

Please Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood
Hebrews 10:19-25; I Samuel 1:4-20

Hebrews 10:19-25

¹⁹Therefore, my friends,
since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus,
²⁰by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain
(that is, through his flesh),
²¹and since we have a great priest over the house of God,
²²let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith,
with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience
and our bodies washed with pure water.

²³Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering,
for he who has promised is faithful.

²⁴And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds,
²⁵not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some,
but encouraging one another,
and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Introduction: Summary of I Samuel 1:1-3

Hannah was married to a man from the hill country of Ephraim named Elkanah, who had two wives: Hannah and Peninnah. Hannah didn't have any children with Elkanah, although she desperately wanted them, and Peninnah did have a number of sons and daughters with Elkanah.

Elkanah would go annually, with Hannah and Peninnah, to make a sacrifice to God at Shiloh, where Eli was the high priest.

The reading finds Hannah and Elkanah on one of their annual journeys to the temple at Shiloh.

I Samuel 1:4-20 (selected)

⁴On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; ⁵but to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the LORD had closed her womb. ⁶Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb.

⁷So 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.

⁸Her 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?”

⁹After 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.

¹⁰She was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD, and wept bitterly. ¹¹She 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.”

¹²As she continued praying before the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. ¹³Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk. ¹⁴So Eli said to her, “How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine.”

¹⁵But 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.

¹⁶Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time.”

¹⁷Then Eli answered, “Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him.” ¹⁸And 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.

¹⁹They rose early in the morning and worshiped before the Lord; then they went back to their house at Ramah. Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and the Lord remembered her. ²⁰In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, “I have asked him of the LORD.” ■

A prayer for Paris, Beirut, and Baghdad by Laurie Ann Kraus, Coordinator of Presbyterian Disaster Assistance.

God of mercy, whose presence sustains us in every circumstance,
in the midst of unfolding violence and the aftermath of terror and loss,
we seek the grounding power of your love and compassion.

In these days of fearful danger and division,
we need to believe somehow
that your kingdom of peace
in which all nations and tribes and languages dwell together in peace
is still a possibility.

Give us hope and courage
that we may not yield our humanity to fear,
even in these endless days of dwelling in the valley of the shadow of death.

We pray for neighbors in Paris, in Beirut, in Baghdad,
who, in the midst of the grace of ordinary life—while at work, or at play,
have been violently assaulted, their lives cut off without mercy.

We are hostages of fear,
caught in an escalating cycle of violence
whose end cannot be seen.

We open our hearts in anger, sorrow and hope:
that those who have been spared
as well as those whose lives are changed forever
may find solace, sustenance, and strength
in the days of recovery and reflection that come.

We give thanks for strangers who comfort the wounded
and who welcome stranded strangers,
for first responders who run toward the sound of gunfire
and into the smoke and fire of bombing sites.

Once again, Holy One, we cry, how long, O Lord?
We seek forgiveness for the ways in which we have tolerated enmity
and endured cultures of violence with weary resignation.
We grieve the continued erosion of the fabric of our common life,

the reality of fear that warps the common good.

We pray in grief, remembering the lives that have been lost and maimed,
in body or spirit.

We ask for sustaining courage for those who are suffering;
wisdom and diligence among global and national agencies
and individuals assessing threat and directing relief efforts;
and for our anger and sorrow to unite
in service to the establishment of a reign of peace,
where the lion and the lamb may dwell together,
and terror will not hold sway over our common life.

In these days of shock and sorrow, open our eyes, our hearts, and our hands
to the movements of your Spirit, who flows in us like the river
whose streams makes glad the city of God,
and the hearts of all who dwell in it, and in You.

In the name of Christ, our healer and our Light, we pray, Amen.ⁱ

The Sermon

Making the rounds on Facebook in the past 48 hours is a short poem by a Somali-British poet named Warsan Shire, who was born in Kenya less than 30 years ago:

later that night
i held an atlas in my lap
ran my fingers across the whole world
and whispered
where does it hurt?

it answered
everywhere
everywhere
*everywhere.*ⁱⁱ

Leonard Cohen, in his early days as a poet, wrote a short piece about one of Hitler's inner circle. It's called "All There Is to Know about Adolph Eichmann."

EYES:	Medium
HAIR:	Medium
WEIGHT:	Medium
HEIGHT:	Medium
DISTINGUISHING FEATURES:	None
NUMBER OF FINGERS:	Ten
NUMBER OF TOES:	Ten
INTELLIGENCE:	Medium

What did you expect?

Talons?

Oversize incisors?

Green saliva?

