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“On Second Thought...”

I Samuel 1:4-20 | *Read the scripture online* <http://bible.oremus.org/?qI=220363238>

Beginning the week after Thanksgiving, I have the privilege of teaching a course at Pittsburgh Seminary on pastoral care. I will remind future pastors about the challenges involved in pastoral ministry and some of the skills they should develop to meet those challenges. And near the top of that list is the skill of listening. The ability to hear comes naturally; the ability to listen is a skill that must be nurtured. Each one of us goes through the day with our head filled with our own thoughts. You know how there are radio stations that, starting on Thanksgiving, only play Christmas music for the next month? Our brains play only our personal radio station non-stop in our heads. Mine's on the “Randy station” 24 hours a day and yours is set to your own station. That's why when we initiate a conversation our first inclination is to think something like this: “We don't have much time, so let me just tell you about me.”

Listening means turning down our own radio station and allowing someone else's music to play for a while. That's why Jesus so regularly said, “Those with ears to hear, let them hear.” But there are lots of things that make it hard to listen. There are other people whom we find it hard to listen to. There are topics that make us uncomfortable. Sometimes our own pain and troubles distract us and make it hard to listen to someone else. There are skills that can be nurtured to help us get beyond these barriers to good listening: skills like showing empathy, being respectful, and making sure you understand what a person is really saying before you respond. But fundamentally, good listening skills require self-awareness. You need to know what songs are playing loudly on your personal radio station and how to turn down that internal volume so you can hear someone else's story. You need to be willing to re-think your initial inclinations, quiet your initial anxieties and say to yourself, “On second thought, this is what I should do now.”

The ability to have “second thoughts” often has to be taught to us from a young age. A Sunday School teacher asked the class if any of the ten commandments were especially appropriate for brothers and sisters, and one sharp, little girl replied, “Thou shalt not kill.” I assume the teacher asked her to re-think her answer. During a busy shopping time, a coffeehouse was extremely crowded. A woman entered and asked one of the workers behind the counter, “Do I have to take a number?” “No,” a clerk replied. “We are on the honor system in this store.” “Good,” the woman yelled. “Then I'm next.” Hopefully the glares of the other customers caused the woman to have second thoughts.

Today is Full Inclusion Sunday, in which we celebrate the faithful gifts of all God's children, regardless of age, gender, race, economic status, physical ability, and sexual identity. Over the past 50 years, our nation has had second thoughts on its prior policies regarding equality between the races, genders, people with disabilities, and people of diverse sexual identities. These have not been easy conversations and the dialogue is far from finished. In terms of gay and lesbian citizens, this past election saw many noteworthy victories, including the passage of same-gender marriage rights in an additional three states—bringing that total now to 12 states and the District of Columbia. Although recent polls by ABC News, Washington Post and Gallup now show that a majority of Americans support same-gender marriage, many churches, including parts of our own denomination and the leadership of the Catholic church, continue to oppose



the validity of these unions. This past week, the Archbishop of San Francisco said, “Many people simply do not understand [that] marriage is...the only institution that unites a man and a woman to each other,” calling it a “child-centered institution whose meaning is written in our nature.”¹ This is sad, because the bible is full of examples that should cause these spiritual leaders to listen to other’s stories and have second thoughts on their position.

There are over twenty different types of families described in the bible. In both the Old and New Testaments, families were multi-generational clans, involving grandparents, parents, children, uncles, aunts, cousins and more. There were polygamous marriages, such as Elkanah’s marriage to Peninnah and Hannah. There were blended families, especially involving levirate marriage in which the man married the widow of his deceased brother. There were adoptions into families (see Abraham), concubines whose children were treated as true descendants of the father (see Jacob), and cross-cultural, interracial marriages and families (see Moses). There were single adults sharing a home (see Martha, Mary and Lazarus); there were two women making a home without men (see Naomi and Ruth); there were men whose love surpassed that of women (see David and Jonathan, 2 Samuel 1:26). It is an affront to single people of all ages, single parents, blended families, and intergenerational families to claim that scripture only supports a [Mom, Dad, and two kids] June and Ward Cleaver definition of family. If people would stop and give this subject a second thought, they would realize that a God-blessed family cannot be restricted to one narrow definition. Rather, every family will have a variety of configurations over the years, including singleness and unions and multiple generations. And when two people in that configuration are lovingly, faithfully committed to one another and the good of that family, their God-blessed rights should be respected by the civil authorities.

