

I've Been Meaning to Ask...Where Does It Hurt? 1 Samuel 1:1-17 and Mark 5:21-34

Amy Kennedy
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For those who don't know me, I am Amy Kennedy, the minister of Congregational Care here at FUMC. My job is to listen out for that might need a little extra support and to point to helpful resources when I can. I'm the staff person who delivers prayer shawls or makes hospital visits or helps folks connect with resources like Stephen Ministers, Doorstep Disciples or the Visitation team.

Today I have been invited to contribute to a four-part sermon series that is called, "I've Been Meaning To Ask..." Tim Kobler got us started last week with the question, "I've Been Meaning To Ask...Where Are You From?" Today's sermon starts with the question: I've Been Meaning To Ask...Where Does It Hurt?

As we begin to leave our homes and mingle more, I hear lots of gratitude for the team that has produced our online worship option during the pandemic. They've done an amazing job of making worship possible during our distancing. I hear joy at seeing family we've missed these past months. And I bet we've got lots of stories that are harder to tell from this time of being apart. Of how we felt scared or alone or angry. Maybe you had some new insight that causes you to look at things differently now. What do we do with these deeper stories of struggle and wisdom? Let's look back to the Bible for some clues.

Hannah lived in a time when women shared husbands in extended families and were valued for how many offspring they could contribute. Hannah was teased and marginalized because she had no children. In her distress, sometimes she wouldn't eat and she made her way to the temple to pray a desperate prayer asking God to see her and to help her conceive a child. The scripture says her lips were moving, but her voice was silent. Her prayer came from deep down inside. The priest Eli saw her lips moving and assumed she was drunk. He scolded her: "How long will you act like a drunk? Sober up!"

Can you imagine kneeling at the altar in prayer and being treated this way? Eli got it wrong. I am so grateful that the Bible includes stories like this. Stories that remind us that people who attend church and people who work at church get it wrong sometimes. Eli made assumptions and spoke out of judgment, not out of love. And I ask myself, are there times when I get it wrong? When I jump to conclusions and misjudge people?

When someone doesn't reply to my email or text, do I assume I am being ignored? Or do I realize they might be busy or overwhelmed? When I hear someone use profanity, do I take offense at the vocabulary without wondering what inspires such anger? When I see a mom snap at her kids while grocery shopping, do I judge her parenting skills or do I remember how hard it is to shop with tired kids? Could I offer her a word of encouragement instead of judgment? I hope you will ask similar questions in your own life, but for now, let's return to Hannah and Eli.

Luckily, Hannah did not run and hide when Eli scolded her. She openly admitted her pain. “Don’t think your servant is some good-for-nothing woman. I have been pouring out my heart to the Lord. I’ve been praying out of my great worry and trouble!”

Eli’s judgment dissolved. Suddenly he saw her faith more clearly and he was moved to respond with compassion. “Then go in peace. And may the God of Israel give you what you’ve asked from him.”

Hannah went on to become the mother of Samuel. She brought her son to the temple and Eli mentored him. Samuel went on to become the prophet who anointed both Saul and David as Kings of Israel. Hannah’s prayer at the temple and her sharing with Eli helped to shape her people’s future. The words don’t always come easily, but I hope that our church is a place where prayers and conversations can shape our future too.

Let’s look at our New Testament reading:

Jesus is on his way when he is interrupted, not once, but twice. Once by a temple official pleading for his daughter and once by a woman who has been bleeding for years. She had spent lots of money and lots of time seeking cures. Think how tired and discouraged she must have been. But for some reason, Jesus sparked hope in her. She wasn’t trying to be disruptive. She didn’t want Jesus to be considered unclean, like her. She thought maybe she could just touch the hem of his garment and feel better.

And she did. Her bleeding stopped! But even in her healing, she didn’t want to draw attention. She just breathed a huge sigh of relief and thought she would disappear to celebrate privately. But Jesus looked around carefully. He wanted to find her because hearing her story, being in relationship with her, was part of the healing. So Jesus asked, “Who touched my clothes?”

