

God's Divine Embrace – Sermon for May 12 2024 (Mother's Day – Melville United Church)

Well, I just about had a meltdown moment yesterday, in of all places, Walmart. In about aisle 4 or 5 of the grocery section. My eye caught a glimpse of those little cups of pudding, and applesauce, and mandarin oranges, and I nearly lost it.

You see, it's been just over a year since my own mother passed away. She was nearly 99 years old. Mom was in a beautiful assisted living facility back in my home state of Connecticut, and for the last few years of her long life. I had been taking road trips to see her down there, even during the pandemic – first to make sure she was still okay living alone in her own home, and later in assisted living – and she always liked having some of those little cups of pudding, or applesauce, or mandarin oranges. My mom was a very athletic person, competing in all kinds of Senior Games, until it got too physically difficult and Alzheimer's disease crept in. She used to have a very good appetite, but like a lot of older adults, during her last years she didn't always feel like eating much. The little cups of tasty, nutritious foods helped.

The thing is, I realized yet again yesterday, that I didn't have to stop to buy those items. Why was I looking at them? My mom doesn't need them anymore. And I, yet again, would feel the pain of missing her terribly. All the displays of beautiful Mother's Day flowers didn't help.

Actually, today is not only of course Mother's Day, but it also happens to be my mother's birthday. She was born on May the 12th, 1924, and so if she were still with us, she would have turned 100 this very day.

So in approaching such an auspicious day during my shopping trip yesterday, I should have been aware of how the natural grieving process would have a way of sneaking up – as it always does – especially since I had mistakenly thought that I had somehow “gotten over it” by now. I think one never really “gets over” a great loss.

May I ask for a show of hands – how many of you here today have a mother who has passed away?.....

[That's what I thought – it looks like a majority of people here this morning have experienced this kind of a loss.]

So Mother's Day probably brings out a lot of feelings for many of you. There are memories. There are some things left unfulfilled. There are wishes for the mothers of the future: for our grown children, and for their children. For new moms and babies everywhere.

As well, there are many different types of mothers: mothers in traditional families, mothers in special circumstances, single mothers, step mothers, pet mothers, religious mothers, mothers who open their homes and hearts to anyone needing a friend. Of course, not every woman is a mother by society's standard definition - that is, a mother being a woman who gave birth to a

child. But you can still call someone your mother if she brings you up as if you were her child. Can someone be a mother without bearing a child? For sure! You might consider yourself a surrogate mother, a caregiver, an aunt, a sister or a single woman – you are a mother in your own right. And of course, everyone here has a mother: a birth mother whom you knew, or perhaps never knew, or an adoptive mother. All mothers deserve our honour today.

And here is a story of a mother, in our scripture reading today. We meet her for the first time in the book of Samuel. She is a woman of prayer and of great faith. Her name is Hannah, which means “grace”. Her husband’s name is Elkanah, meaning the zeal of God. He is wealthy, well-known in the community, a man who knows his roots. There are some aspects of Hannah’s story that we certainly don’t find easy to relate with. For one thing, she was in a polygamous marriage and she was barren – for a certain period of time. In those days, polygamy was very much part of the culture. Elkanah had a second wife named Peninnah meaning “fertile” who bore him both sons and daughters. Elkanah loved Hannah and so he felt that he really didn’t need children from her – anyway, he had plenty from Peninnah. So he couldn’t see what the big deal was . . . why it seemed that Hannah was so unhappy, all alone and sad . . . after all, she was his favourite! But the fact of the matter was: while Peninnah’s tent was filled with little voices, Hannah’s tent was silent. While children ran around the camp and climbed onto Elkanah’s lap to amuse him, Hannah knew in her heart she had not contributed to the legacy Elkanah was building. Hannah’s life seemed glaringly empty to her.

And to add to Hannah’s heartbreak, Peninnah would look at Hannah with pity, or sarcasm or even remorse. She would brag about her dozen children and used that privilege to taunt Hannah with words like: “Oh you poor woman – it must have been difficult when God closed your womb!” In that period, women lose their status in society if they were childless. Remember the story of Sarah or Elizabeth in the Bible. There are many people today who know all about that sort of grief, and even if we aren’t familiar with it, we’ve all had times when we longed for something and that longing was not fulfilled. Hannah seems to understand that if it was indeed God who closed her womb, then only God can open it and allow her to bear children. So she persistently went to God in prayer.

