

## A Coat and a Prayer

2 Timothy 1:3-7

1 Samuel 2:18-20

Preached by Carolyn Bohler  
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Redlands First United Methodist Church

If we asked most people, at least most people of the youngest generations, "Do you know anyone named Hannah?" they would answer, "Sure, Hannah Montana." In fact a movie by that name is showing today at the Krikorian theatre here in Redlands.

Today we are focusing upon another Hannah. We could call her Hannah the Mother. This Hannah was married to Elkanah, as conveyed in the Hebrew Bible. Hannah had prayed so hard to become pregnant with her first son that she had done something drastic. She had promised God to give up this son to be a priest, which meant in those days taking him as a very young boy to live at the temple. Hannah did give birth to a boy, and she did take him to the temple where he was raised up to be a priest.

Once a year Hannah the Mother and her husband Elkanah traveled to see their son, whom they had named Samuel. Every year Hannah brought Samuel a little coat.

This gift makes more sense when we understand what clothes Samuel would have been wearing. He would have been wearing an *ephron*, which was a scanty garment worn for religious purposes without other clothes. One Bible translation names the garment an "apron."

I imagine Hannah thought to herself, "What can I bring him?" And, each year, given there were limited ways she could care for him, she would decide, "At least I can make him a coat."

(You all recall the definition of a "sweater"? It's something you put on when your mother is cold.)

Think about the process Hannah would have gone through each year. She would have had to guess how much Samuel had grown in order to make the new coat. I imagine that she would wonder about his growth, not just for the practical reasons of a seamstress, but also out of reverie, thinking of her son growing up.

Though Hannah did not see her son often, she COULD care for him by sewing and giving him a little coat.

Hannah's gift for Samuel was good for Samuel. Yet, it also met her own need to care her child.

We all have needs to care for others, to do things for them, don't we?

Think of how you feel making a meal for someone and taking it to them when they are ill or grieving. Think about how you feel serving as a Trustee or being on a committee, or greeting people on Sunday. Think about how you feel being on a cook team for Wednesday night dinners. Think about how you feel visiting the hospital, being an office angel, or helping on a work day.

We all have a need to care for others, to do for them. Hannah the Mother sewed and brought Samuel a little coat.

Changing our attention to the New Testament, we see Timothy, who is like Samuel in at least one way. Timothy was going into ministry, too. And Paul, or whoever wrote this letter to Timothy, wanted to encourage Timothy in his ministry.

You see, Paul was a bit worried about these first-generation Christians. He was afraid they were a bit vulnerable in their faith, since it was so new, and there was not much tradition to fall back on. In his letter, Paul used an interesting strategy to encourage Timothy. He reminded Timothy of the strong faith of his mother and grandmother, Eunice and Lois.

In the whole Bible, Eunice is only mentioned in Acts, where she's referred to as Timothy's mother. She was born a Jew, married a Greek man and became a Christian convert. We are unsure whether Lois, Timothy's grandmother, was Christian or Jewish, but she evidently had great faith.

Lois and Eunice represent those who give something that cannot be packaged or tied with a bow—that is, emotional and spiritual support and care. In case Timothy had not realized that gift, or recalled it, Paul was pointing it out, so Timothy could lean upon it, could use that somewhat intangible gift from his mom and grandma.

It's in all of our natures to want to give—both coats and prayers . . .

Our giving helps us; we need to give.

Our giving ALSO genuinely helps the one to whom we give. The benefit to the recipient may be obvious immediately, for they say, "This is exactly what I wanted! How did you know?"

Sometimes the benefit to the recipient may be more apparent years later, perhaps mostly because the gift reminds them of the one who gave it.

I am wearing this yellow coat. I really like it. It's me. My mom, like Hannah the Mother, made this coat and brought it to me. I think my mother knew I liked this coat the moment I opened the package.

This gold coat is not "me." It's my mom's wish-that-I'd-wear-things-like-this coat. *She* liked the material. Although I probably didn't rave as much when I opened this package, I actually treasure this gold coat a lot now, for I think of her so much whenever I wear it.

