

Trinity Presbyterian Church, Ottawa

“I’ve been meaning to ask...where does it hurt?”

Sunday, August 15, 2021

“I’ve been meaning to ask...where does it hurt?” Last week, we asked the question, where are you from? And from our conversation following the service, it seems as though that is a question we can all relate to being asked. As we shared stories and experiences after worship, I enjoyed delving a little more into what that question has looked and felt like to each of you and what it means about the source of our identity. This week’s question is, most likely, one we have not been asked as much, or asked as directly. It’s more uncomfortable, it requires even more courage from those who are asking, and even more vulnerability from those who are being asked. But in the midst of this season of life, it’s a question I imagine we, at least at times, have yearned to be asked. This week’s question- where does it hurt?- implies a truth we do not often acknowledge as a society-that all of us have known pain and suffering. In order to foster connection in our communities and our relationships, we must get curious and comfortable hearing about the pain others carry and the pain we carry ourselves. Before we can do anything at all, we must first acknowledge and believe the pain is real, for bearing witness to each other’s pain helps us cultivate compassion. In 1 Samuel, we see that Hannah’s pain has been ignored, diminished, and mocked. Yet, Hannah vulnerably and courageously bears all of herself before God, and in doing so, transforms Eli’s perspective. She finds peace by being fully seen and known by God. In the dual healing story of the hemorrhaging woman and Jairus’ daughter, we see that those who suffer chronically and in isolation are recognized and cared for. By telling these women’s stories together, we can learn about and bear witness to the particular and very common struggles related to fertility and reproductive health. We also can’t help but recognize that there

is harm done in neglecting the emotional, physical, individual, historical, and systemic wounds that exist among us. These are not wounds that will simply go away with time—they are deep, powerful pains that bury themselves deep inside of us and change us. We have all talked about how grief never disappears, and how there are cycles of grief that change over time. That's also true with the trauma and the pain we experience—it makes a home in us—in our hearts, in our minds, and also in our bodies. Whether it's acute pain or the numbing constancy of a pandemic, it is there, whether we are always conscious of it or not.

Over the last year and a half, we have all suffered incredible loss due to the pandemic—but in addition to the societal loss and uncertainty we have all born, life has continued to go on, in all of its glory, joy and sadness. Babies have been born, people have graduated, married, retired, we have celebrated birthdays and anniversaries and other life events. And also, friends and family members have gotten sick, some have died unrelated to Covid, couples have separated or divorced, women have miscarried, jobs have been lost and many have had to leave school. I wonder, how many of us are hurting in silence, hiding our pain because we believe it to be shameful? What did messages did your family send you about how to deal with hardship and suffering? Maybe we have been taught that certain afflictions are not for polite company, and we have learned the painful, practiced art of smiling through platitudes and keeping the truth about how we feel all to ourselves. Maybe our pain has been invalidated or ignored so many times that we begin to believe there truly is something disgraceful about our feelings or experiences. Maybe it feels easier to bury our emotions for fear of how they will be perceived. In the book of Samuel, Hannah has been belittled, patronized, and provoked for her infertility—a bodily condition over which she has no control. Some of us, like Hannah, may be all too familiar with the particular grief of infertility. Others of

us carry the secret sufferings of child loss, postpartum depression, sickness, job loss, economic insecurity, or addiction. What would we say if someone stopped to ask us, “Where does it hurt?” and acknowledged the validity of our answers? Would we, like Hannah, be able to share our pain with a humble and dignified honesty that trusts that there is no “right” or “proper” way to feel? Would such honesty with our own hurts and disappointments allow us to be more present to others’ afflictions, as well?

In 1 Samuel, Hannah finds some peace after she explains her feelings in her own words, and she is (finally) respectfully acknowledged by Eli. Even as Eli himself is not able to provide an immediate solution for Hannah, he is able to accept her hurting and pray for her. Eli does not have to solve anything to be present. If we are ever to be people who bring peace and healing to this hurting world, we must be willing to pause and bear witness to pain—to our own and others.’ And even harder than that, we must simply show up, listen, and be with others in their pain. Not try to fix them, not offer people quick solutions, not try to get them to overcome their sadness, but just simple sit with them and be with them in the midst of whatever it is they are going through. Like Hannah, with dignity and honesty we can embrace our stories without shame, trusting that God is present and ever listening. And in turn, instead of shirking away or diminishing, we can perceive and accept the pain of others, and like the God we follow, stand alongside those who suffer. We don’t get to this part of the text in the readings this morning, but Hannah does go on to have a baby, Samuel, whom she offers as a servant to the Lord in gratitude for God’s blessing. But here’s the thing:, Hannah is whole just as she is, whether she ends up becoming a mother or not. We see that her pain is rooted in not being seen; the moment her pain is acknowledged and blessed, she finds peace. After Hannah has shared her story with Eli, he answers, “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,^[f] ate and drank with her husband,^[g] and her countenance was sad no longer.^[h] After she has Hannah courageously beared her pain before God and Eli; through that process she is finally seen. Eli bears witness to her suffering and blesses her—that alone transforms Hannah’s experience. Her healing comes in being seen, not in getting pregnant.

