

Rick Snyder
 First Presbyterian Church
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A Tribute to Moms!
 Selections of I Samuel 1

Mother's Day, for many of us, is a bittersweet. Many of us have lost our mothers. My mom died 21 years ago, but I still grieve, having watched this Phi Beta Kappa Latin and French teacher, this Bible Study and Circle leader, this PTA President and the secretary of Lehigh's Chapter of the American Association of University Women, slowly deteriorate due to dementia.

Mother's Day can be bittersweet. Some of us longed to become mothers, but couldn't conceive, and we grieve not having a family. And some of us have had challenging relationships with our mothers. Family relationships are, well, *complicated!* That's why I had to laugh at Dear Abby's Prayer for a mother-in-law:

O Lord, help me to be glad when my son or daughter picks a mate. If he brings home a girl with two heads, let me love both heads equally. When my son says, "Mom, we're getting married," don't let me say, "How far along is she?" Don't let me think that my choice of a mate would have been better. Zip my mouth during wedding planning and when I'm tempted to give more advice on child-rearing than I wanted from my mom. Help me to be a joy to be around, so I won't write to Dear Abby, complaining that my children neglect me. Amen.

Since most of us don't have *Ozzie and Harriett* families, picking a text for today is challenging, although I won't make the mistake a friend of my made. He, like I, will preach about Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel, from I Samuel 1. Alas, my friend puts in the bulletin, not I Samuel 1, but I Samuel 2. So the elder reads this charming text, "*Eli's sons are wicked; they have no regard for the Lord. They steal the sacrificial offerings, taking all the choice pieces. They sleep with all the women who serve at the Tent of Meeting. So they are put to death.*" Oops! Happy Mother's Day! So we'll focus on I Samuel 1.

Hannah is a witness to the statement, "*The hand that rocks the cradle controls the world.*" Her son Samuel is the moral force that shapes Israel, guiding her from being a chaotic, morally bankrupt, loose-knit confederacy of tribes to a being a nation with a king, secure borders and an army to defend herself. Yet he prophetically warns Israel, "*You are choosing an earthly King to be like all the other nations. But don't ever forget that your true King is God. You will prosper only if you seek his face and obey His commands.*"

It is true: "*The hand that rocks the cradle controls the world.*" One of the most remarkable mothers of all time is Susanna Wesley, the mother of John and

Charles Wesley. Marrying at an early age, she bears nineteen children, and loses nine of them in infancy. Another child is crippled, and yet another can't speak until age six. Her husband, a pastor, can't manage money, and the family barely ekes by. His sermons are so inflammatory that parishioners twice burn down the family's house. And due to a childish disagreement about English politics, he takes off for long periods of time, leaving Susanna to cope with the crushing load of childrearing and finances alone!

Yet Susanna cares for her children's minds, instilling a love of learning. She cares for her children's hearts, modeling kindness, discipline, and goodness, and she cares for her children's souls, teaching them to love the Lord their God. She prays for each child daily and spends an hour of 1-1 time with each child weekly.

Susanna's child-rearing philosophy is very contemporary: No eating between meals; lights out by 8 p.m. Teach children to pray as soon as they can speak. Don't punish a child if a fault is confessed, but never allow a sinful act to go unpunished. Commend and reward good behavior. Commend any effort to please, even if poorly performed. Always keep your promises!

Her son John, of course, founds Methodism and preaches to over a million people in the 18th century. Her son Charles writes over 9000 hymns including, *O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing, Hark! The Herald Angels Sing, Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus*, and the Easter hymn, *Christ the Lord is Risen Today*. Both sons say they owe everything to their mother Susanna.

Selections of I Samuel 1

Like Susanna Wesley's life, Hannah's life is very difficult. Hannah is the first wife of a devout Israelite named Elkanah. But Hannah is barren, which means no old-age security, eventual loss of property, and the disappearance of the family-line. So Elkanah takes a second wife named Peninnah, who pops out child after child. Each year the family travels to a shrine named Shiloh to worship and sacrifice to their Lord. There Peninnah mocks Hannah for her barrenness, leaving Hannah in tears.

Family dynamics are indeed complicated. The word "Hannah," means beautiful and attractive. Hannah is Elkanah's favorite. The word "Peninnah" means fertile. So like the father who favors his football-star son over his scholarly daughter, envy and backbiting reign year after year. And sadly, Elkanah says, *"Don't ! mean more to you than ten children,"* rather than what Hannah needs to hear, "I love you more than any children you can produce." True love looks beyond ourselves and our own frame of reference to care for another!

One year, Hannah can stand it no longer. She enters the sanctuary, drops to her knees weeping and prays, *"Lord, if you will look upon your servant's misery and remember me, and give her a son, I will give him to the Lord all the days of his*

life.” Despite her humiliation, Hannah still calls herself a *servant of the Lord*. She hasn’t lost her faith! She still turns to the Lord, sharing her heart-wrenching need.

