

HANNAH'S STORY  
JUNE 16/17, 2018

FIRST, MARSHALL  
PASTOR SCOTT FULLER

1 SAMUEL 1:1-20; 2:1-10; PSALM 100; LUKE 12:22-31

*Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.  
Amen.*

*Please join me in prayer: Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we may believe and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Hannah's vulnerability is exposed. She is unable to have children. And though that is heart-breaking news to anyone who's longing to give birth, **her** grief was compounded by living in that time and that place.

Women back then who could not conceive lived under a shroud of humiliation, as if they had somehow failed at the game of life. Here's part of the reason why: every couples' goal was to have children in order to keep the family name alive in the presence of the living God. To die without any offspring was to have your name cease to abide in God's loving company.



So infertile women were forced to bear their affliction as a scar of shame. Some people even judged them as being punished by God for some supposed sin.

Adding to Hannah's pain was the fact that Elkanah's other wife, Peninnah, had a brood of children – and never passed up the opportunity to rub salt in the wound of her competition. Three times in two verses we're told that Peninnah liked to provoke Hannah by shaming the woman for her infertility.

It probably didn't help matters either when their husband, Elkanah, always gave Hannah extra portions of food on family feast days. It was a clear signal that said *I like YOU best!* So as generous as Elkanah was to Hannah with the family's special food, so was Peninnah when she dished out her abuse...

Year after year, celebration after celebration, Hannah is forced to grieve as Penninah continues to breed. That is Hannah's kryptonite, her burden, what makes her absolutely vulnerable... Plus, her childlessness is hanging out there in public...for all the world to see...all day, every day...

What would that feel like? To have some thing, some imperfection, some failing about which you feel completely vulnerable, and have it so publicly and persistently portrayed to your neighbors?

Dr. Brene Brown is a brilliant speaker, writer, and researcher about the peculiar truth of how we human beings wrestle with vulnerability. Everyone, she asserts, struggles with it. It may be something we don't like about ourselves that's physical/mental/emotional...it may be something in our past – or continuing in our present. The good news here? We're not alone, for the truth is that all of us harbor secret vulnerabilities.

Take a moment now to examine your life – what you look like, how you act, things you've done and said, or failed to do and failed to say...what is it that you like least about who you are, or what you've done? Then I want you to share that with the five people sitting closest to you... [Not really!]

Dr. Brown asserts that we all work very hard to keep those things locked up nice and tight, because we also believe that if that burden, that secret, that failing, that sin were to be exposed, it would be the end of life as we know it.

Hannah is proof of what we're talking about. Her vulnerability was exposed, and she suffered for it...as verse 7 tells us, year after year...



Finally, Hannah reaches a point where she can't take it anymore – she's sick and tired of being sick and tired...(which is, by the way, a wonderful title of a great little book about wrestling with the effects of alcoholism on a family system: Sick

and Tired of Being Sick and Tired). But alcoholism or not, that feeling is something we've all experienced before – and most likely will again.

But what happens this time with Hannah is that she takes her vulnerability... into the very temple of the Lord... Now, you would hope that NO priest/pastor/rabbi/minister would act like Eli did – accusing this poor, pain-filled person of being plastered!!

Yet, Hannah takes no offense – she doesn't have room for any more pain in her soul. She simply tells the truth about the hole in her heart...and, thanks be to God, Eli honors her offering, and offers her a blessing: *Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him.*

Notice he does NOT say, God WILL grant the petition you have made...but that doesn't matter – Hannah leaves feeling assured that her prayer had been heard and, as the NRSV tells us, *her countenance was sad no longer* (1:18). She came to the temple carrying *everything to God in prayer*...and she left with the blessing that she had found *a solace there*.

Let's stop here and sing that great song about prayer, What a Friend We Have in Jesus.

**What a Friend we have in Jesus  
All our sins and griefs to bear!  
What a privilege to carry  
Everything to God in prayer!  
O what peace we often forfeit  
O what needless pain we bear  
All because we do not carry  
Everything to God in prayer!**

**Have we trials and temptations?  
Is there trouble anywhere?  
We should never be discouraged  
Take it to the Lord in prayer  
Can we find a friend so faithful  
Who will all our sorrows share?  
Jesus knows our every weakness  
Take it to the Lord in prayer**

Are we weak and heavy-laden  
 Cumbered with a load of care?  
 Precious Savior, still our refuge —  
 Take it to the Lord in prayer  
 Do thy friends despise, forsake thee?  
 Take it to the Lord in prayer  
 In His arms He'll take and shield thee  
 Thou wilt find a solace there

Now, we all know that the act of taking our vulnerability *to the Lord in prayer* will not always result in God granting our requests in the ways that we hope. But, I'm also convinced that God always wants us to dare to share our vulnerability in our prayers. That simple act will always result in God helping us let go of the power it holds on our lives. For the truth is that whenever we give our vulnerability to God, it loses some of its power over us. In fact, as Dr. Brown has said, *Vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity and change*. And none of that can happen if it holds us in its power.

