

Message for November 15, 2020

1 Samuel 1:9-18

It was about 3,000 years ago back in the days of the Judges and at that time it was considered quite normal for a man to have more than one wife. A man named Elkanah had two wives; Peninah and Hannah. The one wife, Peninah, had a number of children but Hannah had none. Hannah wanted a child of her own more than anything else but it never happened. Even so she did not give up.

One day she went to worship God in the sanctuary at Shiloh and, as she usually did, she prayed passionately about her desire to have a child; indeed she was so caught up in her prayer that the presiding priest thought that she was drunk. He told her off but when she explained her situation, his attitude changed altogether. Indeed inspired by God, the priest told her that she was going to bear a son and sure enough it happened. While that is where today's scripture passage ends that is not the end of the story.

When her son was old enough Hannah took him back to the sanctuary and dedicated him to God's service. Now what this meant in practical terms was that the boy would now live at the sanctuary permanently. But why did Hannah do such a thing? What was her motivation? The realization that her child was a gift from God and that while God gives good gifts, all good gifts should be used in his service. To Hannah that meant giving up her boy; she believed that by returning the child to God she was making the world a better place. And the world would become a better place because of her choice since that child would grow up to become one of the greatest prophets of all time, Samuel.

In one of his books a German author named Christian Schwarz notes that we Christians usually think of heaven and hell as being places that pertain to the future. Heaven so to speak is "up there" and is the place where we go if we have faith in God and strive to live good lives. Hell on the other hand is "down there" and is the place where we go if we don't believe and live bad lives. Fair enough says Schwarz but he notes that

when we read the gospels, Jesus also talked about the Kingdom of God or heaven as we usually call it, as being here and now. But how Schwarz asks, can this possibly be?

He concludes that the Kingdom of God or heaven is here and now wherever and whenever people use their God-given gifts, talents and abilities to serve him and others. When we seriously try to live as Christ's disciples we give the world a foretaste of what the life yet to come is like. Conversely Schwarz says, hell can also be here and now too. It occurs whenever and wherever people live primarily for themselves without a care or concern for others. In short, heaven and hell aren't just future destinations, they are also present realities.

After a closure that has lasted eight months to the very day, today is Boston's re-opening service. I must admit that I would have never believed it that March morning if anyone had told me that we wouldn't be gathering for worship again in Boston till mid-November. Likewise I wouldn't have believed it if anyone had told me what things would be like when we finally did so; no singing, pews marked off and the wearing of masks for example. So much has changed both here in church and in the world around us. The last eight months have been a long haul and unfortunately it is going to continue for a while longer. To be sure, even if a covid vaccine does pan out we will probably be well into next spring before a mass quantity can be made, distributed and enough people inoculated so that the restrictions can be lifted. For many of us this is not only disheartening but discouraging and fatigue is now setting in.

When the pandemic began last spring there was a strong sense of caring and sharing along with a widespread feeling that we were all in this together. Sacrifices were demanded and made. Now however many people are tired of the restrictions and are still worried about health, livelihoods and countless other things. It sometimes seems as if we are going nowhere fast and this may make it harder for us to continue to care as much about others. It is however even more important that we do so now than ever before. It is because even as it seems that life is becoming more of a 'hell' for so many, it is through the choices great and small that

we make each and every day, that we can help alleviate some of the pain and help make God's kingdom here on earth a reality. It is by our caring that we offer hope and light to what is for so many people today, a dark and hurting world. This was something that one of the great preachers of days gone by learned.

He passed away five years ago but Fred Craddock is still considered to be one of the greatest preachers that the United States has ever produced. Years ago he and his wife were spending the last day of their summer holidays in their favourite café in the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee. They just wanted to be left alone but then an older fellow walked in and much to their annoyance wandered over to their table and started talking. When the man found out that Craddock was a preacher, he announced that he had a story that he just had to tell.

"Yeah", the man said, "I was born back in these mountains. My momma wasn't married. We lived in a shack outside of town. The other women in town used to spend their time guessing who my daddy was. And I didn't know who my daddy was. That was a real problem back then."

"The other kids weren't allowed to play with a boy like me so I would hide at recess, and I ate my lunch alone. They said I wasn't any good and I'd never amount to anything."

Remembering those painful days of childhood, the old man was now weeping but he collected himself and kept going.

"Well" the old man said, "there was a church in Laurel Springs. I knew church wasn't a place for boys like me. Sometimes I'd sneak in and sit towards the back so I could sneak out before the service ended. But this one day I just got lost in what the preacher was saying. Before I knew it, church was over. Folks were looking at me. I was making for the back door as quick as I could when all at once I felt this big hand on my shoulder."

“This big voice boomed. It was the preacher man himself! He talked so loud everybody heard as he said, ‘Boy, who’s your daddy? I know who your daddy is. Now let’s see ... why you’re a child of ...,’ he paused and everyone listened, ‘Why you’re a child of God, and I see a strikin’ resemblance!’ Then he swatted me on the bottom and said, ‘Now you run along and go claim your inheritance.’

The old man looked familiar to Craddock and so he asked him his name. He replied, “Ben Hooper.” Fred thought to himself that he recognized the name and then clued in. “Oh yes! I remember my daddy telling me about you, you’re the illegitimate boy who was elected the Governor of Tennessee two times.”

Old Governor Hooper looked up at Fred and with tears in his eyes said, “I was born that day.”

Everyone else had looked at Ben Hooper and only saw an illegitimate child; a person to be scorned and shunned. That preacher though saw what was really there; a child of God who could accomplish something with his life if he was given half a chance. What was ‘hell’ for that child became ‘heaven’ that Sunday morning. Indeed heaven itself was revealed in that church that morning all because one person, a disciple of Christ, chose to love and care.

With privilege comes responsibility. Our privilege is to be the people of God and the disciples of Christ. Our responsibility, especially in a time such as this, is to love and care for it is by doing so that we help create the kingdom of God here on earth and in doing so give a foretaste of what is yet to come.