

2018 11 18 – Belonging

1 Samuel 1:1-20

Today we have a story of a family. There's the husband, Elkanah and his two wives Hannah and Peninnah. The fact that Elkanah has two wives would be big news in our western society, but, in the Middle East, when these ancient stories were written down polygamy was normal. But that doesn't mean that their family life was easy. Quickly we discover that this particular family has its issues.

In the first few lines we are told that Hannah is childless while her rival, Penninah has children. To make matters worse, Penninah makes fun of Hannah, taunting her and even bringing her to tears. Hannah becomes so distraught she can't eat and begins to feel that she is unworthy and an outsider in her own family.

On their annual pilgrimage to Shiloh, Elkanah expresses his love for Hannah by giving her a double portion of the meat that the family has sacrificed on the altar. But Hannah cannot be comforted. Elkanah doesn't understand her feelings. He says, "Hannah, why do you cry and why do you refuse to eat? To grieve? Am I not more to you than ten sons?" Through Elkanah's questions we see his self-centredness and his inability to sympathize with his wife.

No wonder Hannah has lost her sense of belonging. She no longer feels accepted by Penninah or understood by Elkanah. She also has no sense of worth or purpose in her family. If she cannot have children, so what can she offer to the family's well-being? Hannah feels that she does not belong.

Belonging means being accepted as a member or part of something. A sense of belonging is a human need, just like the need for food and shelter. Psychologists would tell us that a sense of belonging helps us to see value in life and helps us cope with intensely painful emotions. We all need to belong.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/pieces-mind/201403/create-sense-belonging>

Where do you get that sense of belonging? What are some of the places where we look for a sense of belonging? (wait for answers: family, work, school, church, teams, organizations, friends, even social media....) There are lots of places and ways that we can be connected, that we can belong. Everyone is different, some people see themselves as connected to only one or two people, and that's OK. Others believe and feel a connection to all people the world over, to humanity itself .

Hannah feels she doesn't belong in her family for at least two reasons: she doesn't feel accepted for who she is and she doesn't feel like she has anything to offer. Think of situations in your life where you have felt that you didn't belong. What made you feel that way? What are some of the other obstacles to having a sense of belonging? (*wait for answers: being different, being new, not knowing anyone, not understanding the culture or the rules, being left out*)

I remember when I was first living in Toronto and working for IBM Canada I didn't have a sense of belonging. I came from a large family with seven brothers and sisters, but none of them lived in Toronto. I had a group of colleagues at work, people that I liked and admired, but they weren't my friends and I knew that many

of their values didn't really jive with mine. I was living in a city filled with over two million people and I was lonely. It was only when I joined a church in my neighbourhood that I finally found a sense of belonging. I found a group of people that accepted all that I was, and I found a place where I could contribute. I became an integral part of Bellefair United Church and I knew I belonged.

In today's scripture reading, Hannah, no doubt, found a sense belonging when she finally conceived and was able to give birth to her son, Samuel. But I believe that belonging is being accepted for who we are. It was wonderful that Hannah was finally able to have the child that she longed for. But what if that was impossible? What if Hannah had remained barren? Are there other ways that she could have found a sense of belonging, of acceptance, of self-worth?

Brené Brown, researcher, story-teller and popular author, tells us that "true belonging only happens when we present our authentic, imperfect selves to the world, our sense of belonging can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance" (*The Gifts of Imperfection*, page 26). So she is telling us that first we have to learn to accept ourselves, to recognize our own self-worth, before we can expect to feel a sense of belonging in the world.

Hannah needed to recognize that, even if she couldn't have children, she had other gifts to offer to her family. Maybe she was a skilled cook, or a midwife, or healer, or story-teller, or homemaker. Maybe she had a wonderful smile and an ability to make others laugh. We all have gifts to offer to any family or church or

any other group to which we belong. But we need to recognize those gifts within ourselves.

And we need to realize that we are loved and accepted by the Holy Mystery, a God who is the essence of love, a God who loves and accepts us unconditionally no matter what we have to offer. Even if we have no other sense of belonging we can know that we belong to God.

It is also important to realize that there are ways that we can help others have a sense of belonging. First we need to accept people for who they are and not expect them to conform to our sense of normalcy. Second we need to do our best to help people know that they are worthy and that they have something to offer.

I want to end with a story from Australia that I found on the Internet. It is called "Keeper of Secrets."

At an international seminar held in Australia, Aboriginal speaker Eddie Kneebone explained the sense of importance his people were able to impart to their children when they still lived "in the old way on their land". A feeling of insignificance or despair leading to suicide – all too common today among young adults – was unlikely then because of a unique custom:

At a certain predetermined time, a young person would be solemnly entrusted with a secret piece of knowledge that could prove vital to the

tribe's survival. It might be the location of a hidden waterhole in one area of their territory. It might be the medicinal powers of a certain plant. No one else in the tribe would be given that piece of important knowledge and when the time came, this young person would be expected to contribute it for the welfare of all.

“Imagine,” concluded Eddie, “what a sense of importance and belonging this custom gave our young people. Each of them had a unique place, each had an undeniably important role to play. Self-esteem and a sense of personal worth were the great benefits of this Aboriginal custom long before any psychologist told us about these elements of healthy growth!”

Source: Reported in Catherine Hammond, *Stories to Hold An Audience*

<http://storiesforpreaching.com/category/sermonillustrations/belonging/>

It is my hope that the young women who were confirmed today will experience a sense of belonging here in this community of faith and will know what it is to truly belong. May it be so Amen.