I joked earlier about sharing your vulnerability with the people around you... Well, I'm going to share one of mine with you now. **Are there any recovering perfectionists like me in the house today?**



Again, Dr. Brown says this, *Research shows that perfectionism hampers success. In fact, it's often the path to depression, anxiety, addiction, and life paralysis.*

That was me – the best way to avoid criticism – and to be affirmed – was to be perfect...

And then came my first call as the Associate Pastor at Trinity Lutheran in Tacoma, Washington.

What I quickly discovered is that it's easier to maintain a charade of perfection when you're a student than when you're out in the real world, right? I mean, research papers, exams, all that stuff – all I had to do was devote enough time and energy to the project and I was able to come out with an A...perfection...

It should come as no surprise that my game plan didn't work out so well in the congregation. Visiting a family in crisis, comforting someone who's loved one is dying, dealing with a youth who's a master at self-defeating behavior; I was constantly being confronted with situations in which not only did I not know the answer, I didn't even know what the question was!!

So at the same time that all this is going on, my wife was invited to join a women's group that read and discussed books – which I thought was great...until Carolyn told me that they also talked about their relationships and the challenges in their lives, their families, their marriages...

The perfectionist in me was not at all happy to hear about that! I mean, how can those people believe that I'm perfect when they hear from my wife that I'm really only human – and not always so good at that!!

Yet at the same time, Carolyn's experience with that group proved to be a doorway to a new way to look at life for both of us. Here's a great example. Whenever we went to a gathering – a wedding reception, a neighborhood party, anything like that – I would be ready to leave within 30 minutes of arriving. Even if I was enjoying myself, I'd just be ready to go.

Not so with my wife. Carolyn couldn't even conceive of leaving unless there was no one left to talk with. We argued about that one a lot. I thought she was trying to control me – she thought that I was trying to control her – and so it went. Then, her women's group decided that they'd all take the Myers-Briggs personality inventory...have any of you done that?

Well, with it her eyes were opened to a truth about us and she tried her hardest to get me to take it as well. And in my most opened-minded, sensitive-husband

mode, I said, *No way in he!! am I going to take that!* It was hard enough to pretend that I wasn't screwed up – I most certainly didn't need to see the cold hard facts of that on paper!!

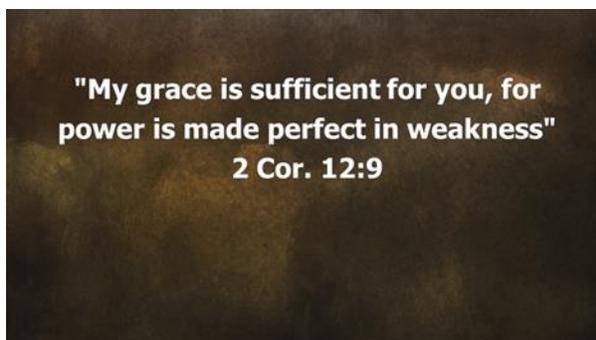
I told her, *Absolutely not – I'm not going to take the Myers-Briggs personality inventory...!* So...I took the inventory, and I'm very happy to say that I survived the experience...and I'm also very thankful to say that it proved to be a huge step forward in the dismantling of the chains that kept me in my perfectionist prison.

So here's what we learned. Carolyn, it turns out, was an extravert – off the charts. She got her energy from being around people...conversely, she was at home all day with our two young children. I discovered that I was an introvert – par excellence! I got my energy from being alone...conversely, I spent my days around people – constantly. Do you see where this is going??

What an absolute eye-opener it was for us – and, a blessing to eliminate some of the contention between us. Remember those parties where I'd want to leave and Carolyn wanted to stay? From that day on, we simply drove 2 cars to a gathering... That way, I could leave when my social energy was gone, and Carolyn could stay until her tank was filled...

Says Dr. Brown: *When we dare to drop the armor that protects us from feeling vulnerable, we open ourselves to the experiences that bring purpose and meaning to our lives.*

Here's how the Apostle Paul puts it. In 2 Corinthians 12:9-10, he writes that he prayed to God to relieve him from what he called a thorn in his side. Paul tells us that God said to him,



Say that with me...

<sup>9</sup>*“My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.”*

So, [Paul continues] *I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.* <sup>10</sup>*Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.*

Who knew that the secret to being strong was to embrace...our weaknesses?? And then, as Hannah did, take them to the Lord in prayer...and give them over to God.

*When I am weak...then I am strong...*

So Hannah gets her baby...yet after Samuel is weaned, she follows through on her promise to God. She takes the boy back to the Temple, offers a sacrifice, presents him to Eli, the priest, and leaves him there to be raised as a servant of God.

Only someone who is certain that God knows their weakness and will turn it into strength can follow through on a promise like that.



I'm going to leave you with one more Dr. Brene Brown quote.

When we pick up a little baby, she says, one of the first phrases to come out of our mouths is this: *Oh, she or he is so perfect!!*

**Dr. Brown** encourages us rather to pick up that child and lovingly say to him or her, *You are imperfect, you are wired to struggle in life, but...you are worthy of love and belonging.*

Let's hope that we all learn the secret of being imperfectly human, so that we can live and love in the certainty of God's perfect strength.

Amen.