

## REFLECTIONS ON MINISTRY: WHAT I THINK I'VE LEARNED

I Samuel 1:1-11

Philippians I:12-21

Hannah was barren.

That's how the Bible says it.

Hannah, the wife of Elkanah, was barren.

“In bitterness of soul Hannah wept much and prayed to the Lord. And she made a vow saying, “O Lord, Almighty, if you will only look upon your servant’s misery and remember me, and forget not your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head.” (I Samuel 1:10-11). That was Hannah’s prayerful plea. And the Lord answered her prayer: Hannah, the barren, became the mother of Samuel, who became a prophet of God.

Dorothy was barren.

That's how it was in the Reaser family.

Dorothy the wife of Edgar, was barren.

And she prayed what she would call Hannah’s prayer. Only now it was her own. “O Lord, Almighty, if you will only look upon your servant’s misery and remember me, and forget not your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life.” (That was her prayer. I’m told she left out the part about the razor.)

A year earlier, Dorothy had given birth to a stillborn son, unnamed and unknown, except to God. And now, like Hannah before her, she was desperate for a child. And just like Hannah, the Lord answered her prayer and she was now pregnant. But in her sixth month, she fell ill with the symptoms that had resulted in death for her first-born. With ferocious desperation she clung to what she now believed was God’s promise to her. Early in her third trimester, she was confined to bed. In the eighth month, she was hospitalized and the doctor asked my father, “Should a choice become necessary, do you want me to try to save the baby or his mother?”

My father told me this story when I was a teenager, but he never said what his answer was. Nor did I ever have the courage to ask.

But you can see, in any case, why I refer to myself as a “life-long Presbyterian”, called to the ministry of Word and Sacrament; so destined by the tenacious, even ferocious, prayer of a Godly mother.

Now, if that sounds too mechanistic, even for Presbyterians, let me hasten to add that though God calls us, God doesn’t force us to do God’s will. My mom never told me this “Hannah Story” until, at age 12, I said to her that I believed God was calling me into the ministry. Not then, and never since, have I felt manipulated into a decision over which I had no control. On the contrary, with God’s “call” God also issued such joy for life and ministry

that I can't even imagine doing anything else. When someone asks me, "What would you do if you weren't a minister", I never know what to say. I have no Plan B; I can't imagine myself doing anything else; it's what I believe my life is all about – serving Christ, to use Paul's poignant phrase, "whether by life or by death". (Philippians 1:21).

Now, I want to come back to that statement later, but first I'd like to say a little more about THE CALL. Mine and yours.

Here is where we get to what they called in my seminary homiletics (preaching) class; the "SO WHAT". That is to say, you're hearing my story, but what does that story have to do with you? I want to do "so what" with each of my three points this morning, stating the relevance I believe the story being told has for you.

I. THE CALL: (I've described mine; you have one too.) At times, at First Presbyterian, when we have had space enough, we have placed a "staff" page on the back of our church bulletin. In that space the Pastor is named, and right beneath that is a line that reads, "THE MINISTERS: EACH MEMBER OF THE CONGREGATION". God has a call – perhaps more than one – to each of us who belongs to the body of Christ. And one of those calls is to minister to one another.

I think this might be the right time, and the right place in this sermon, to say a word of thanks for one way you've already responded to that call. It's been nearly eight years ago, but still within painful memory, that I suffered a complete mental and emotional breakdown. I was hospitalized (a more realistic word is "confined") in the Psych Ward of Martinsville Memorial Hospital.

Without the care provided by the loving and capable hospital staff, and without the loving and caring support of what I call my "A team" – i.e., God, Ann, Randy, Jody, Carolyn and Bob and Beth. I am absolutely sure I would not be here today. But it is equally important to me to say that my recovery is also because of your ministry – you the ministers of the First Presbyterian Church of Martinsville. With your prayers, calls, visits, cards, letters and much more, you "brought me back" and I am very grateful to be given the opportunity today to say "thank you". How many others are there who would have similar stories of the ways your lives - your ministries - have supported them through dark days and hard times?

Yes, I have been "called", and I thank God for that call. But please remember – for God's sake, and for your sake too – remember that you've been called as well. Called to a ministry different from mine, but no less a "ministry".

You've heard of the "Christian Doctrine of Vocation"? Developed by Luther and refined by Calvin, that doctrine has been the lodestar of Presbyterianism ever since the Reformation. And you've given flesh to it in the way I've just described. May God continue to bless you and use you in the ministry God has given to you.

