

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
September 19, 2021
1 Samuel 1:1-18
Luke 7:11-17

“I’ve Been Meaning to Ask . . . Where Does It Hurt?”

Last week I started a new sermon series titled “I’ve Been Meaning to Ask”. It’s a series about asking simple questions that can lead to courageous conversations if we’re willing to really listen to what others have to say. I wanted to do this series because for the most part, I believe we’ve lost our ability to listen to people, especially people who don’t think, look, act, or believe like we do, and this, in my opinion, has led to a decline in community and a rise in rancor and distrust. And we just can’t go on living like this. It’s not only bad for society, it’s unfaithful too.

Last week the question we explored was “Where are you from?” This week, our question is “Where does it hurt?” *Where does it hurt?*

I’ve been thinking about this question all week and I’ve also been living with this question all week. Some of you heard that my daughter Charlotte was home half the week because she was sick so I found myself asking her a lot, “How are you feeling? Where does it hurt?” When we went to the doctor, she asked Charlotte: Where does it hurt? So we ask this question when someone is physically hurting.

I also participated in two funerals this week, so I witnessed a lot of emotional hurt. As a pastor, I often have a front row seat in witnessing people’s emotional pain. Friends, if there’s one common denominator we all share, it’s that everyone knows pain and suffering. Everyone carries hurt. Our hurt is different: some carry the pain of losing a child while others carry the pain of losing a spouse; some hold the anguish of addiction while others hold the anguish of economic insecurity or job loss; some suffer from depression while others suffer the grief of infertility; and some endure chronic pain while others endure emotional abuse. But everyone carries something. Don’t let appearances deceive you.

As I’ve been living with this question all week, I’ve also been wondering if some of the anger we witness today isn’t stemming from a place of hurt because people

aren't hearing one another, or validating one another's pain; or valuing one another – and maybe this is why there's so much bitterness and malice. As I watched the school board meeting of my district when they talked about masks, people were mean. Why? Is it possible that it's not really about masks? But stems from a place of hurt? It's a question worth asking: do you hurt? And if so, "Where does it hurt?" Are we willing listen to what others have to say?

As I've been living with this question all week I was also preparing to lead Presby Day about my experience on the Mayor's Commission on Police Reform and Racial Justice. In preparing my presentation, I went back and watched the commission's first meeting together where one of the leaders from ChangeMakers came and spoke to us about her interactions with the police. She said in her presentation that in order for the commission to really do our work, we need to be willing to go beyond conversations about body cameras, reports, and even diverse representation, to conversations about values. Who do we value, she asked? Who has value? She went on to say that families like hers do not see themselves as being valued by the city, and shared with us a painful story about an interaction she had with the police that has led her to feel this way. She expressed hurt, and it was anguishing at times to listen to her hurt. But her story stuck with me during the many months of our work, because she's right. Who do we value? And do we value them enough to ask "Where does it hurt?" and then listen to their response? I became convinced – I am convinced -- that if we're unwilling to ask the question and listen to the answer, it will be impossible to move forward.

Do we value people enough to ask, "Where does it hurt?" and do we want their answer?

Today we heard two stories about women who are hurting. Our women have some things in common. Both are childless – the first one (Hannah) is childless because her body is unable to conceive; and the other, our unnamed widow is childless because her only child, a son, has died. This leaves both women very vulnerable and not of much value to their society.

As you've heard me say before, in Jesus' time women lived under the protection of their father's household, and then their husband's household when they got married. After the death of a husband, it was customary for the brother or other

relative to marry the widow. In cases where there was no male relative, like our story from Luke, the widow moved to the margins of society and became quite vulnerable. Furthermore, the death of an only son would leave the widow without an heir and therefore unable to keep whatever means remained for her. You see without an heir, all personal property reverted to the husband's family.

In Hannah's day, it was the same thing: a woman's worth was strongly tied to her ability to bear children—specifically, sons. Only if she had a son would she be guaranteed to have a future, especially if or when she was widowed: he would be a source of literal sustenance and protection. A woman without a son could easily become a woman without a name, without a voice, without any sense of power or agency in the world. And notice how that's true: our New Testament woman has no name and no voice. Folks, a childless woman, especially a childless widow, was a person of no value.

Perhaps it can be difficult for us to fully grasp that reality, but that was Hannah's and the widow's reality. If we were to ask them, "Where does it hurt?" they would probably have said, "Everywhere." Their grief over losing a son and not being able to bear one is excruciating, and their lot in life is horrendous.

