

“Flexible Blessings”

1 Samuel 1:4-9

(Hannah identified herself as ‘a woman who wants a child.’)

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Redlands First United Methodist Church
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Much of the year in our prayers we tell God the desires we want to fulfill. At Thanksgiving, we dwell on the fulfilled desires, or blessings we have, whether or not we had sought them out. Hannah, an important person in the bible for Jews, Christians, and Muslims, is a person whom we might think of mostly for what she had an intense desire to fulfill. Hannah, when we see her, has almost become “Hannah-the-woman-who-wants-a-child.” Hannah prayed fervently. She prayed so vehemently that the priest named Eli who saw her praying at the temple thought she was drunk.¹ Hannah’s husband, Elkinah, already had three children by his other wife in those ancient days, before monogamy was the norm. Hannah’s husband tried to console her, his true love, by saying, “Isn’t my love enough?” Basically, Hannah said “No.” Crying and not eating, she pleaded directly to Yahweh, “I want a male child.” Hannah-the-woman-who-wanted-a-child wanted a child so badly that she promised Yahweh that if she were blessed with a son, she would *give up that very child* to become a priest.

When my sister and I were graduating from Junior High School, there was a ceremony and dance. Our mother had sewn for us green and black pinstripe dresses with lots of ruffles. We went shopping for heels to wear—we were actually told to wear heels in those days. I found some black leather pumps that were extremely comfortable. *I wanted them.* But they were expensive. There were other black pumps, much less expensive, that actually looked quite similar. Inside myself, where no one could see, I became Carolyn-who-wants-those-shoes, but we purchased and wore the cheaper ones. I had a good time at the graduation events, but long afterward I still had a little pain inside. I became attached to my desire for those shoes. Even years after the events, I was still Carolyn-who-wanted-those-shoes.

Hannah went home from the temple at Shiloh where priest Eli had witnessed her praying so hard for a child, and it is said that “God opened her womb.” She and Elkinah did bear a child, whom they named Samuel. Samuel became a prominent King who would become highly respected and was the King who announced David King.

There are Hannah’s in this very room. Several of you have managed to have children through what seemed like miracles—through adoption or with amazing medical assistance. Some of you have faced cancer, been determined, prayed hard, and gotten healthy. Nan Self really wanted to be ordained, and it took her 25 years. Luvi Avendano is determined to be an Opera Singer; he’s working hard at it. All of you musicians, Roger Duffer is Director of the Inland Master Chorale, all of you who strive for high C’s or double octave low notes... fulfilled desires. Tor wanted to get dogs started on their way to guiding people with special needs. He does... I bet that every one of us in some aspect of our lives *is* Hannah or Nan or Tor or Roger—We’ve achieved a goal we held to fervently and prayed for hard.

Yet I imagine that at the *very same time* most of us could also empathize with me at graduation time when I was 13, when I did not get what I wanted, even though I wanted it really badly. There surely is something that each of you did not achieve or get that you really wanted.

Every story has its foreground and its background. Consider the recent election. There were those who worked really hard and won. However, others who worked equally hard did not win. I want to believe that God blesses, or wants to bless, all of them, as each gains perspective in their lives and, winning or losing, finds continued ways to seek to do good in the world.

God's blessings just do not follow an either-or logic. ***Everyone can be blessed by God. Whether or not they get exactly what they long for... God, I believe, offers flexible blessings—not just first prizes.***

This is the main point of this sermon: Everyone can be blessed by God, whether or not we get what we desired. God offers flexible blessings.

So, too, for the myriad sisters of Hannah, most of whom did have children and surely some who had no children. In a society that valued women mostly for having children, some of those surely wanted one almost as much as Hannah.² All the other women are in the background of this story.³ Some ancient women without children were certainly miserable or treated miserably, but I've got to believe that some ancient women who did not bear children—even in that society—felt blessed by God with the lives they did have.

Some friends of ours have been married a very long time. At one point, in their late thirties, they realized that though they wanted a child, it was becoming obvious that they would not be having them, and they shared with us how they had come to terms with that. They decided that they would actively seek to participate in the lives of their friends' children, to volunteer, for example, to take care of their friends' children now and then. This couple is now nearing retirement, and they talk openly about their deciding upon a retirement community where the adult peers are exciting and there's so much that is meaningful to do—because, they point out, they do not have children to care for them. They feel close to God *and very blessed*, by the God who offers *flexible blessings, not just stereotypical ones*.

It's kind of a challenge. If we pour our all into our wishes and become “Lance Armstrong-who-must-win,” “Hannah-who-wants-a-child,” “Carolyn-who-wants-those-shoes” or “Mr. Jones-who-wants-to-get-elected-Congressman,” our focused, fanatic, single-minded obsession may indeed help us to be “successful”—blessed with the desired outcome. However, if we pour our all into *one* goal so that our identity is almost merged with that goal, then we usually have to sacrifice a lot. Hannah sacrificed the very son she wanted (though we know she had five other children later). Lance Armstrong sacrificed lots of junk food you and I would have a hard time doing without. Politicians sacrifice lots of time with their families.

Does God answer some prayers and not others? Is the determining factor how fervently we pray? How hard we try?