Madness?ⁱⁱⁱ

Despite the human desire to be able to categorize people as obviously, identifiably good or bad, Saint for All Time or Evil Incarnate, there is terrifyingly little difference between any of us. We all have within us the capacity for astonishing goodness and appalling inhumanity.

But we're not even there right now.

Right now we're in the temple at Shiloh, where Hannah, in perfect righteousness, is lifting up her prayers to God, and Eli, a great man of the church, is looking at the way she's doing it and making an easy interpretation that discounts every bit of her integrity and faithfulness.

And while the man who speaks for God is dismissing her with prejudice, God is hearing every word she says.

People may not know the truth about you. But God knows the truth.

For those who do not trust God, that can be a terrifying thought.

For those who do trust God, it is the greatest joy, relief, and comfort, and ultimately, it is the only assessment of you that matters.

Elkanah's other wife used to provoke Hannah, just to irritate her, over the fact that she, Hannah, was unable to have a baby.

Year after year, the three of them would go up to the house of the LORD, and Peninnah would "provoke" Hannah; the word could also be translated, "harass."^{iv}

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?"

Ehhh...

I have a dear friend, someone I have respected as a mentor from my childhood in my home church, a marvelous minister, about four years ahead of me in life and a hundred in wisdom.

When we were young adults, she and her husband found that the course of nature was not bringing them the children they desperately wanted to bring into the world.

It was devastating, and a lot of people, men and women, had great sympathy, even empathy. But, she said, she couldn't take anymore hearing well-intentioned people say things like, "You could adopt... Maybe you're just not meant to be biological parents... You would be wonderful foster parents..." All these things were true enough, but she said, "People don't understand: *this feels like a death.*"

In her state of misery, Hannah got up and went to present herself before the LORD.

Eli, the priest, was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple.

Hannah "was bitter in her soul
and prayed to the Holy God,
and wept and wept."^v

And although she was not speaking out loud, she made this vow:

"LORD of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, [and] give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite"—one who is "separated" or "dedicated," very much like a priest, made holy to the LORD.^{vi}

Eli watched her mouth while she was praying. She was praying silently; her lips were moving, but she wasn't speaking out loud, so Eli went over and said, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine."

We all have different triggers, but for many of us, being misunderstood, misrepresented, maligned based on ignorant assumptions, having assumptions made about our integrity—that's one of the shortest fuses somebody can light.

A few weeks ago, knowing the readings that were coming up in the lectionary this month, including today's, a refrain came to mind from an old Nina Simone song, recorded by a 1960's group called Eric Burdon and the Animals. I hadn't heard it for probably 15 years or more. In fact, the last time I remember hearing it was in the 1980s, when I saw Elvis Costello doing it on TV. I don't know a single word from any of the verses, but the refrain goes:

"I'm just a soul whose intentions are good.
O Lord, please don't let me be misunderstood."^{vii}

And here is Hannah, standing before God in her rage and her pain and her sorrow, asking for a miracle and making a solemn and sacred promise.

And here is Eli, saying, "Shame on you for being so disorderly! Obviously the only explanation is you're drunk."

It's a dissonance that is dangerous, explosive, and stubbornly persistent.

A couple weeks ago, it reminded me of an ongoing disagreement that I've had with an old friend that started in college—in college!

Whenever it comes up now, it's always couched in kind of ha-ha just-kidding terms, but it still consists of a misrepresentation of my deepest beliefs that somehow manages to get my goat every time. It occurred to me again about three weeks ago, and it put me in a terrible mood for the rest of the afternoon.

Ted Loder published a piece some years ago called "Christmas in the Ruins."

"I recall," he said, "the year my wife Jan and I scheduled a dinner for friends a week or so before Christmas. On the morning of the party, we admitted to each other that we were too tired and pre-occupied to enjoy it, and we fleetingly considered canceling out, but didn't. When our guests arrived, they hinted at

having similar feelings. Apparently we'd all 'pressed on' out of a sense of social obligation.

“Not surprisingly, during the course of the evening the conversation got a bit heated. It was on some topic so important I can't remember it now. Whatever it was, it was laced with a lot of 'men *always*, women *never*' comments that tie everyone in a knot of irritation and frustration. The party limped to a close in a mode of sulky civility. No one wanted to prolong the evening by trying to repair the breach we all felt.”

Later, he said, “I was helping to clean up the kitchen as I prosecuted my case to an imaginary jury who nodded their heads in agreement with my every word. In the process of ranting and raving, I broke the handle off [a] pitcher that had been given to Jan by her beloved, departed grandmother.

“I don't know if it was rage or despair...but rather than apologize or examine the pitcher to see if it could be repaired, I hurled it to the floor. It smashed into a thousand pieces...”

