

"Wanting What We Don't Have"
1 Samuel 1:1-8/Philippians 4:10-14

There's an account of a brief chat after the inauguration of John F. Kennedy as the 35th President of the United States. Richard Nixon and he had been the two major party nominees in the campaign and Kennedy won in the closest election to that time. After the swearing-in, Nixon commented to Ted Sorenson, a Kennedy aide, that there some things heard that he would like to have said. "Do you mean the part about 'Ask not what your country can do for you?'" Sorenson asked. "No," Nixon replied, the part beginning 'I do solemnly swear...'" (Fadiman, Clifton, editor, *The Little, Brown Book of Anecdotes*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1985, p. 429)

Now even though he did come to speak those words eight and twelve years later, his response from 1961 highlights a human tendency for persons in and outside the Oval Office; namely, that for all of us there can be times we long for something we don't have. Moments when we expend great energy trying to get the one thing we believe will make us fulfilled.

That was certainly true for the key actors in the Old Testament narrative we read moments ago. Beginning today, we going to reflect over the summer months on the first half of the book called First Samuel. Its namesake was the last of Israel's judges who transitioned the nation into its first kings. Today's passage opens that narrative, telling of tension before his birth.

The text introduces us to a man named Elkanah who had two wives—Hannah and Peninnah. That fact implies he was a wealthy man since polygamy was not the norm in that era, but we are clearly told he was a man of faith. Each year he would go to Shiloh to worship God and as part of that pilgrimage, gave to both wives food that had been sacrificed to God. Peninnah had many children by her husband while Hannah had been unable to conceive. Hannah was the favorite, though, and thus Elkanah would give her a double portion of the food. That act did not go unnoticed by Peninnah, of course, and she retaliated with her greatest weapon, reminding Hannah who had provide Elkanah with his offspring. That cruel pattern occurred year after year.

On the day of our passage, the pilgrimage has again taken place and the familiar pattern of subsequent events is also repeated. Elkanah once more gives Hannah twice the food provided to his wife with children and Peninnah has again tormented the favored one. Hannah is so upset she will not eat and a troubled Elkanah goes and asks her a series of questions: "Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?"

As I read his response, I began to shake my head and could hear Dr. Phil saying "What were you thinking?" Elkanah clearly offers no empathy and instead seeks for Hannah to re-affirm his importance. It was certainly insensitive, ignoring the real pain felt by couples before or since who have found themselves in such a situation. Yet even so his words do suggest that Hannah had gone beyond longing for a child to a place where that absence in her life had begun to control her and suspect that at least part of it was due to daily comparisons with Peninnah.

I recently read an article entitled "Don't Let Facebook Make You Miserable." In it, the journalist contrasts the reality of life with what people post on social media sites. "It is now official," he begins. "Scholars have analyzed the data and confirmed what we already knew in our hearts. Social media is making us miserable. We are dimly aware that everybody else can't possibly be as successful, rich, attractive, relaxed, intellectual and joyous as they appear to be on

Facebook. Yet we can't help comparing our inner lives with the curated lives of our friends.

The author points out some distinctions between the two. "In the real world," he says "*The National Enquirer*, a weekly, sells nearly three times as many copies as *The Atlantic*, a monthly, every year. On Facebook, *The Atlantic* is 45 times more popular. Americans spend about six times as much of their time cleaning dishes as they do golfing. But there are roughly twice as many tweets reporting golfing as there are tweets reporting doing the dishes. The Las Vegas budget hotel Circus Circus and the luxurious hotel Bellagio each holds about the same number of people. But the Bellagio gets about three times as many check-ins on Facebook.

"I have been studying aggregate Google search data," he goes on. "Alone with a screen and anonymous, people tend to tell Google things they don't reveal to social media; they even tell Google things they don't tell to anybody else. Google offers digital truth serum. The words we type there are more honest than the pictures we present on Facebook or Instagram.