And in truth, none of us have it all together. We value positive thinking, strength and self-reliance, not wanting to appear needy. But life is like a sine wave with ups and downs, peaks and valleys. Back in March, a local high school basketball coach leads his team to the school’s first-ever state berth. Arriving home from ISU, he drops by his parents’ house to hug his dad, his mentor and high school coach. He’s on the mountaintop. At midnight, the phone rings. His dad has died of a heart attack. So in hours, he hits rock bottom. But our Lord understands, and, as our loving Parent, the Lord feels our pain!

Shiloh’s priest, Eli, thinks Hannah is drunk. But Hannah confesses that she’s not drunk, she’s “deeply troubled,” a very careful word choice. For *deeply troubled* in Hebrew means both embittered and hard, but also persistent. Susanna Wesley can throw in the towel when her wayward husband deserts her. But instead she turns daily to the Lord. She wears an apron, and when coping with the loss of nine children and providing for ten more, often alone, she tells her children, “When I pull the apron over my head, don’t interrupt me, for I’m praying.” Persistent prayer gets us through the difficult times! After Hannah’s confession, Eli prays for blessing and sends Hannah home in peace!

So Hannah returns home, puts her future in God’s hands, and soon conceives. No, our prayers aren’t always answered as we wish. But when we ask and seek and knock, we always receive God’s presence. And God always has a plan B. I entered college wanting to be a professor like my father, except in math not engineering. I do reasonably well. But my junior year, I room with a 16 year-old prodigy, who can scan textbooks that take me hours and hours of study. I quickly realize that he has gifts, of which I can only dream. That was really demoralizing. So I worry if I have a future. But God has a plan!

Hannah conceives and bears Samuel. In a few months, after Samuel is weaned, she takes him back to Shiloh to dedicate him to the Lord. And very appropriately, since a child is a gift of God, she offers this beautiful prayer of thanksgiving, “*My heart rejoices in the Lord . . . The Lord is holy; there is no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God . . . The Lord raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap. For the foundations of the earth are the Lord’s (and) He will guard the feet of his saints.*”

I’ve always liked the thought that we’re to give our children two things – roots and wings! Roots: the security of steadfast nurture and care! Roots: unhurried time that allows them to open their hearts, for with children love is spelled T-I-M-E. Whenever I tried to talk to Erik or Mark, I’d never get anywhere. But if we did things together, if we played golf, went bowling, grabbed a lunch at McDonalds, or went jogging or cycling, we’d start to talk, often about very significant things.

We give our children roots: the certain knowledge of God's unconditional love, and the promise that God has a plan and a destiny for their lives. For Samuel isn't just any child. God calls Samuel to be a prophet, to speak God's word to Israel. And as God works through Samuel, Samuel will give Israel moral direction, ending the chaos when every person "does what is right in their own eyes." Samuel will anoint Saul as the first king of Israel. He will help Saul bring Israel together as a nation, defeat Israel's enemies and protect her borders. But Samuel keeps reminding Israel that her true King isn't Saul, but the Lord her God, whose commands she must obey.

By dedicating Samuel to the Lord, Hannah is committing herself to a parent's most important task – the shaping of character – for it is our character in the long run that will determine our destiny. It is so sad to see supremely talented athletes, a Jamar Smith with his struggles with alcohol, a Josh Hamilton once again falling off the wagon with drugs, Heisman Trophy winner, Jameis Winston of Florida State, accused of rape, apparently so caught up in their press clippings that they harm themselves and others. Or to see respected schools like North Carolina or Syracuse create cultures that encourage the flaunting of rigorous academic standards.

A sound character, built upon the traits of discipline, humility, honesty, compassion, service, and the resolve to do what is right even when it isn't expedient, plus believing deeply that God has a purpose for our lives, gives us deep roots. And that is the contrast between Samuel and the sons of Eli in I Samuel 2. Samuel will shape a nation. Listen again what Eli's sons do: *"Eli's sons are wicked; they have no regard for the Lord. They steal the sacrificial offerings, taking the choice pieces for themselves. They sleep with all the women who serve at the Tent of Meeting."* So perhaps I Samuel 2 does have a message for any Sunday we think about family relationships.

Children need roots and they need wings. Hannah, at great cost to herself, leaves Samuel at Shiloh to be prepared for the destiny the Lord has for him. It's like paraphrasing the poem by Guillaume Apollinaire, "Come to the edge," he said. "I can't; I'm afraid." "Come to the edge," he said. "I can't; I'm afraid." But I came to the edge, and he pushed me, and I flew." Roots and wings!

Hannah is a remarkable woman. Her story shows us that life can be very difficult, but that in the midst of that difficulty God does not desert us. Her story teaches us that persistent prayer sees us through the difficult times, and that God's timing is not our timing. Her story teaches us that, when we're tempted to become embittered, don't lose faith. God is always at work. And Hannah's story teaches us that our children need roots and they need wings!

But, on this Mother's Day, I think again of a mother's importance. For as we see with Hannah and Samuel, *The hand that rocks the cradle controls the world.* Happy Mother's Day!