

Marion weekly update

SERMON January 7, “Whole and Well” mark 2:13-17, Luke 17:11-19

This week we begin a new series. A couple months ago I told you that after we finished the 7 cardinal virtues and Advent series we'd look at some thing inspired by the conference we went to in November. Here we are. The conference in fairness was not anything overtly spiritual. It was regarding mental health, addictions, leadership, and wellness. Most of the people there were coming at it from a therapeutic lens. I would wager that my notes were different from most of the other attendees. I was coming at it from the lens of pastoral counseling, and also theology, scripture, and ministry.

The first session of the conference was a discussion between Dr. Yosi Amram, a psychologist, and Alanis Morissette. Some of you might know Alanis Morissette as the popular singer/songwriter. She also has had her own battles with mental health. Through it she has become well educated in the field as well as emerged as a powerful advocate for mental health awareness, treatment, and research.

The session was about wholeness and wellness. So please attribute much of the material outside of the spiritual piece to that session. That said, I was surprised at how much spirituality was brought into their discussion. Both Dr. Amram and Alanis Morissette have a very deep regard for the role spirituality plays in our wellness and wholeness.

These two notions are trendy and popular today. The issue they discussed is that people use the terms interchangeably, and that these are not the same things.

Wellness is about health. Spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional health. There's a lot we can do to improve and maintain all of these kinds of health. Yet we can be well, but not whole. Conversely we can be whole and not entirely well. Wholeness is a very different beast.

Think about the lepers in our scripture today. They walked away physically well. 9/10 didn't come back to thank Jesus. We might say there were other areas of them that weren't well that generated that, but I would argue that perhaps they weren't whole either. Our hymn this morning “He touched me and made me whole” suggests that an encounter with Jesus fixes everything. The notion is wonderful and uplifting. The thing is that being forgiven and being whole aren't the same thing. In fact, as we'll see this idea gets in the way of too many professing believers living out a truly transformed life. Wholeness is about an internal unification as well as externally recognizing a unity with both God and the world around us.

For people of faith, there can't be a sense of being whole without recognizing our connection to the divine. There is a creating God who loves us and calls us. Ignoring that blocks out a part of ourselves. Shutting down the Holy Spirit limits the fullness of our being. If being one with God is what it takes to be whole, the more we push God away the less whole we are going to be.

We are not islands unto ourselves. We are part of a greater world and community. It's why Hebrews tells us to “not forsake gathering together”. We are all part of a bigger community, and that community is part of us. If we can't grasp and embody that we can't be whole. Being connected to one another is a great gift and blessing. Shutting that out, building divisions, separating, all of it erodes our wholeness because we disconnect from people that, like it or not, are part of our experience and we are a part of theirs.

Individually wholeness is about bringing every part of who we are together, embracing it, and acknowledging that each and every part of who we are is our reality. This is where wellness factors OUT of it. There are things we can't control. I can't control my brain chemistry. If it's off that's part of who I am. A doctor can help me manage it by prescribing medication to balance me out. But the imbalance is part of who I am. I might have a chronic disease or other condition. My doctor can help me manage it but I have to exist with it.

I can't control how people speak to my face or behind my back. I can't control the other drivers behind the wheel on the road. I can't control the weather. I can't control someone else's temper or how they treat me. I can't control how well the cook at the restaurant makes my meal or whether a drive through order is correct. I can't control the response on the other end of a customer service line. I

can't control the call of a referee in a game I'm playing or watching. Yet all of those things might affect me. Even if I'm physically, emotionally, spiritually, and mentally well, or as well as I can be, those things impact my life.

At the end of the day all of us have parts of ourselves and our pasts that we'd like to avoid or hide from. Especially the ugly we struggle to manage or contain we don't want to look at. The temptation is to hide from the ugly or compartmentalize who we are. When we do this we aren't whole. We are fragmented.

Recently I've had multiple conversations about the exhaustion that comes from being a different person to different people. Who am I to so and so? What have I told this and that person so I don't undo the front or lie I've created? Exhaustion from being fragmented.

The hiding from our own ugly I suggest might be the most destructive of this fragmentation spiritually. I don't like what I see in the mirror. I know where I have problematic traits and flaws. I don't want to fully embrace them. So I ignore them. I distract myself from them. I busy myself to the point that I'm distracted from them. Even my quiet time is a distraction. I spend time in prayer and study to remind myself that I'm forgiven even though I'm imperfect, and then move on with my day ignoring my imperfections.

Sadly hiding from my flaws also hides me from Christ.