“Tears filled Jan's eyes as she picked up a piece of the pitcher and held it in her hand. Then she looked at me and whispered, 'It's too bad.'”^{viii}

Sometimes when we carry within us the feeling of being misunderstood, misrepresented, maligned, things get broken.

And sometimes when we don't know what to do with that frustration, we take things that are probably easily fixable and shatter them into a thousand pieces.

Vivian and I were having lunch together about three days ago in a decent little place where there was some music playing amid the sounds of a busy restaurant. I wasn't even aware of it at first, and even as my ear started to pick it up I couldn't quite believe it, but then the melody finally came together:

“I'm just a soul whose intentions are good /
O Lord, please don't let me be misunderstood.”

It comes on at unexpected times, and quietly emerges from within the cacophony around, but once your mind focuses on it, it might as well be the loudest sound in the room.

Hannah's frustration comes out when you're standing in the kitchen doing the dishes, and suddenly you realize you are reliving a meaningless conversation from forever ago wherein you never felt you got the vindication that your soul craves.

Hannah's frustration comes out when you're waiting in the checkout line, by yourself, and all of a sudden you blurt out—to nobody—"But that isn't what I *said.*"

Hannah's frustration comes out when you're thinking about the friendship you have counted on for months or years or decades, and wondering how it's going to get back on track.

When Hannah brought before God her tears and her agony and her feeling of victimhood at the hands of her rival, and even then was assailed by someone who didn't even know her—somebody who was accustomed to speaking in the name of God, no less—

God heard her prayers.

People may not know the truth about you. But God knows the truth.

For those who do not trust God, that can be a terrifying thought.

For those who do trust God, it is the greatest joy, relief, and comfort, and ultimately, it is the only assessment of you that matters.

When Hannah found that God had remembered her, and had not forgotten her, and had, astoundingly, granted her the miracle for which she had prayed, she went back to the temple. And this time, she prayed,

“There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one besides you;
there is no Rock like our God.”

People may not know or understand the truth about you.

They may be mistaken about you,
they may misrepresent you,
they may malign you based on their own ignorance.

But God knows the truth.

A writer named Kent Keith has had the dubious honor of having a piece of his writing, which has turned up all over the world, erroneously attributed to Mother Teresa, while his name remains almost unknown. It was originally called *The Paradoxical Commandments* and he and others have adjusted it from time to time. This, I believe, is the version that hung on Mother Teresa's wall—which is how it ended up having her name attached to it.

People are often unreasonable, irrational, and self-centered.
Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives.
Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some unfaithful friends
and some genuine enemies.
Succeed anyway.

If you are honest and sincere people may deceive you.
Be honest and sincere anyway.

What you spend years creating, others could destroy overnight.
Create anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness, some may be jealous.
Be happy anyway.

The good you do today will often be forgotten.
Do good anyway.

Give the best you have, and it will never be enough.
Give your best anyway.

In the final analysis, it is between you and God.
It was never between you and them anyway.^{ix}

Therefore, my friends,
since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus,
and since, in Christ, we have a great priest over the house of God,

let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith,
with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience
and our bodies washed with pure water.

Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering,
for he who has promised is faithful.

And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds,
not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some,
but encouraging one another,
and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Amen.

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November 15, 2015

ⁱ Laurie Ann Kraus, November 13, 2015, published by Presbyterian News Service (<http://pres-outlook.org/2015/11/a-prayer-for-paris-beirut-and-baghdad/>).

ⁱⁱ Warsan Shire. The poem is widely quoted online but—as is so often the vexing case—rarely is accompanied by original source information. This poem does not appear in her published collection *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth* (2011), but a more comprehensive volume is said to be planned for release in 2016. Based on what she has given the world so far, we can only hope.

ⁱⁱⁱ Leonard Cohen, *Selected Poems, 1956-1968*. New York: Bantam Books, 1971.

^{iv} Johanna W.H. van Wijk-Bos, *Reading Samuel: A Literary and Theological Commentary*. Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2011; p. 22.

^v I Samuel 1:10 as translated by Johanna Bos, op. cit., p. 22.

^{vi} Described by Jacob Milgrom, as quoted at www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0015_0_14638.html.

^{vii} “Don’t Let Me Be Misunderstood,” copyright © 1964 Warner/Chappell Music, Inc. Writers: Bennie Benjamin, Gloria Caldwell, Sol Marcus.

^{viii} Ted Loder, “Christmas in the Ruins,” in Loder, *Tracks in the Straw: Tales Spun from the Manger*. Philadelphia: Innisfree Press, 1985/1997 (New Revised Edition); pp. 170-174.

^{ix} Kent M. Keith. See his website: <http://www.paradoxicalcommandments.com/>. He deserves to be associated with his much-quoted and well-traveled work.