

Hannah's Prayer
1 Samuel 2: 1-10, Yr. B. November 15, 2015

What happened in Paris on Friday broke our hearts. We ask what can we do to make this world peaceful and safe? Last week we prayed for peace, and it is a long way to go. There are many ways to talk about peace. Today, we begin with the basic human issue, peace between the two sexes.

Hannah, mother of the prophet Samuel, was in a desperate situation. She needed a son. She needed a son badly, immediately. When talking to the priest Eli, Hannah promised to dedicate her son to serve the Lord. At the end, she got one. Samuel was born.

The text we have just read is Hannah's prayer. It is a moving prayer of thanksgiving. Hannah sings the nature of God, of God's provision and care. It is similar to many ancient victory prayers, like the one Miriam sang after ancient Israelites crossed the Red Sea. These victory songs are not just praising God for deliverance, but they also sing the nature of God. These lines are some of what Hannah sang.

The bows of the mighty are broken
Those who were hungry are well fed
God raises the poor from the dust

This prayer is remarkably similar to the one sung by Mary, Jesus' mother, when she was told she was given a son. But unlike Hannah, Mary didn't pray for a son, Mary didn't want a son, not right away. Hannah wanted a son very badly right away. The reason was that Hannah's husband had another wife, and she had children. Hannah didn't. You know the consequence.

But Mary upon knowing God's favour, also sang a song of liberation, of justice. We may see the tradition of thanksgiving. Maybe Mary memorized Hannah's prayer growing up. Both women sing of God's nature. How God cares about the plight of the poor, the hungry. It carries strong theme of social justice where the proud, the strong, the mighty were bought down.

God will not let other people to look down on them because they are poor, hungry, low in status, and especially women without offspring, more specifically, without sons.

Preceding the Book of 1 Samuel in our Christian is the Book of Ruth. You all know well what happened to Ruth and Namoi. You know well the situations of women and widows, without husbands, and without sons. Maybe those situations are the reasons for Hannah's distress, praying days and night for a son. For her future would be in jeopardy without a son. Her status as a member in her tribe would be miserable.

While this prayer is beautiful, it exposes the conditions of women in most of ancient time. They often experienced rejection, fear, and anxiety if their bodies do not produce sons. Producing a son becomes their biggest hope to obtain security and respect.

While this prayer praises God's salvation for deliverance, it teaches us the very important nature and desire of God concerning how we should live. God cares. God desires justice. Gender justice may not be spelled out in this prayer, but faith in God inspires us to see both sexes as equal. There is no male and female, Paul says, we have been set free to exercise our gifts and talents given by God.

The church throughout the ages, despite doing it slowly and sometimes with setbacks, has been actively taking away prejudices, inequality, and exploitation of women. The gospel teaches us to see that the contribution and gifts of women are not limited to kitchens and bedrooms, but also in hospitals, court houses, engineering firms and as leaders of nations.

This is what the United Church Canada has committed to do. The church that you and I are part of is committed to gender justice. Earlier I told you how aboriginal justice as the aftermath of Residential School scandal shaped the United Church. Another important milestone is gender equality. This is the legacy and commitment of The United Church.

The UCC is one of the earliest denominations to ordain women and to fight for women's status in society. To be part of this tradition, we learn to relate to women differently, with respect, with justice, honour and care.

Our Chinese culture still has a long way to go despite much being changed. Although we have accepted it conceptually, to live it out is still a challenge. And in the area of women leadership in churches, I see many churches, including ours, have room to improve.

Women are not second-class citizens. This is our conviction.

There is a problem: our assumed and preferential language for God. To embrace gender justice has many obstacles. Theological language is one of them.

We keep talking about God as Father, as male. Sometimes when we pray, we may be thinking about a kind old-man, listening to our petition. If you have gone to the first U-Talks presentation, you would have heard an amazing address given by one of the presenters, Dr. Naila Keleta-Mae. She is an award-winning professor of Theatre and Performance at the University of Waterloo.

In her address where she talks about educating women for leadership, she invites us to examine our assumed language for God.

