

**“Reckless Devotion”**  
**I Samuel 1:1-20, 24-28; Mark 12:38-44**

**The Rev. Dr. Sally A. Brown**

In the Scripture readings this morning, we find ourselves confronted with two portraits from the gallery of Jewish and Christian faith. It is as if someone has handed us two old snapshots from the family album..

One of the photographs is clearly much older. Turn it over, and on the back you can just make out in faded ink the name “Hannah.” The picture shows her crouching down, her arms open wide. It is not clear at first which part of her story is captured here; is she praying? But look closely— do you see it there at the right-hand edge of the picture? There--the back of a curly dark head, the hem of a child’s robe, a toddler’s small foot. That is little Samuel, walking away from her. **So Hannah’s open arms here are a gesture of release, of letting go.**

No one knows the second woman’s name. She is facing away from us. She had no idea anyone was watching her. Her arm is stretched out, throwing something toward the huge brass cask where the Temple offerings are gathered. Two coins so tiny they are almost invisible catch a glint of light as they arc through the air. **The woman’s hand is open, releasing, letting go.**

We’ve known these stories, some of us, since childhood, known about the extraordinary gifts these women gave. Hannah, after years of longing for a child, releases her only son to the service of God. The unnamed widow gives, as the text says, “all she had to live on.” She could have kept her two little coins, and no one would have blamed her. She could have given only one, and she’d be celebrated for that. But she parts with both little coins, and now there is nothing left.

**Such extravagant gifts, such reckless devotion ... These women’s stories inspire us, but they also disturb us.** Some contemporary interpreters of the Bible believe that we should indeed be disturbed by these stories, but not simply because these women give extravagantly. We should be disturbed, some are saying, because these stories raise disturbing questions about the social systems, then and now, that take advantage of women. Read these stories with a critical eye, and we may begin to wonder if it’s time to stop celebrating these women as heroines of faith and start mourning them as victims of social systems that robbed them of dignity and worth.

Consider Hannah. Now, before we can even begin to consider issues of justice in her story, we need to take time to acknowledge how difficult it can be for some people to hear Hannah’s story at all. Anyone who has longed to be a parent, but for whom that has not happened, or anyone who has loved someone in that situation, can appreciate why this story can be painful. God is said to have “closed” Hannah’s womb, then is moved to change that state of affairs by Hannah’s prayer. The pastoral issues are legion here, and wrestling with them belongs to another sermon for another time; but the point today is that we cannot read or interpret Hannah’s story without acknowledging that, for someone sitting in the pew with us, this story may be painful.

That said, there is another troubling dynamic to Hannah's story. As a female in a patriarchal culture, Hannah had no doubt been taught from childhood that her worth, socially and economically, lay in her ability to bear children, particularly sons. It is not only her fertility, then, but her very identity and dignity that are at stake. Her husband Elkanah is well-meaning, but clueless: "No, you're not a mother," he says, "but you're *my wife*; isn't that enough for you?" No, Elkanah, I know this comes as a shock to you, but it isn't. Even Hannah's co-wife Peninnah, from whom one might expect some woman-to-woman sympathy, buys into the whole scheme. Instead of drawing alongside Hannah in compassion, she flaunts her own fertility, and humiliates Hannah.

In desperation, then, Hannah strikes an ill-considered bargain with her God, pledging that if God will only give her a child, she will give that child to a lifetime of divine service. So, the story goes, Hannah gets her baby, but a deal is a deal: she hands him over to the Temple priests as soon as he is weaned.

**Is Hannah's gift truly free, or is it a grim obligation undertaken by a woman made desperate by a society that only sees her as a baby machine?**

Issues about women and justice bristle in the widow's story, too. Remember that just before he singles out the widow, Jesus declares that the scribes, the Temple elite, maintain their privileged lifestyles by, as he puts it, "devouring widows' houses" – in other words, preying on the piety of society's most vulnerable to swell the Temple treasuries, of which they are beneficiaries. Now along comes precisely one of these victimized widows--and Jesus points her out. Into the Treasury she throws her last cent.

**Is she a heroine of faith, or the victim of predatory religion?**

These are important issues. There's no question that these stories bear the thumb prints of the patriarchal societies that produced them, no doubt that women have been victimized, even (or especially) in the name of religion. So on one level, these women's stories speak to us– and should– about issues of justice. They alert us to dangerous patterns that may still exist, patterns we need to expose and challenge.

**But the stories of the Bible have many layers; they have more than one truth to tell. We sell these women short if we reduce their stories to only one point.** So while I want to take seriously what these stories can tell us about dangerous patterns of potential injustice to women, I want to test with you another possibility: that in their extravagant giving, these women *transcended* the limitations society placed on them, and *claimed their identity and dignity as children of God*.