In those days it was customary for people to go on a pilgrimage so they could encounter God. On one of those occasions, after they had enjoyed their meal, Hannah pulled herself together, she rose, slipped away from the family group and entered the sanctuary. A wise choice, to spend part of her pilgrimage time taking care of her soul.

There was an old priest named Eli, who was “the man-in-charge” of that worship centre. He was sitting on a seat beside the door, and he saw Hannah going into the sanctuary. He saw that this woman was deeply distressed and wept bitterly as she prayed to God. In her prayer, she made a vow to God: if God would give her a son, she would offer him to God.

Eli, the priest, was there watching Hannah with uneasiness. Hannah was doing something unusual; she was praying silently. Most people in those days prayed out loud. In Hannah’s case, though, her lips were moving but she was not sounding out the words. Eli totally

misinterpreted the situation, thinking that Hannah was drunk, and so he got upset with her. But she explains her situation and tells him, “I have been in pain, unhappy and desperately praying to God to give me a son”.

She bravely prays directly to God, rather than going through a priest or anyone else in authority. Hannah is a model of direct, authentic prayer, “the prayer of the heart”. She shows up, without bringing an offering, without asking directions from the priest, and simply prays, soaring past all the liturgical conventions of her age, boldly presenting her petition before her God without benefit of clergy. She uses her own words, her own voice, without representation. Hannah, this broken-hearted, misunderstood and taunted woman, leads us to further reflect on our own prayer life.

What if we looked at our lives as prayers in action? Hannah’s life is a prayer of the heart. Hannah’s prayer was answered. She gave birth to a son named Samuel who grew up under the mentorship of the priest Eli and later on became a judge and a prophet. It was Samuel who anointed David as king of Israel.

Hannah walked into that sanctuary as a woman of faith, distressed, but trusting and ready to pour out her heart and expose her need, and she walked out as a woman of faith, radiant with confident joy that what she needed would be coming her way. Hannah finds her voice - she experiences a kind of transformation. The song at the end of today’s reading attributed to her celebrates God – the holy one – her rock and refuge. Hannah sings a song that later inspires the song of Mary, the famous Magnificat. We still love reciting the Magnificat today especially during the Advent season, perhaps without noticing the kind of radical transformation of the world that it expresses, of the mighty brought down and the lowly lifted up. Surely, the lives of Hannah and Mary and many like them on the margins long ago and today as well, have been transformed by God’s enduring love. God’s divine embrace.

In reflecting on Hannah’s story, what prayers of the heart do each of you have in this very moment? Are any of us weighed down by emptiness because of grief or illness or barrenness of your spirit? I think any of us who has experienced the loss of our mother, or anyone we love, has that feeling of a gaping hole existing: just being there every single day.

But our faith tells us that we can take heart – for God is with us – all we have to do is open ourselves to God with our own truths in prayer. Sometimes our prayers are not answered, but there must be reasons behind each unanswered prayer – at times, the answer might be “wait and see... be patient”. And no matter what answers we receive, we can always count our blessings and be grateful for every circumstance that life may offer. Because, as the old expression goes, when God sometimes closes a door, God will surely open a window for us. When Hannah poured out her grief and emptiness in the presence of God, she was finally able to see that her life was, indeed, filled with good things. Filled, piled high, overflowing, lavishly supplied . . . with everything she needed.

Today, as we celebrate and honour all kinds of mothers, nurturers and life-givers, as we honour families in all types of configurations, their presence in our lives, let us rejoice for the many Hannahs in the world. Let's remember those who chose to *live* - out of love, devotion, faith and prayer. Hannah stands for those mothers whose heart aches with longing, grief, and even bitterness, but also those who live with courage, persistence and hope. Wherever life takes us this day and in the days to come, let's approach God with the prayers of our hearts. Follow the simple and powerful example of Hannah and view your life, not through the circumstances that makes life seem empty, but rather through the lens of God's goodness filling your life with blessings and grace. For this reality, or for this hope that we cling to, even in the most desperate times, I can only think to say this morning: let us celebrate God's divine embrace! Let's celebrate mothers and life-givers! Let's celebrate with Hannah! May it be so. Amen.