

Mothers Change the World

1 Samuel 1

A sermon by Meighan Pritchard
Prospect United Church of Christ
Seattle, WA May 14, 2017

All of us are born of a woman. All of us have had a birth mother and maybe also an adoptive mother at some time in our lives; maybe also a grandmother or two was involved in our upbringing. Or a foster mother, a godmother, or other maternal influences. And as much as Mother's Day is painted in roses and sweet sentimentality, mother-child relationships can be fraught. Perhaps there was abuse, a major falling out, problems with addiction, lack of support, mental illness. Perhaps a mother exited your life too soon. Mother's Day is presented as a Hallmark card opportunity, but some of us do not have Hallmark card relationships with our mothers—or with our children. And perhaps some of us do.

Many is the woman who finds herself with an unplanned pregnancy and the imminent prospect of motherhood. But in today's reading we hear about Hannah, who is desperate to have a baby. If Hannah were alive today and sufficiently well off, she could visit a fertility clinic, pay money for in vitro fertilization. But back in her day, her main option was prayer.

So she prays. You notice that Hannah, Elkanah, and his other wife and her children go to worship at the temple at Shiloh, not Jerusalem. Shiloh was a holy place farther north and was eventually wiped out. And the priest, Eli, doesn't seem to recognize prayer when he sees it: he thinks Hannah is drunk because her lips are moving but no sound comes out. In part this tells us something about how people prayed in those days: out loud. So she has to explain to the priest what she's doing.

Hannah makes a promise to God: If you give me a son, I will raise him as a nazirite and give him to you. A nazirite never cut his hair or consumed alcohol and did not touch dead bodies. A nazirite is set aside as a holy person.

Having a child gives Hannah worth in her social setting. Having no children means having no value or identity. This is why the other wife's sneers are so cutting. Penninah is saying, "You are nobody."

Hannah makes a promise to God, and God remembers her. In due time, Hannah gives birth to a son, Samuel. There are no visits by angels or stars or wise men. Just another woman experiencing the miracle of a life coming out of her body and beginning its own journey.

God remembers Hannah; Hannah remembers her promise to God. And she keeps it. It must have broken her heart to give up this treasured and much-longed-for little boy. We read in subsequent chapters that she visits every year when the family comes to Shiloh, and she always brings him new clothes. Doesn't that sound like a mom? She does eventually have other children. But this first one is always special.

I've heard it said that our heroes should be not the movie stars and singers and sports players we will never meet, but rather people we know in our own lives, people who mentor us, encourage us, love us, become role models, show us how to be the best we can be. By that definition, some of us might call our mothers or fathers our heroes.

Think of immigrant families who come to this country. The parents may know that they will never feel fluent in the new language, never experience wealth or an easy life. But you will often hear them say they came so that their *children* could have a good life. The parents work incredibly hard, often at low-paying jobs, so that their kids can go to school, get a good education, have opportunities that the parents never had. Of course, this puts enormous pressure on the kids to succeed. But they also know how important they are to their families.

Mothers can change the world. I'm thinking of the mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in the 1970s and 1980s, when an oppressive military dictatorship was making thousands of people "disappear." The disappeared were often never heard of again, or their bodies might turn up much later bearing signs of torture. In that regime, anyone who dared to speak against the government risked suffering that same fate. But mothers of those who had disappeared started showing up in the plaza across from the presidential palace, demanding answers. They wouldn't shut up, and they wouldn't go away. They were nonviolent. But they were insistent.

And the world took notice. By their witness, they shone a light on the injustices of their government. Some of the mothers paid a price: they, too, disappeared; they were tortured and killed; their bodies were flown out to sea, dumped out of airplanes and washed up on shore. But as a group, the mothers kept on speaking truth to power. When Jesus was told to keep quiet, he said, "If I kept quiet, these very rocks would cry out." The call for justice cannot be silenced. These mothers did not back down.

So, too, on this Mother's Day we remember the mothers of young Black men and women killed in recent years in confrontations with police officers.

Sybrina Fulton, mother of Trayvon Martin

Leslie McSpadden, mother of Michael Brown

Gwen Carr, mother of Eric Garner

Samaria Rice, mother of Tamir Rice

Geneva Read-Veal, mother of Sandra Bland

Gloria Darden, mother of Freddie Gray

There are many, many more. We keep these mothers in our prayers on this Mother's Day as they grieve the loss of their children and as they continue to cry out for justice so that other mothers never have to experience what they have gone through.