The story from Mark, in the midst of a pandemic, makes me cringe a little bit—so many people crowding around Jesus, trying to get close to him and to touch him. I remember in my high school Spanish class learning about all kinds of rituals used in the Catholic church that actually stem from the days when people were unable to bathe—the smoke and the incense that nowadays brings us back to another era when we enter a Catholic church, was used as a practical way to diminish the smell of the crowds of people that would gather for mass. In the days before the pandemic, I used to attend a church in Atlanta, which is a vibrant community of people with and without housing—this church community used to gather in an old basement. Some days, especially the rainy ones, there would be way too many people in our tiny space. On such busy days of ministry, the church would, not surprisingly, have distinct smell to it: the combined scent of damp socks and worn-out sneakers, drying jackets and sweat-stained tee-shirts, bathrooms used as showers, coffee percolating, and the remnants of cigarettes just smoked. Every crowd has a smell to it—the pungent, sweet smell of human life itself. Death has its own smells, too. I remember some of those sights and smells from my time as a hospital chaplain. The Reverend Brittany Ficcus Van Rossum, who is now the pastor of that church I used to attend in Atlanta writes that “Sometimes I think we would like to sanitize or avoid strong smells, because what we can perceive with our senses can also remind us of where life can hurt. We shirk from the man who smells of sweat, avert our eyes from the dirtied hand reaching out for

change, and try not to see ourselves in the woman whose only possessions are piled in a damp cart.” Perhaps now, we might shirk at the sight and smell of hospital workers, sanitized with so much disinfectant as an attempt to stave off this persistent and deadly virus. I know I have averted my eyes, pinched up my nose, or turned the other way when I am reminded of such signs of life and hardship. Sometimes it’s just too much.

But in this passage in Mark, we find Jesus in the midst of human life—and all its hurting. He is in the press of the crowd with sweaty human bodies and the scent of a woman’s blood. Jesus stops and listens to this long-hurting woman—as if pain were not so shameful but something we all experience. Jesus then enters a stagnant, grief filled room, no doubt smelling of sickness and death. He reaches out and touches the body of a girl that everyone already thought they had lost. These relational and embodied healings humanize those whose hurting has been pushed aside, calling our attention to the broken systems that can perpetuate and dehumanize pain. Jesus’ healing disrupts the injustice of a woman who has been rejected and labeled impure for her condition. With the girl, Jesus disrupts death itself. How might we allow Jesus to disrupt us—enabling us to acknowledge others’ pain so that we may seek life together? We must put ourselves in the uncomfortable places where human beings live, breathe, and hurt—because those are the places where we will also find Jesus.

Many of you, I know well, I am aware of what some of you are going through, what you have been through—the hardships and the joys that you have born, both silently and publicly. That is one of the aspects of being a pastor that makes it such a sacred honor and privilege—being present in the full spectrum of people’s lives. But so much of this last year we have lived, carried, endured, alone, or with just a very few people. I imagine there are levels of life that we are dealing with that will take years to understand and unearth. But as

you think about this question-where does it hurt, I encourage you to take some time to bring these questions and these answers into prayer and the presence of a God who is there for you in even the most difficult times. Where do you hurt, and where does the world hurt? What pain has been ignored, silenced, or unacknowledged? What pain have you missed or ignored? How do you feel? Where is God in the midst of this? And as you think about those around you-whether in your family, your neighborhood, or the larger community, I encourage you to wonder, with gentleness and curiosity these questions-What spoken and unspoken grief weighs heavily within your community? Who in your community is suffering—publicly or privately? What might it look like to authentically bear witness to this pain in worship and in this church community?

Friends, let us remember that Hannah was healed in the acknowledgement and recognition of her pain, not in the resolution of her infertility. And in many ways, the hemorrhaging woman was transformed not by Jesus' physical and literal healing, but in the way that Jesus turns to her, acknowledges her and really sees her. May we be guided by these examples of transformative presence, and really see the full truth about the people in our midst-and may we acknowledge their and our lives in all their pain and suffering in addition to the joys and success. We do not have it in our power to be God-we ourselves cannot heal or take away people's pain and suffering. But we show up for others in the midst of their suffering, listen to them and be present to the world and all that it holds. Such presence, in its willingness to be, rather than fix or change, can heal not only those around us, but it can transform ourselves. Life, in all its shades of experience is not always easy, not comfortable, nor joyful. But when lived with compassion, understanding, and a desire to be present to those around us in true and deep ways, it makes the burdens that we undoubtedly all bear, less isolating and painful. It is a clear and present reminder that the God always, always, always

shows up, in the mess of life, walking with us, loving us, and never leaving us, no matter what hills and valleys we pass through. Amen.