A similar dynamic happened between my daughter and me. I tend to send her care packages with any little thing I can think of. I don't sew, however. I know she likes strawberries, so when I saw fresh strawberries here in California, I regretted that if I sent them to her in Chicago, they would not be fresh by the time they arrived. So, I included in a package some dried strawberries from Trader Joes. When I visited her a couple months ago, I saw dried strawberries, two bags of them, in her cereal cabinet; she said she adds them occasionally to her cereal. When I returned to Redlands, my next package included another bag of dried strawberries. This time, Alexandra said, "Thank you Mom, for the package. You know what? You don't need to send me any more strawberries." I said, "But you seemed to use them, you had two bags..." She said, "That's because those were the two bags you sent me a long time ago..."

Famous author Alice Walker wrote a little story in which there was a discussion between two women about quilts. One woman declares that quilts are old-fashioned; they are out of style. The other woman responded, "But they are priceless! You just will not understand. The point is these quilts, these quilts. You just don't understand."

"What don't I understand?" retaliated the first woman.

"Your heritage."<sup>1</sup>

Some gifts are valued more highly years after they have been given because it's the *giver* who is being remembered, because of heritage.

When I asked a couple very young children what they do on Mothers' Day, they told me, "We give our moms pictures we draw." Those pictures are valuable to their mothers, and I'm glad these children knew it.

We have the natural desire to give, don't we?—coats, prayers, quilts, drawings...

Our giving helps us, the ones who give. We receive from others, too—tangible objects like coats and intangible gifts like prayers. We benefit from the gifts given to us and from the intended love in the giving.

So, biblical mothers, mothers in stories, children, and all sorts of loving people give coats, quilts, prayers, and drawings ... Some of these gifts immediately evoke appreciation and joy. Others take on more meaning as we value the one who gave, their intent, their heritage, or—in the case of children's gifts—their future. This giving and receiving is crucial for all concerned. Actually, this giving and receiving describes **the way life is**.

Let's be still for a moment and look around and think around... giving, receiving is part of the nature of God's gorgeous life. Life **is** creative and relational. We could say it's the nature of God to give, give, give, and to receive, receive, receive. It's the nature of human beings, nature, and God to be creative and to want to present that creation to others.

I was the adult child "at-a-distance" in my family when our parents were older. My sister was, for almost two decades, the "adult-child-nearby-our-parents." Marilyn would try to keep me up-to-date about our parents. One day, when our mother was in her late 70's, my sister told me that she had gone over to our mother's apartment and knocked on her door. Our mother's first words were not, "Hello" or "Glad to see you." Her words were, "Come, see what I have made!"

"Come, see what I have just made!"

She was sewing, of course . . . surely whatever it was, it was a gift—she didn't like sewing for herself.

Can you imagine God saying that same thing to us when we open our doors or windows to start each day? "Come, see what I have just made!" White-and-orange \_\_\_\_\_ blossoms ... "Come, see what I have just done" quite a few people restored to health ... "Come, see what I have just done"... prompted insight that brings humans to a cure for ... Can you imagine God being that excited with God's creativity, God's giving that is received and acted upon?

Lois and Eunice supported Timothy with their faith; God supports us in ours. Sometimes God even helps to provide people like Lois and Eunice in our lives. God provides mothers like Hannah, a father, a next-door-neighbor or people at church, if a mother is not around-to provide little coats.

On this Mothers' Day, I feel like saying to God: "Here I am, your child. I accept your little coats, your prayers, your fussing around, your immense and secure shoulders and lap—your being there to plunk upon when tired."

One writer presented a vivid image of a mother holding up a coat, unbuttoned, ready for a child to enter. No doubt all of you from teens on up have done that for someone—held a coat open for another to put their arms into. This author wrote descriptively about the mother who was holding out the coat: "When the coat puffed up, she'd quickly button up the spirit inside and hurry it home."

What an image! Imagine God holding up coats for us to put on... whatever it is that we need to be safe, comforted, or prepared to do what we need to do. As we accept what God is holding up for us, as we slip inside and hurry on, can you imagine God expressing, "Come, see what I have just done." "See what I have for you to do!"

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<sup>1</sup> Alice Walker