Hannah, for one, is belittled, patronized, bullied, and provoked because of her infertility – a bodily condition she has no control over. Her husband's other wife, Penninah, has taunted Hannah for years about her infertility while she, Penninah, has born numerous sons and daughters. And Elkinah, the husband, apparently loves Hannah dearly, but wonders why she's so sad. "Why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?" Friends, this is not the response to give when someone is hurting; this is the reply of someone who is tone deaf. What Elkanah should have said was, "Hannah, I love you more than ten sons. I'm sorry you're so upset." That is the reply of someone who hears another's pain.

Our response to another's pain is not to question it like Elkanah, or mock it like Penninah. Our response to another person's pain isn't to dismiss it, either, like Eli did. I know you know this, but sometimes a reminder is needed. At the second meeting of the commission, one of the police officers made sure to point out to us that the ChangeMaker's story was incorrect. Her brother-in-law didn't lie in the street for an hour, without help, as she'd claimed. He only laid there for 10

minutes. The officer wanted to make sure we had the facts, but in doing that she dismissed the pain and hurt the speaker expressed and devalued her worth.

Who do we value? Whose hurt do we value?

Where do you hurt? Do we want to hear their answer?

Contrast the reaction people had to Hannah to the reaction Jesus has to the widow. As the story goes, Jesus is taking a road trip when he comes across a large crowd in the town of Nain. The road is impassable because it's crowded by a funeral procession. Friends are holding the woman's son aloft on a bier. Jesus sees this, and even though the Bible doesn't say it, I imagine he also hears the primal sound of a mother pouring out her grief at the loss of her child. As the grief-stricken procession passes him, Jesus reaches out his hand in compassion for the mother.

"Do not weep," he says. And with that he touches the bier, and says to the dead son, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" And miraculously the young man does, and Jesus gives him to his mother.

Notice what Jesus doesn't do. He doesn't question her, doesn't mock her, isn't dismissive her. And he could have been and done all of that! You heard about her lot in life! Plus, for a male Jew, the body of the dead was considered unclean, and Jesus would have been forbidden to touch it.

Nor did he politely stand on the side of the road to make way for the mourners – even though he could have! No one asked Jesus to heal the young man. But he sees the woman, really sees her and her hurt, all of her messiness and pain, and walks into it.

And he instantly feels deep compassion, the kind of compassion that makes our own eyes water, the kind of compassion that makes our own heart hurt. He felt a gut-level, visceral compassion for that woman. And he immediately approached her to be present with her. "Do not weep," he said. I am here now, with you, alongside you. And I'm not going anywhere.

Friends, this is how we respond to people's hurt. We stand with them. We don't dismiss it or correct it, or argue about why they aren't really hurt. Nor do we need solutions or answers to their pain.

We bear witness to other people's pain by standing with them, not because we understand or even agree, but because they are a child of God, too. So let us rise just like Hannah did – and take the hurt to God. Let us rise and persist in our faith and find the courage, just like Hannah did, to engage in conversations about why there is hurt in the first place. Let us rise and dare to believe, just like Hannah did, that God will hear the cries of anguish.

And let us rise just like the young man did, and show compassion, and be life-givers, not takers. Let us rise to remember that the compassion of God will not allow God to passively stand still in the face of hurt. Let us rise to remember that while most people do stand passively by, waiting for the funeral procession to pass, Jesus intervenes, because Jesus sees people as God sees them and wants us to respond to them as God responds to us. "Where do you hurt," he asks. And takes the time to listen.

If we're going to be people who bring peace and healing, it's going to happen through listening; it's going to happen through relationships; it's going to happen by being present with one another, and bearing witness to pain, because that's what God does. God bears witness to pain. And God stands alongside us in all of our pain and suffering and hurt. So let us rise because we're called to do that for one another.

Amen.

Prayer

Gracious God, You are the healer. You are the source of all health and healing. You are the One who defines wholeness and who gives it as a gift. Dear Lord, continue to heal us where we are broken. You see those places, Lord, even when we don't see them. Heal our fears, our sadness, our inner brokenness. Make us the whole people You have created and saved us to be. Amen.

Sources:

Feasting on the Word, Year C/Volume 2 and Year B/Volume 4, commentaries on 1 Samuel and Luke 7

Rev. Shannon J. Kershner for her thoughts on Hannah

Sanctified Art, video commentary on "Where does it hurt?" by Rev. Brittany Fiscus-van Rossum

