

“Hand In Hand”
I Samuel 1-2
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San Dimas Community Church, United Church of Christ
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We human beings have deep within us the impulse to give life. Today’s scripture tells the story of Hannah who desperately wanted to bear a child, to give life. Those of us who have experienced wanting children and not being able to have them know this emptiness and deep longing to give life to our world. I remember years of sitting in the doctors office filled with pregnant women, and yet I couldn’t conceive. It seemed everywhere I went, there were women just about to give birth--the grocery store was filled with them, the mall overflowed with strollers holding cute, little babies. My sorrow was overwhelming. So I identify with Hannah’s joy at the blessing of the birth of Samuel. Her heart was no longer empty. She could give life to the world!

Unlike Hannah’s time and place, today there are many ways to give life and to nurture life, and they are not limited to bearing children. Our impulses to be life-giving can be fulfilled through step-parenting or mentoring children or working to create a world that provides justice for children everywhere. But in Hannah’s world children were not only a way to contribute life, they were the very reason for women’s existence.

Without children, Hannah was nobody. Perhaps when she was young she could work in the fields, but when she was older, she would be like Naomi, who upon the death of her sons, sat at home bitter and without meaning to her life. Remember, the world was underpopulated, and having children meant survival. So the conditions were such that for women children were the only way to contribute life to society and to have a place of honor within that society. It is within this context that Hannah’s joy over Samuel’s birth brings a sense of justice to her world. She would no longer be ridiculed as barren or blamed as worthless. She had a purpose to her life; she gave life. Hannah’s story is really a story about empowerment.

As I reflected on the juxtaposition of Hannah’s story and the theme of “Justice and Joy”, it occurred to me that they go hand in hand. For Hannah justice and joy both were found through her having a son. Today “justice and joy” includes a wider breadth of circumstances. It is good to remember as we talk about “justice” that “justice” does not mean the same as punishment. Punishment is retribution, hurting others because we’ve been hurt ourselves. We haven’t always been clear about the difference between justice and punishment.

I remember as a child getting whipped with a belt (usually for arguing with my sister) and then being told by my dad, that he had to whip me for my own good and that the whipping hurt him more than it did me. So not only did I get to feel guilt for sibling rivalry, but I also got to feel guilty for causing pain to my dad. This punishment did not bring about justice. It did not make my sister and I love each other more. In contrast to punishment, justice is about relationships and restoration, and wholeness. Justice is about making the world a place where life can thrive, and all creation can find meaning and fulfillment. Justice brings joy not bitterness, justice brings opportunity not limitation, justice brings God’s reign not human beings acting out their revenge. Justice and joy go hand in hand in the world as God so loved it to be.

The Pilgrims (and I don’t mean you Pilgrims out there) came to this land, America, seeking justice. Many came for religious freedom, to find a place to worship God as their hearts required them to worship. In their homeland they were being punished for not “toeing the line” of the church back in the homeland. They sought justice in the form of a place and the space to be faithful. Others came here seeking justice as a place to live in peace, away from the wars on the continent of Europe. Justice meant freedom from fear, freedom from poverty, freedom from hopelessness. Their joy was that they could be in a new land with the opportunity for the kind of justice that brings meaning and wholeness to life. They could feed their families; they could give life to God’s world. A land where justice was even a possibility brought joy as well as hardship. It is out of this long history of being empowered to find justice and joy, hand and hand, that the United Church has continued to take stands that have not always been popular. Of course, we’re not a perfect church, no church is, either as a denomination or a particular faith community. We

don't have to be perfect; we just have to try our best to be faithful.

How will we as inheritors of this faith that values justice that leads to life and as inheritors of this land founded on the hope of opportunity bring justice into our world in ever widening ways? We are faced with a world in which many complexities require of us an attentiveness to what God calls forth from within us. God, the giver of life, wants each of us to give life. God, who created order out of chaos, calls us to perpetuate that order which God declared "good" by shaping a world of justice so that all God's people may feast in joy and thanksgiving.

There's about 80 people here in worship and there's about 80 ways God empowers each one of us to create a world where justice and joy go hand and hand. This means many possibilities all working together to bring harmony to the world. Each of these possibilities revealed through the individuality of your life are like the individual notes that each orchestral instrument plays, and combined these individual notes create a beautiful symphony for the world to hear.

Today there are still people who like the Pilgrims of old are punished in their homelands for who they are and what they believe. Some are treated brutally. The Bible teaches us not to forget the gracious gifts of God. It tells us to be people of praise, of gratitude, and it teaches that out of our own overwhelming sense of joy, we are compelled to extend opportunities for justice to those pilgrims in today's world. And when we do so, when we create justice, we create joy both for them and for us, and especially for God, because justice and joy go hand and hand.

Well, I know you to be a grateful people and a generous people and a people who extends God's love out into the world. Sometimes it's overwhelming when we are made aware of the problems out there through the technology that brings information from every corner of the world; and it's not always good news. We wonder what difference we can make when we're faced with such huge problems. My advice is that we choose something small, something near and dear to our hearts; something we feel passionate about.

Barbara Nelson shared the story of a girl scout troop who made gifts of jams and potpourris for a boutique in order to raise money. It was very successful, raising over \$1000. The troop had learned about the genocide in Darfur and wanted to do something about it. This war has systematically targeted civilians and resulted in many people killed and many women raped. After being driven from their homes the refugees only choice is to live in camps. When the women venture outside the camps to collect firewood for cooking, they are often raped. So after learning about Darfur, the girls used their boutique profits to buy solar stoves. With these compact stoves and the power of the ever present sun in this arid land, there is no need to go outside the camps. Children can be fed, the forest is not depleted, and women are safer. It's just one of many ways people, in this case young girl scouts, show justice and joy hand in hand.

I've noticed that there are people who live their lives out of enormous gratitude. Their mantra is "God is good--all the time." And there are those who made bitter by circumstance wall themselves off from the world; they find no justice and no joy. In some instances justice may not come in our lifetime; but our confidence is in a God who is just and good and wants us to find joy. It is to that God, that today we work for justice, we feel the joy, and to this God we give our heart's grateful praise. AMEN