Take a second look:

**Hannah's behavior is remarkable for a woman of her time.** She refuses to be dismissed by the household as pathetic, or soothed like a child. Instead she takes her stand in the Temple; she confronts God personally, passionately. She lays claim to her right to be heard. It is *this*, not the blessing of the priest, that is the turning point of Hannah's story. And what looks like an ill-considered bargain may not be that at all, but a genuine covenant with a God she believes enters into relationships of mutual trust with human beings, women included.

**The unnamed widow is also presented not as *typical* of her gender and station in life, but *exceptional*–** and is held up by Jesus as a model precisely in contrast to wealthy male counterparts. She's not just one more vulnerable woman at the mercy of the establishment like

so many others. Jesus singles her out as stunningly, almost defiantly generous. Furthermore, Mark the storyteller allows her story to anticipate another similar scene only a few verses later when another woman acting with extravagant, almost reckless devotion, breaks open a vial of immensely valuable perfume and anoints Jesus' head. The very *next* act of costly, total self-giving that this Gospel reports is Jesus' own: he gives his life. These women then certainly were among his truest disciples, if not in a sense even his teachers.

What if Hannah and the unnamed widow are not victims, at all, but women of profound insight and courage, who assert their dignity as human beings who bear the image of God? **What if Hannah and the unnamed widow understand something that many of us miss: *that nothing is more characteristic of the God whose image we bear than to turn to the world with open arms and open hands in acts of release, liberation, and giving?***

If this is true, then maybe what *really* disturbs us about these two women is that they turn basic assumptions about power, human and divine, upside down: **What makes God, God is not the power to possess, accumulate, and control, but the power to release, to liberate, and to give. And we most surely claim our identity and dignity as children of God when, like Hannah and the unnamed widow, we turn to the world with arms and hands open—giving, liberating, releasing.**

'Tis the season, in our mailbox at least, for two things: Christmas merchandise catalogues and charity appeals from every organization known to humanity. My husband and I seem to take the catalogues to the trash by the carload. As for the charity appeals, I'm not quite jaded enough to throw them out immediately. I mean, what if somebody went through my garbage and found all these envelopes from the Salvation Army and the local rescue mission and the Animal Shelter, for heavens' sake, *unopened*, and addressed to the *Reverend* Sally A. Brown?? That won't do. So I carefully slit open the envelopes and leave them on the kitchen counter to marinate.

More and more of these charity mailings are rigged; have you noticed? They enclose those little packets of notecards or address labels or a clever little refrigerator magnet – “our gift to you,” they say. Right. They figure only a few of us are brazen enough to use these little trinkets without sending in a red cent.

Then there are the phone calls. “I won't take much of your time, I know you're busy, but let me ask you: You care about the safety of our children, don't you?” “*Unfair!*” “*Low blow!*” I want to scream into the phone. Who are these people to try to make me feel guilty, cheap, or inhuman unless I cough up a pledge??

Now, certainly, not every human need is ours to fill; not every cause has our name on it. **But maybe if I could I stop seeing those envelopes on my kitchen counter as a form of persecution, and myself as a victim; and instead find my true identity as a child of the God whose very nature it is to give, the whole giving question would look very different.**

As a child I went summer after summer to church camp. There was a Baptist preacher there who liked his Bible in the King James, liked his hymns loud, and liked his sermons long. Toward the end of his sermons when he was working toward the altar call and ratcheting things up, he'd often say, “*Even though Jesus knew he was the Son of God, he gave his life for us.*” “*Even though—!*”

Well, that preacher was right about a lot of things, but on this one point, I think he got it

wrong. Jesus gave his life precisely *because* he knew he was God's own child, and total giving is *how God is*. **There is no surer evidence of our family resemblance to God than when we turn to the world with open arms and open hands— releasing our resources, to liberate and to bless.**

The apostle Paul wrote to the early church: “Have this mind in you which was also in Christ, who [in interpreting God to us] did not take God to be one who takes and grasps, but instead [interpreted God to us] by emptying himself for us, coming among us as one who serves.”

My husband's church in downtown Lancaster, Pennsylvania, serves breakfast every weekday for anyone who needs it. Most of those who come are homeless. One of the women who serves meals on the breakfast line slipped into a pew a little late on a Sunday morning and was surprised to see at the end of her row, by the wall, a man she had served breakfast to just the day before. As the time came nearer for the morning offering, she felt more and more uneasy: Clearly, this man had almost nothing ... Should she pass him the offering plate —? Or would that embarrass him? In the end, she passed him the plate. He dropped in two coins— six cents, a reckless act for a man who has nothing.

**You and I join the company of Hannah and an unnamed widow and a man who gave six cents whenever we turn to the world with open hearts, open arms, open hands. There can be no surer sign that we are children of God, the God whose life is poured out for the world with extravagant, reckless devotion.**