

When the Church is Silent

I Samuel 1:1-20

Center Church

November 18, 2018

The Rev. Dr. Rochelle A. Stackhouse

November is National Adoption Month! In our family, which includes our three adopted children, and here in this congregation celebrating Dan and Ann's adoption of Isabelle, this is a joyous month indeed! And a great way to lift up something for which we are deeply thankful as we come to Thanksgiving this week.

But I want to walk you back some years in my story that lead to adoption. Because every time I read Hannah's tale in the book of Samuel, I am sent back to the early 1980's and my diagnosis of a disease called Endometriosis.

It was diagnosed not because of my desire to conceive a child, but because of pain, excruciating pain often described as equal to labor pain. Every month for a couple of days or more. It took years to come to a diagnosis (don't get me started on the sexism of a couple of male doctors). To make a long story short, endometriosis often results in infertility, an agonizing reality for me and for my husband. Between managing the terrible chronic pain and trying to figure out how we might have children, I was not in a great place mentally or spiritually for quite some time. I remember days of doing exactly what Hannah did, praying with passionate tears and some anger at God.

But unlike Hannah, I did it privately. I knew the church did not discuss infertility (though oddly enough it is all throughout scripture: Sarah, Hannah, Elizabeth, etc.) Even after all those millennia, it seemed that Eli's first response to Hannah, dismissing her because she was so emotional that he assumed she had to be drunk, represented the reality that a place of worship was a place where we were expected to be in control of our emotions. Pray, certainly, but don't get too carried away with it. How many people over the

years have said to me after a death or disaster in their lives that they did not come to worship because they were afraid that they would cry! My response is always that this is a safe place to cry! But the feeling that we all need to be quiet and controlled and composed still pervades too many congregations. So, for years, I suffered in churches in silence.

What I want to say to you this morning is that this is not the way church is called to be. This sanctuary is meant to be a place where you can bring your deepest pain, fear, suffering, hurt, shame and find support not only in personal, private prayer, but in public caring by those you can trust. That story is told in these windows, look! (point out window to Gallaudet and Wells). Church can be a place where we can deal with and speak out loud the hard stuff that no one else talks about, that often brings feelings of shame because of how society regard things like infertility or miscarriage or poverty or sexual assault or unemployment or divorce or unintended pregnancy or abortion or arrest or depression or other mental illness or imprisonment or, or, or.

We are not a place that can supply all the answers or make every hard situation have the kind of happy ending that Hannah's did. We can be a place where pain can be heard and the one in pain can be held in support and love. A place where we are not afraid of tears.

We can be a place where we come to Thanksgiving ready to dive a little deeper in the pool of thanks coming from hard things. We can give thanks for the beauty of the earth and for human love, for babies and for good food. Maybe we can also give thanks for things like these:

- The person who heard us and loved us when we were having a challenge in our lives.
- The person who took care of our kids when we had had it up to here.

- That though our sister Pat Anderson is dying, her spirit is so much at peace.
- For medications that take away terrible pain of body or of mind.
- For people who believe in us when we don't believe in ourselves.
- For a free meal when we are so hungry.
- For our adoptive children's birth mothers and all their struggles.
- for a place where we can bring all we are honestly and find hope and love.
- For God who hears our heartfelt prayers, spoken or unspoken, and loves us through whatever valley of shadows falls across our life path.

“Come to me,” Jesus said, “all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” Sanctuary. That's what it means. Let us be the body of Christ for each other and anyone else who comes in those doors bringing labor and heavy laden-ness here. As a lovely prayer from New Zealand puts it: “Help us, as a pilgrim people, to endure hardness, knowing that...Christ has prepared a place for us.” (New Zealand Prayer Book, p. 638)

Here. Amen.