In a recent article, our UCC minister for racial justice, Velda Love, writes of these women and their quest for justice for their children. She links them to Mary, the mother of Jesus, and imagines the scene where Mary is standing at the foot of the cross.

Yet, in his excruciating and unimaginable pain there stands his mother, Mary. Jesus makes eye contact, he can see in his mother's eyes the anguish and pain, heartache, and rivers of tears as she embraces her sisters around the foot of the cross. Perhaps she tries to reach out and touch her... son for the last time. Perhaps she scans the crowd to see if the 5,000 he fed would be there to support her, or the blind who now had sight, or the crippled who could now walk, or the mute who could now talk, or the physically and spiritually dead who were raised to new life in His name. And in her heart she might have asked... "Where are they now?" [Velda R. Love, Witness for Justice, "Moving from Lament to Hope," ucc.org, May 11, 2017.]

Michelangelo carved a pieta of Mary holding the body of Jesus after it has been taken down from the cross. As his limp form drapes across her knees, with one arm she holds him to her in a final embrace. Her head looks down. Her other hand comes up in a gesture that could be prayer, supplication, or deep grief and despair. This mother changed the world, and her own heart broke.

Mothers change the world today. At the Womxn's March in January, there were some great signs by and about women. One woman's sign said, "Now you've pissed off Nana." One young woman, whose hair and clothes were all colors of the rainbow, held a sign that said, "Women's rights are human rights." The woman standing with her—possibly her mother?—held a sign that said, "Love is love is love is love." One smiling young woman held a sign in many colors that said, "We will always be stronger together." An older woman's sign said, "I marched with women from my generation, and today I march with my daughters and granddaughters." Another woman's sign read, "A feminist is:

anyone who recognizes the full humanity of women/men.” The little girl at her side held a sign: “Feminist in training.”

Mothers are role models, for better and for worse. At their mama-bear best, they speak truth to power. They demand justice and do not back down. The Womxn’s March was Mother’s Day a little bit early. I was moved by all the women—and men—who turned out in support of women, daughters, granddaughters, all the children who are now and who are yet to be, and the world that we want for them.

In the past month there have been opportunities to march for science and climate change. 350 Seattle recently had an action to defund the banks that support pipeline construction. If you ask a group of climate activists why they bother, at least one of them will say, “I want a livable planet for my children and grandchildren.”

Mother’s Day did not start out in this country as a Hallmark card experience. Some of the women who worked to create this day did so as a means of reconciliation after the Civil War. In 1870, Julia Ward Howe wrote “A Mother’s Day Proclamation,” which called on mothers to promote world peace.

Mothers during World War I demonstrated for peace, insisting that not one more of their sons be sent off to die in war. There was a song making the rounds then called “I Didn’t Raise My Son to Be a Soldier”:

I didn't raise my son to be a soldier
I raised him up to be my pride and joy
Why should he put a musket to his shoulder
To kill another mother's darling boy
Why should he fight in someone else's quarrels
It's time to throw the sword and gun away
There would be no war today
If the nations all would say
No I didn't raise my son to be a soldier

I found a version of this song on YouTube with Israeli and Palestinian mothers singing together. These mothers want to change the world. By raising their voices together, they are living into the world they want to see. If there is any chance of peace between Israel and Palestine, it is actions such as these that will call it into being.

After her son Casey was killed in Iraq in 2004, Cindy Sheehan set up camp outside President George W. Bush's ranch in Texas to demand some answers. By this mother's incessant witness to the loss of her son, she kept raising the real face of the price our mothers and fathers pay when our leaders send our sons and daughters off to war.

Hannah prayed for a son and promised to dedicate him to God's work. She kept her promise. How do we keep our promises to be good parents, good stewards, good embodiments of the world we want for our children?

Mothers change the world. Fathers change the world. We—mothers, fathers, children, all—can change the world. So on this Mother's Day, if your mother is living, give her a call, or a card, or some flowers. But I also invite you to envision a world in which mothers also have adequate health care, a living wage, quality child care, education opportunities. Envision a world in which all of our children and their children can live in peace on a healthy planet. And then consider how you can be the mother or father or the beloved child of God who helps bring that world into being.

I sing for the mothers all over the earth
For their power, for their love
I ache for the mothers all over the earth
For their sorrow, for their love
May their broken hearts be cradled
May their righteous anger be heard
I pray for justice and healing for all of the mothers
All over the earth. Amen.