... a series for curiosity, courage, & connection"ⁱ

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Introduction to Scripture Lesson Mark 5: 21, 24-34

Hannah did not give up. Nor did she give in—after years of being ignored and sidelined. In her day, if you were a woman who could not bear children, you were not considered a whole person. You were definitely seen as “less than,” a drag and a burden on the economy of a household: someone to be used and even abused. Yet, *somehow*, Hannah refused to believe this was the whole truth about her and her life. Instead, Hannah took her cue not from the people around her, but from God, who told her that she *did* matter. That her hurt and pain were *not* her whole story. She chose not to let her malady define her. Even after *years* of being shamed and bullied. Her rival wife, Peninnah, mother of many sons and daughters, (whose very name meant “fertile” or “prolific), provoked Hannah and mocked her. Surely this was a house full of drama. No one was happy in that family.

But we just saw how Hannah went for broke that day at Shiloh. She laid it all out to God in prayer. And even then, was mocked by the priest, Eli for her style of praying. Even then, she did not back down, nor did she give in, with a, “never mind” or “whatever.” Hannah knew better about herself than anyone around her and chose otherwise: She told Eli *her* whole truth.

The story you are about to hear from the Gospel of Mark, tells the story of another woman who was hurting, about twelve centuries later, when Jesus’ earthly ministry was just gearing up. Somehow this woman who had heard about Jesus. This woman who had been hurting and isolated for twelve long years. She is not named, we know her only as, “the hemorrhaging woman.” Her suffering literally stemmed from bleeding that would not stop. No Band-Aid could help this bleed: and although her hurt was physical, it was also emotional and spiritual.

Like Hannah, but even more so, she was stigmatized because of her condition. Unlike Hannah, she had no Elkanah, she was alone. Nor did she have four friends to bring her on a stretcher through the roof to Jesus. She appears to have no family, no friends. Whomever she once had, are all gone. Yet she pushes through crowd bravely, hoping not to be seen by anyone. Being seen has only made things worse for her so far. This destitute, hurting hemorrhaging woman enters our gospel story drained of blood, of money, of community. And yet, there was one thing she still had. What was it?

Sermon

1 – 10, what is your level of pain? I'm guessing many of us in this room have been asked that question. More than once. It is essential information for those who are seeking to help you manage your pain. Having been with my husband Bob at the hospital for his right hip replacement surgery ten days ago, I heard that question almost every time one of his wonderful nurses came into his room. Uncontrolled pain hinders our body's healing process. And thank God, these days we have a host of pain medications that can provide relief.

The question, "where does it hurt?" is different. Its primary goal is not to manage or solve the problem of the pain. It opens the door to something deeper. And it requires no medical training or pills from bottles that are hard to open. You may recall that last Sunday we began this four-week series, "I've Been Meaning to ask..." by focusing on curiosity (we spoke of cats, of Curious George, and of Alice in Wonderland) on our way to considering the power of *asking unassuming questions*. That's right: questions where we refuse to assume things about another person and we prepare have our assumptions about another person or group of people be disrupted.

Last week our question was "where are you from?" and we were challenged to cast aside assumptions (conscious or unconscious bias) in order to let that 4-word question, open up new ways of connecting to and understanding another God-formed, God-breathed person, another God-formed, God-breathed culture, other than our own. Today, we have a second question: where does it hurt? Perhaps this is a question you have been meaning to ask someone, but were afraid to. Or just didn't want to. The answer can be hard to hear. Or very long. And chances are, we cannot fix it, anyway. If we can't solve the hurt, why ask?

Most of us approach a hurting person, especially one we love, the way Elkanah approached his troubled wife, Hannah. You can see that Elkanah was a kind and well-intentioned man. We are told that he loves Hannah and *tried* to treat her with care. He pleads with her to eat and not be sad. He tries to "cheer her up" suggesting that surely *his* love for her should be enough: "isn't that worth more than ten sons?" Sweet, yes. But *not* helpful in that moment of crisis. I love how even in this ancient story, we see the very same mistake that we often make today: Rather than inviting Hannah to talk about her pain and simply listen with attention and presence; instead of trying to make her feel seen and heard, he is trying to talk her out of it, discounting her pain, "it's not that bad, Hannah. Look on the bright side, you have me!"