His disciples rolled their eyes and said, “There are dozens of people touching you. Why are you even asking? Come on. Let’s keep moving.” Here’s another case where the Bible reassures us that followers of Jesus don’t always understand how Jesus works.

Even so, this woman heard Jesus’ question and came forward with fear and trembling. It was not easy for her to approach a stranger. It was not easy to tell her story, but she fell down in front of Jesus and told him the whole truth. The whole truth as she saw it. And after he had listened, Jesus said, “Daughter, your faith has healed you; go in peace.”

I hope you will notice here: Jesus doesn’t take credit for this healing. He gives credit to her faith, a faith she expressed by holding on to her hope, reaching out for help and telling her story. There is power in naming what ails us and having a supportive listener. Thank goodness, Jesus paused to listen and to bless her. Her healing would not have been complete otherwise.

Can we have the courage of these two women, one in the Old Testament and one in the New, to be honest about our struggles with God and with each other? Our stories may not be as dramatic as theirs. Maybe we just admit that we are tired of rethinking everything? Do we feel safe to say if we are uncomfortable with returning to church or being out in public? Can we share that it's hard to return to the swift pace of life after such a long pause?

Don't worry- I'm not asking you to tell your biggest worries to everyone. But I do want to encourage you to slow down and to give yourself the time to process these past few months and to tell your own story. As you consider how you might do this, I want you to know about three options our church offers. I trust you can choose if one of these works for you.

The first option is a visit to the Trees of Laments along our promenade at the corner of State and Washington. In 2016 Debbie Houghton and I were on a Celtic Spirituality pilgrimage in Ireland, when we saw these trees that had strips of cloth blowing from their branches in the wind. People would visit these trees and ask for God's help and then leave a visible sign of something they are struggling with. We want to give you a chance to try praying in this way sometime when you are downtown or perhaps at a tree near your home.

We have provided strips of cloth and are inviting folks to leave a strip on one of the trees along the promenade. After you offer your concern to God, we hope you won't feel alone in carrying your burden and that you can walk away feeling a little lighter. Again, you'll find instructions and strips of cloth near the promenade at State and Washington Streets if you'd like to try this practice of asking for God's help.

A second option is for those who want to tell their story out loud in a confidential way. I invite you to ask about meeting with a Stephen Minister. Stephen Ministers are lay people trained in active listening who meet with folks on a regular basis when they are walking through a hard time. They don't judge or nag or fix. But just telling a bit of your story and naming what is difficult for you and knowing that someone is praying on your behalf can be the start of new insights and healing. I encourage you to contact me or Elaine Shaw or the church office if you would like to know more about this option.

The third option is one you can try right here, right now. We are going to follow the example of the woman who approached Jesus. On your way back to your seats after receiving the communion elements, I invite you to pause at one of the two stations where we have placed prayer shawls. I invite you to place your hand on that prayer shawl. If you don't feel comfortable touching it, you can just put your hands over your heart. You don't have to say a word out loud- just pause to hope that things can get better and know that God, the Eternal Listener who knows you better than you know yourself, loves you and wants the best for you even in the messiness and uncertainty of this time.

And as you pause, Debbie, Shonagh and I will offer you this blessing. Soak in these words and carry them with you when you feel deeply wounded or just a little out of sorts. **God sees you. Christ strengthens you. Spirit surrounds you with love. Amen.**

I'll close us with these hopes grounded in the scripture we read today.

May we make room in our lives for someone who asks us, "Where does it hurt?"

May we have the faith of Hannah that who believed God sees us and hears us with compassion.

May we, like Eli, look past our mistaken first impressions and open our hearts to hear one another.

May we have the hope of the woman who suffered much and risked reaching out for the hem of Jesus' garment.

May we, like Jesus, resist the temptation to swoop in to fix without stopping to see who needs our help.

Like Jesus, may we pause to listen and to be in relationship with one another. Amen.