

Twenty Sixth Sunday After Pentecost – Fr. John Warfel Sermon

Hannah wanted a baby, a son, desperately  
She wept continuously, she refused to eat  
To make matters worse, her rival, her husband's other wife  
provoked her mercilessly year after year:

*You'll never have a son  
The Lord has closed your womb  
Only I can give children to Elkanah.  
You are as useless as a broken pot, you pitiful old thing.  
Who will take care of you when Elkanah dies?*

Now Elkanah loved Hannah;  
he loved her more than he did Hammah's spiteful rival  
He didn't care that Hannah was barren – he loved her.  
*Am I not more to you than ten sons?*, he asked

Elkanah doesn't get it  
I'm not sure that any man fully understands-  
the emotional and spiritual trauma that a childless woman bears  
Hannah's heart's desire was to have a baby, a son  
She would do anything, promise anything to achieve her heart's desire:

*O Lord of hosts,  
if only you would look on the misery of your servant,  
but will give to your servant a male child,  
I will dedicate him to you, I will give him over to the service of the Lord.  
He won't drink intoxicants, he won't cut his hair, he won't shave – ever.*

Eli, the temple priest, accuses Hannah of being drunk.  
Notice how the men in this story are a bit obtuse;  
and this just mortifies Hannah's even further  
But finally Hannah sets Eli straight  
And so Eli sends her off with a blessing-  
that the God of Israel might grant her petition.  
The story has a happy ending.  
Hannah becomes pregnant and she gives birth to Samuel,  
the last of the Hebrew judges and first of its classical prophets.  
True to her word, Hannah gives Samuel over to the temple priest, Eli  
and well, the rest is history.

Her heart's desire now realized,

Hannah sings a song of great joy,  
a song of thanksgiving reflected years later in Mary's Song of Praise,  
The Magnificat.  
God heard her prayers and granted her request.  
A happy ending indeed.

But what happens when there's not a happy ending?  
In my early twenties I too shared my heart's desire with God,  
and I pleaded with an intensity that perhaps approached even Hannah's  
I begged, cajoled, and bargained-  
to win the heart of a very special gentleman  
For nine days in succession I went to daily Mass  
I prayed the rosary each day; I went to confession

In other words, I pulled out all the stops,  
called in all my spiritual chips,  
made ambitious promises -  
things I would do if only God granted my request.  
Why, I'd be so filled with love that I would do everything in my power-  
to help bring about the Kingdom of God.

I literally ached for Divine intervention,  
An intervention well within the realm of possibilities,  
at least to my mind.  
My life's happiness seemed to hang in the balance.  
And I was devastated, absolutely devastated,  
when I didn't get what I wanted so desperately  
I was shattered, so shattered in fact,  
that it took years for me to share my heart's desire with God again  
I just couldn't bear the disappointment  
so I shut down.

Oh, I still went to church, of course.  
I still prayed, but not for myself.  
I wasn't about to ask God for anything personal-  
lest I be grievously disappointed once again.  
Lest God deny my fervent prayer once again,  
and I stop believing altogether.

Here's the thing  
With intimacy comes vulnerability  
We cannot be intimate without also being vulnerable,

We cannot have an intimate relationship with God,  
unless we are willing to be vulnerable at the same time.  
It's OK to pour our hearts out to God  
It's OK to pray for a specific outcome  
And at the same time,  
it's equally OK to express our pain when we don't get what we want.

It's not just OK, it's necessary that we express disappointment,  
even grave disappointment,  
when we feel that God has let us down.  
We must own up to our disappointment with God  
Unless we do,  
our prayer life will never be fully genuine  
and our intimacy with God will remain stagnant.

Sharing our disappointment with God may sting,  
it may pierce our hearts in a very real way  
We may become angry, despondent, depressed,  
But all human emotions, all human passions are part and parcel  
of the profound, unfolding intimacy between God and each and every soul  
Prayer isn't just about petitions and thanksgivings  
Prayer is the vehicle,  
the channel through which Divine intimacy sparks, develops and matures

It turned out that it wasn't within God's unfolding Flow-  
that I share my life with that particular man  
It wasn't part of God's Flow that my dream come true  
So be it:  
I was still stuck single, alone, insecure, unfulfilled

I wasn't happy about it one bit,  
But by acknowledging my disappointment in prayer,  
I was set free to yield to the Flow once again.  
This time to God's Flow. Not my own Flow.

What is your heart's desire?  
It might turn out to be God's desire, too. It might not.  
Prayerful intimacy and purposeful vulnerability with our Creator-  
are the means by which we all find out.