Somehow Hannah has learned to believe that the God of Israel cares for people like her: people who are hurting and without status. Hannah's song in the next chapter, rings out with this truth, "The Lord raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap." (1 Samuel 2:8) We hear Mary, sing this same theme as she sings to Elizabeth of what the baby Jesus in her womb, will do, "he has lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things." (Luke 2:46-55)

Before we leave this story, I want to be clear that although Hannah and Elkanah were granted the miracle of their son, Samuel, this was not what made Hannah whole. Hannah is a whole woman just as she was before she had a son. Her pain was rooted in not being seen. Hannah's countenance changed at the moment her pain was acknowledged and blessed. At the point where Eli finally bears witness to her suffering—that is what transforms her experience. Hannah's healing was in being seen and heard, not in getting pregnant. In the work of soul healing and soul recovery, the physical outcome is secondary.

Where does it hurt? This question pulls us right into the heart of another individual's pain. In both of our Bible stories, we see two very different women advocate for themselves until they are seen and heard by the One who is our Advocate. They both had great faith in the midst of their pain and struggles: faith that God heard and God saw them fully and lovingly just as they were. From their faith they found courage to speak their truth.

God draws close to us in every moment of suffering. Not only as individuals, but as a society, and as a world, Jesus bears and bore the pain of all creation. Therefore, as Christ followers and as our church body, FPC, we must also ask this larger question: Where does the *world* hurt? The brokenness of our *world* is not the whole story, either. Jesus came to save this world from its brokenness. And is calling us to take up this essential work, as Christ's body. Did you know that the word salvation comes from "salvus" which means to heal? Healing justice is at the heart of our church, because it is in the very heart of God. So, where does the world hurt?

- There have already been 225 mass shootings in the U.S. in 2021 so far (each killing four or more people), according to the nonpartisan Gun Violence Archive. And Jesus wept.
- I was surprised to read this week that there are more actual slaves today than ever before in human history. Humans being forced to work against their will. Slavery is not over. And Jesus wept.
- In December 2020, more than 80 million people were forcibly displaced from their homes around the world. That number has doubled in the past ten years, as fewer could go home and more were uprooted.ⁱⁱ And Jesus wept.
- 2.65 million children right now are being raised by grandparents without their parents present, who were victims of the opioid epidemic. "Grandfamilies" hurting physically and emotionally from the grief and loss of their parents *and* suffering economically from the extra financial burden placed upon them. And Jesus wept.

We must also "where does it *still* hurt" –historical pain that still inflects and infects our nation today. I will give just two examples that still bleed, largely unacknowledged:

- The 100th anniversary of the Tulsa Race Massacre just passed. On May 31 – June, 1921 1921 mobs of white residents killed hundreds of prosperous Black citizens in the Greenwood neighborhood, the wealthiest Black neighborhood in the nation. I was never taught about this racial violence for which no one was ever punished. Were you? Neither the victims nor the perpetrators were seen or heard. And Jesus wept.

- From 1830 – 1840, at least 16,000 Native Americans who had occupied and cultivated the land of what is now the Southeastern United States were displaced by our government, marched forcibly over 1200 miles of rugged land, over 5,000 of them died in this unimaginable deep hurt against our indigenous neighbors, known as the Trail of Tears. And Jesus wept.

This question, “Where does it hurt?” Brings us to the core of our mission as a Presbyterian church body. Here is how we articulate the Mission of the Church:

“In Christ, the triune God tends the least among us, suffers the curse of human sinfulness, raises up a new humanity, and promises a new future for all creation. In Christ, Church members share with all humanity the realities of creatureliness, sinfulness, brokenness, and suffering, as well as the future toward which God is drawing them. The mission of God pertains not only to the Church but also to people everywhere and to all creation.” (F-1.0404)

In closing: Let’s bring it back to all who are listening to this sermon. If you are suffering silently right now, reach out to me, or to one of our deacons or elders. We can sit with you, and let you know that we see you and you are not alone. Let’s also think about the people we know and love who are not listening to this sermon: I bet there is someone in your life you’ve been meaning to ask, “Where does it hurt?” Take this invitation, this challenge to do that today, or sometime this week. Ask that person, then listen, just listen. Don’t try to solve or suggest. And here’s one more before I close: think about a group of people you don’t know and don’t understand. Maybe even dislike or disdain their point of view. Ask them, or just try to consider how they might respond to our question, “Where does it hurt?” And then, take inspiration from the two women in our two stories, and have faith in the healing power of Christ. Amen.

ⁱ This sermon series idea was created by Sanctifiedart.org, Founding Creative Director, The Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity.

ⁱⁱ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/12/1079642>