The Bible makes it clear that God isn't human. Numbers 23:19. God as man we found in the Bible is a metaphor. But to keep saying God in male terms gives the male gender privileges and unforeseen advantages. It gives half of the sexes societal advantage.

There are times we say, "our Father in heaven," but also the need to say "our mother in heaven." But then you may say, "If God isn't male, God isn't female either." That is correct.

My preference is to speak of God as God. God is totally beyond human comprehension, beyond human language. There is no language that is able to fully capture the essence of God. I like to speak of God as Creator of heaven and earth, creative power and so on.

But I understand these are examples of metaphorical language. Just as God as a father empowers men, we need God as mother to empower women.

For us, the phrase "Our heavenly father" comes out so easily from our mouths. Because we have said it for so long, the idea that God is male have consolidated in our minds. It set in stone in many of our hearts that God is male, a father. But in fact God is not.

Yes, God can be understood as a father, but God can also be understood as a mother.

I think the doctrine of incarnation invites us to think of God differently. God isn't human; otherwise, there is no need of incarnation. Incarnation tells me God isn't like us. But the language we use to describe God is such that as if God were human. The male language for God we found in the Bible is the reflection of a culture bound in time. It is what the assumption of the time allowed them to say.

That is the heritage we receive from the Jewish faith, a very human-like kind of God.

Then, you may say, when we use male pronoun such as “he” or “Him”, we are thinking about Jesus. Good, let’s talk about Jesus, the doctrine of incarnation tells me God came to us in one time as a man, Jewish man where he lived among us as a human being. So when we talk about that Jesus, a Jesus of 2000 years ago, we may say, “he” or “him”. But today, Jesus is with God. God isn’t human. So....

How should we talk about Jesus of today?

Then, you may say, “Pastor, don’t blame me. I don’t want to talk about God as a father, but Jesus started this. The Lord’s Prayer teaches me to pray – our father in heaven. And the whole of the Bible keeps talking about God as a male figure.”

Humm.... Very good. That is a good question. This is the time for us to think. So we care about what Jesus said, right....

Jesus said many things. I wonder how many of you have carried out what Jesus said. Jesus also says,

29 If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them.

47 And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell,

41 If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles

By the way, Jesus only called twelve men, only men, only Jewish men.

Our ability to take faith and culture seriously, not the wordings in the Bible literally, is important for the future of the Christian faith. This mindset is important for our ability to be God’s messenger of peace and justice in the world.

The Bible doesn’t dictate to us what to believe. The Bible doesn’t demand us to neglect critical thinking. Contrary, the Bible opens up conversations for us to discern the needs of our time.

When the United Church moves to promote Intercultural church, we recognize our languages, convictions, behaviors, that form the ways we talk about things are guided by the lenses of culture. Our experiences and understandings are shaped by culture. There simply is no perspective that is culture-free.

The denomination is moving toward intercultural church. One of the statements of

intercultural church is this:

“To be intercultural church is to acknowledge we cannot capture the complexity of God through our limited cultural understandings, our time bound understandings, and our talk of God guided by previously shaped assumptions. Our understanding of God is limited when we see this God through only one dominant cultural perspective... Instead, our understandings of God and our scriptures can be deepened when we come together, as disciples of Jesus Christ, in all of our differences and diversities to acknowledge intercultural reality and richness.”

Many times I have told you, teachings that have been said a long time may not be the truth, ideas just discovered may not be heresy.

To be responsible followers requires us to be courageous enough to open up spaces for examination, for critical evaluation, and from there, recreate appropriate theological language and thinking in our time.

To close, let me say there is one more obstacle to face as we try to educate toward gender justice: No songs to sing!

There are so little hymns and songs that take gender equality seriously, both old and new. Songs, as I have told you before, are powerful medium of education. In the church, hymns and songs educate us theologically. But we keep singings songs that portray God as male. That is my passion to look for songs that that speak of God as God and God as female and mothers.

Keep looking for more gender equality songs. If there is none, we need to write some.

Finally, to the men in this room, we need to reflect on this. I believe you take gender equality seriously. But because of our upbringings, our mind agrees, but our actions still in search of adequate expressions. If you are a young father who has young children at home, I encourage you to make yourself as an example, and teach your kids to live respectful life toward women.