A cartoon shows a man talking to his next-door neighbor while the man's wife is painting a name on the back of the new boat that's in the driveway. The man wanted the boat fervently. He explains to his neighbor that his wife agreed to his buying the boat if

she could name it. Unnoticed to the husband, the name she's painting on the back of the boat is "For Sale."

Is it perhaps that when we don't get a goal we haven't really set our whole selves toward that goal? I know that when I occasionally play tennis, I really don't care whether I win. I'm even that way about card games. I just don't try that hard. Now, when I play Scrabble, I do have a killer instinct—I want to win. But in most types of activities I don't care enough to go all-out. Maybe to get what we want we need to pray fervently and sacrifice all else.

The daughter of a friend of mine joined her high school's cross-country team. But the girl had almost *no* conception of winning; instead, she visited with people along the way as she ran. She enjoyed the talks, but she came in last in every single race. Yet, she *felt very blessed*.

I wanted those black leather heels, but not enough to put up a fuss, to really communicate my desire. If I had put my "all" into it, maybe I could have asked for 6 months of allowance, or sold lots of lemonade at the curb. Maybe our absolute fanatic desire for a goal helps us to get there—and helps God to help it to happen. If YOU have a big goal you truly want with all your heart, soul, and mind, GO FOR IT!

But then, is it *always* advisable to be so identified-with-a-goal-that-there-is-nothing-else? We admire people who are so identified. They make the news. But is that the model for how every one of us is called to live, for every goal we have?

How many of you saw the movie *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*? Many of us know the story, from the book or movie. Five children find special tickets that enable them to go to the Chocolate factory and to tour it with the owner, Willy Wonka. Charlie is one of those children. He's an empathic, poor, child who is attentive and cares about others. The other four children are each fanatic in some particular way. They are one-dimensional. There's the spoiled-girl-who-gets-everything-she-wants, the oversized boy-who-eats-and-eats-and-eats, the girl-who-is-a-champion-with-many-trophies, and the boy-who-is-addicted-to-TV. One by one each of these single-focused kids are done in by their own behaviors. The movie is really a moral tale told by Roal Dahl that illustrates the dangers of excessive preoccupation with any one thing.

Jesus guided us to pray, ask, and then to receive. Yet he also pointed out that we should not fret about our desires and needs—pointing out that the lilies of the fields are dressed in splendor—that flowers have what they need. Are Jesus' two words of advice contradictory? (1) Ask, and you shall receive. (2) Don't fret, be like the contented lilies.

If you want some new clothes, you can support your desire to a loved one that shares your bank account by pointing out that Jesus said to ask and receive. But if you are the loved one of another, sharing their bank account, and you are concerned about their potential purchase, you can suggest to them, "Can't you be content like the lilies of the field"?

We offer all sorts of conflicting "secular" advice that reflects this same conundrum: "Go girl," "Just do it," "Be all that you can be," but also "do not push the river," "accept things as they are," and "take time to smell the roses."

This awareness of the *flexibility of God's blessings* relates even to our health. Sometimes people *can* fight cancer with every single ounce of energy. Other times a person announces that he or she does not have any more energy. They can accept whatever happens. One knocks fervently, asks. The other is grateful for life as it is. Both

seek blessings from the God that offers flexible blessings—blessings that may make the news or may be in the background, but blessings nevertheless.

When John and I were dancing at my 40th High School reunion, a couple years ago, I was wearing a great pair of shoes and a dress I liked a lot. But those shoes and dress were not in my mind as I danced with John. What crossed my mind was this thought: “I’m genuinely happy.” That’s an odd kind of thought—to notice yourself being happy. Usually we just *are* happy, we don’t comment on it to ourselves. But, after grieving so hard for a year, always on the verge of sadness, I noticed my happiness. With the God of flexible blessings, we are blessed not only when we have what we’ve longed for, but also when we don’t get what we want, but **nevertheless** *arrive* at a state of mind and heart that enables us *as we are to feel blessed*.

As members of our congregation, we expect certain blessings—music and prayers and leadership and opportunities to serve in a meaningful way. Our celebration of our *Momentum* in Ministry sets up expectations for a blessed 2009. Yet, when we look back over this year, I bet the blessings we could name are not exactly the ones we expected. The same will be true next year. We’ll be blessed, and we’ll be blessings to others, in ways we cannot itemize or budget or put down on a goal list at this time.

This Thanksgiving the mashed potatoes may be lumpy; Aunt Zoe may be late; Uncle Joe may arrive too early; Mr. X may not eat enough; Mrs. Y may eat too much. Be open to things not being exactly as you want them; be flexible in counting your blessings.

This Thanksgiving may we all give thanks for what we have, and if we don’t have exactly what we have sought or expected, may we experience ourselves as blessed with what we do have... In the future, whether you are male or female, may you **be** fertile, like Hannah. If you have a dream, go for it! Be a Slumdog Millionaire maybe... But, be flexible, for then we just may meet God on that path.

¹ The priest spoke to her to admonish her for being drunk, and it was then that she told of her fervent prayers.

² The sacrifice that Hannah and Elkinah were making at the temple, along with Elkinah’s other wife was based on how many children a woman had.

³ This little family story of Elkinah and Hannah and their first child Samuel is told within a bigger framework of Israel needing a king. Samuel becomes one of Israel’s great men of destiny, the first of the prophets after Moses. Samuel had the honor of anointing David as king—and Samuel is still held with high respect by Jews, Christians, and Muslims.