II. THE THEME: (Remember Jesus Christ) (II Timothy 2:8). The Apostle Paul was in jail. It was near the end of his life, and he knew it. Furthermore, he was ready for it. But

one of the things “still on his plate”, was to make sure that Timothy, his son in the Lord and his successor in ministry, was ready for the work ahead of him. I believe that as Paul was writing to Timothy he was saying to him in effect, “You want a guiding theme for your ministry? Here it is, ‘Remember Jesus Christ!’

“Timothy, there will be some hard days ahead, but no matter what happens, ‘Remember Jesus Christ.’ Remember his life, his suffering, his death, and above all his resurrection. And remember also, he promised that he will be with you always, even to the end of the age. In the world you will have tribulation. But remember, Jesus Christ has overcome the world.”

The Greek text teaches a great lesson that isn’t apparent in English. The tense of the Greek verb Paul uses for “remember” does not imply one definite act in time. It is a continuing state – it lasts forever. Remember Jesus Christ: forever risen, forever forgiving; forever your ever-present Lord; forever the power to overcome whatever roadblocks are in your journey.

So ...with that mantra, I call all of us to the kind of Christian heroism to which Paul called Timothy: “Remember Jesus Christ.”

III. THE PURPOSE (What is my purpose in life?). A couple of years ago, Rick Warren wrote a best-selling and life-changing book entitled *The Purpose Driven Life*. In it, he confronts the reader with the soul-searching proposition that she or he was created for a purpose. And then Warren asks, “How are you fulfilling the purpose for which you were created?”

I first began struggling with that question while I was in college. What was my purpose? And out of that prayerful struggle it became pretty clear to me that God was speaking not only to the new Christians in Philippi through the Apostle Paul. God was also speaking to me (Philippians 1:20), “I eagerly expect and hope that in no way will I be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body whether by life or by death.” (Philippians 1:20). That became my “life verse”. That was to be my life’s purpose: to exalt Christ in my body, whether by life or by death.

Have I perfectly honored that goal? I’m afraid not! But that’s why we have the confession of sin as a part of our worship service. We all fall short. We all need God’s forgiveness. But the verse has been the “North Star” of my life, always showing the way, even through the darkness. And I can also tell you this. It was what made me able to keep going in Vietnam when I was not able to know for sure whether on that day, I would honor Christ by my life or by my death.

Now we come to the “so what”. What does my story have to do with you? You say you were not called to preach? Well, maybe like St. Francis of Assisi, your calling is not so much to do as to be. Maybe your calling is to live so as to honor Christ wherever you are, whatever you do, whether by life or by death.

One day Francis said to one of the young monks at the monastery, “Let us go down into the town and preach!” The novice, delighted at being singled out to be a companion of St. Francis, complied with great enthusiasm. They passed through the main streets, turned down many of the byways and alleys, made their way into the suburbs, and at some length, returned by a circuitous route to the monastery gate. As they approached the gate, the younger monk reminded Francis of his original intention. “You have forgotten, Father, that we went to the town to preach!”

“My son,” Francis replied, “we have preached. We were preaching while we were walking. We have been seen by many. Our behavior has been closely watched; it was thus that we have preached our morning sermon. It is of no use to walk anywhere to preach unless we preach everywhere as we walk.”

Maybe we could agree, that’s a way we can all fulfill our purpose – our calling. In St. Francis’ well known motto: “Preach the Gospel always. And if necessary, use words.”

How many sermons have you preached without even knowing that you were preaching? It pains me to confess that not all the “unconscious sermons” I’ve preached have honored Christ. For that, I ask your forgiveness, and God’s. And I call on all of us as God’s people, as Christians, to bring the love and peace of Christ into the world not only with our lips, but also with our lives. Let us resolve to live the Peace Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi with which we opened this hour of worship. Let us pray it again. This time in unison:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace;  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
Where there is injury, pardon;  
Where there is doubt, faith;  
Where there is despair, hope;  
Where there is darkness, light;  
Where there is sadness, joy;

O Divine Master,  
Grant that I may not so much seek  
To be consoled as to console;  
To be understood as to understand;  
To be loved as to love;  
For it is in giving that we receive;  
It is in forgiving that we are forgiven; and  
It is in dying that we are born again to eternal life.

Let us pray it again – this time as Jenny sings a setting of St. Francis’ prayer for peace. Please turn to hymn #374 and pray with her as Jenny and Cynthia lead us in song to God’s throne of Grace

As we go from here, let us pray it, preach it, live it! Amen.