In too many communities right now, the church is playing the role of Eli while countless Hannahs are walking past them to pray directly to God. Did you notice that detail in the story that Heather, Patrice and I read? In verse 9 of I Samuel 1, we’re told that Hannah rose to go to the temple in Shiloh, and when she arrived, the priest Eli was sitting on the seat by the front door. Yet Hannah did not speak to him. She did not name for him her depression, her tears, her times of despair in which she couldn’t find the strength to eat. Did she walk by Eli because his was one of the voices telling her that she had no real value because she hadn’t given birth? Was his one of the voices telling her she was fatally flawed in God’s eyes because she wasn’t more like Peninnah?

And was she joined by other Hannahs who walk by the church of Eli whenever it says you are not welcome because of your race or sexual identity? When the church of Eli says that your depression, your battles with anorexia and bulimia and cutting and self-abuse are shameful secrets no one can ever know about? When the church of Eli says that the bullies who provoke gay and lesbian youth to attempt suicide are somehow justified?

Eli does not come off well in this story. He was blind to the inner strength and faith it took for Hannah to rise up from the ground and go to the house of the Lord. Eli was ignorant of her pain and blind to her piety, when he accused her of making a drunken spectacle of herself. Thankfully the story doesn’t stop there. Hannah broke the silence. Notice that: she broke the silence; and said she’d not been pouring liquor into her body, but rather was pouring out her pain and suffering before the Lord. Then she boldly says, “Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman.” Eyes that look back with integrity and strength into the face of the accuser are the strongest weapons we possess, whether it is looking back into a biased Eli in Shiloh, a racist Birmingham sheriff with a



fire hose, or a cluster of vengeful teens confronting a gay youth in a school hallway. Because of Hannah's humble strength and her words, "Do not regard me as a worthless woman," Eli had second thoughts. He ends up offering her a benediction: *Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made*. A supposedly drunken spectacle is now recognized as a sacred spectacle. The woman who responded, "Let your servant find favor in your sight" will hear her words spoken by Mary generations later, who was told by the angel Gabriel she had found favor with God and she too humbly responded, "Let it be according to your word."

I pray that people stop walking past the doorposts of the Church of Eli. I pray that our faith may be modeled after the example of Hannah so that we will belong to a church of justice, a church of inclusion, a church of love, and thereby a church of Jesus Christ. That may require some second and third thoughts on our part; that's alright. God is patient. Like the father waiting for the prodigal to turn around and come home, God is anxious for our return to the fullness of God's word and love. What is required of us? It requires listening skills. Turning down the radio stations inside our minds and listening to the stories of those around us, especially when they are carrying around heavy secrets and pain; especially when they are worried that their social status or sexual identity necessarily closes every door before them. Listen carefully, respectfully, compassionately. When prejudice or your own demons tempt you to dismiss someone as an unworthy spectacle, take time for a second thought. Who knows? Like Eli, it may lead you to a new place altogether and allow you to offer a benediction of peace.

Hannah rose. Despite everything, she rose. Hannah walked past those who had shown they had nothing to offer her. Hannah prayed and trusted in God to provide for her. When confronted by Eli, Hannah broke the silence with integrity and faith. And in time, Hannah delivered a child, who would become the prophet Samuel. That's good news. On second thought, at the end of the passage we're told that God remembered Hannah. God always remembers us. On second thought, I think that's the real good news.

AMEN

¹ Jonathan Pitts, "Catholic bishops struggle with message on gay marriage." *The Baltimore Sun*, November 13, 2012. Quoting Archbishop Salvatore J. Cordileone of San Francisco, chairman of the bishops' subcommittee on the promotion of defense of marriage.