"Anytime you are feeling down about your life after lurking on Facebook," he continues "go to Google and start typing stuff into the search box. Google's autocomplete will tell you the searches other people are making. Type in 'I always...' and you may see the suggestion, based on other people's searches, 'I always feel tired'... This can offer a stark contrast to social media, where everybody 'always' seems to be on a Caribbean vacation." He thus offers a suggestion: "As our lives increasingly move online, I propose a new self-help mantra for the 21st century... Don't compare your Google searches with other people's Facebooks post." (Stephens-Davidowitz, Seth, "Don't Let Facebook Make You Miserable," *The New York Times*, 5/6/17).

Hannah certainly did not have to worry about social media in grieving her inability to bear a child, yet she was clearly focused on the one thing she did not have. She was not the only one who did so either as Elkanah was so distressed by Hannah's tears that he fumbled badly in an effort to console. Peninnah had the children, but our text could be heard to suggest he had taken her as a wife only because Hannah could not conceive as the name Peninnah means "the second." Thus, we see that contentment was widely missing, with each of the three acting on what they did not have.

In contrast, we also heard the words of Paul, who in the first century wrote a letter to Christians in Philippi. In the chapters prior to our passage, he focuses primarily on what that congregation didn't have, too--unity. While we aren't told what was behind the problem, the bulk of his letter encourages those first century believers to find their oneness in Jesus Christ.

It's only as the letter is winding down that he expresses gratitude for some gift they had sent to him and then says "I have learned to be content with whatever I have... I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me." Were those words written while relaxing in some villa on the Mediterranean? No, he was in prison and awaiting trial and yet still could say "I have learned to be content with whatever I have," he said. And why? Because "I can do all things through him who strengthens me. Words that are more than just a helpful insight from a believer in the first century and instead name a goal for all Christians still.

In one of his books, Presbyterian pastor John Ortberg shared a vision from a man named Robert Hastings: "Tucked away in the recesses of our mind is an idyllic vision. We see ourselves

on a long journey that crosses mountains and plains. We are on a train, and out the window is an endless procession of cars motoring down nearby highways, children waving up at us from crossings, cows grazing on distant hillsides... lakes and rivers, city skylines, and village halls.

“But we don’t really notice. What we keep thinking about is the final destination. We will arrive at the station to marching bands and waving flags. Once we get there, our dreams will be fulfilled. The jigsaw pieces of our lives will finally be assembled, the picture will finally be complete. In the meantime, we restlessly roam the aisles, checking our watches, ticking off the stops; always waiting, waiting, waiting for the station. Always wishing the train would go faster. The name of the train is *more*. The name of the station is *satisfaction*.

“‘When we reach the station that will be IT!’ we cry. ‘When I’m eighteen.’ ‘When I buy a new Mercedes!’ ‘When I get the next promotion!’ ‘When I lose enough weight.’ ‘When we get married and have kids in the house.’ ‘When the kids grow up and get out of the house.’ ‘When I have paid off the mortgage.’ ‘When we can afford a second house.’ ‘When we finally retire and all the pressure is off, then I will live happily ever after.’

“We keep thinking that a train called *more* will get us to a station called *satisfaction*. What if trying to pursue satisfaction by having more is like trying to run after the horizon?” Ortberg suggests. “What if the train is called *contentment*? What if the station is called *heaven*?” (Ortberg, John, *When the Game is Over, It All Goes Back into the Box*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007, pp. 199-200).

We don’t have to wait until we arrive at heaven to find contentment or passively expect it one day to show up on our doorstep either. There are far too many accounts of times when persons have pushed themselves to do more or achieve something which others felt to be impossible and in so doing experienced great contentment. I don’t hear Hannah’s lament or Paul’s response as suggesting that God looks for us always to accept our lot in life with a smile.

Yet I do think those believers from the past reveal that if we are so focused on what we want that we forget what we have or become so intent on the one thing we believe will bring us contentment that we lose sight of the blessings present, that we stop and turn our attention back to God. Affirming once more how we, too, can do all things through him who strengthens us because we know that God always provides what we need, even if it isn’t always what we want.