Embracing my faults doesn't mean that I condone them or resign to them. It just means that I acknowledge them and draw them into my whole sense of who and what I am. Who and what I am isn't stagnant. It's ever changing. Hopefully ever growing and improving. Fragmenting myself out of pride or shame does not good. It denies those parts of me that need tending to become better. Embracing and engaging all of myself contributes to my overall health, and in wholeness steadies and strengthens me to confront those ugly parts of myself to overcome them.

So where does Jesus factor in? How am I hiding from Him in fragmenting? The great physician is the answer.

Jesus is clear in this passage, and suggests at it elsewhere, that the problem with religious folks is that they won't admit their faults. They hide from them and put on airs. They are fragmented. Instead He says that He hasn't come for the "well". He hasn't come for those who think they have it all together and are perfect. He came for the sick, the sinner.

So what does this mean? First, yes, Jesus is there for and with us in all of our giftedness and the good things we do. We are granted talent and purpose by God and as we live into that Jesus is arm in arm with us. But where do we need Him most? It's not in what we do right. It's in overcoming where we are wrong.

Where do we experience Jesus the most powerfully? It's in transformation. Where is Jesus waiting for us both patiently and excitedly? It's in the dark parts of us that we want to hide from. It's those places we pretend don't exist because of shame and guilt.

You want to talk the good news? Here it is. Jesus is waiting in those places we don't look to free us from guilt and shame! Those fragmented pieces are precisely where He is waiting for us. Wholeness leads us directly to Christ. We know ourselves, embrace ourselves, and allow Jesus to meet us where we are. And He walks with us to make the sick well. The wellness doesn't create wholeness. The wholeness creates wellness!

We tout the notion of confession in our faith. Most frequently I hear it pointed at someone else rather than ourselves. Before God, confession isn't guilt it's freedom. Confession is the courageous moment where we stare the worst parts of ourselves in the face and say "I see you, I own you, and with the help of God I can change you." And then we do.

This may seem like strange advice for the new year where so much is laced with the frilly "everything's going to be great this year" sense. Look your ugly in the eye. Don't be afraid. Do it knowing you have a God who loves you, Christ who redeems you, and the Spirit who will strengthen and guide you to overcome whatever it is. Welcome every part of yourself into wholeness. And then let the new year be a year where that wholeness is a growing, enlivening, and redeeming experience day by day.

BIBLE STUDY 1 Samuel 2

The second chapter of 1 Samuel opens with what is known as either the prayer or the song of Hannah. The scripture itself calls it a prayer, however song might be more fitting of the format. This doesn't read like a typical prayer. It reads more like a Psalm. It sounds like poetry. Moreover the language doesn't sound like a private prayer. "let 'your' mouth speak". Who would she be addressing directly were she simply praying alone to God? It's unlikely that Hannah jotted this down herself when she uttered it. Perhaps this could be attributed to a later poem that honored a tradition around Hannah. Regardless, the language is poetic and has some interesting nuances to it that continue to push the story along as well as uplift God.

The first verses are all about thanks, praise, and joy. Hannah has finally bore a child. She "boasts over her enemies", which may be a not so subtle reference to her struggle with Penninah. More broadly it's joy over being delivered from pain and oppression.

Then comes a warning. Don't be arrogant, be humble.

The next part plays on what we know as the Deuteronomistic tradition. The book of Deuteronomy sets up a basic theology for early Israel. "Be good, be blessed. Be bad, be cursed." A very simple formula. What plays out is a series of reversals about the downtrodden being uplifted and the powerful being brought low. It is about the transformation of the world where justice is meted out. Keep in mind that justice in this world is significant. At the time there was no sense of true resurrection or heaven and hell as we understand it in Christianity. Even in Paul's day this was at least a debate. Recall at one point he was standing on trial and decided to pit the Pharisees and Sadducees against one another to get himself off the hook. What did he use to distract? The idea of the resurrection of the dead. One group said yes, the other no, and they got into a fight over it.

Not believing in a resurrection becomes important to grasping how this principle plays in their hearts and minds. There is no sense that if justice isn't rendered in this life it will be rendered in the next. Therefore the only place justice can be rendered is in the present life.

Who metes out this justice? According to the song it is the LORD. The LORD lifts up and brings down. But is this completely accurate? It is not.

Practical experience bears out that justice is not always achieved in this life. The weak and oppressed don't always get lifted up, nor do the powerful wicked get their comeuppance. Reading this in a literal sense defies the realities of life. What do we do with this? Does this make scripture out to be a lie? Not at all.

"Song" or "Poem" is critical. Hannah is expressing deep and powerful emotion. Poetry, song, and art are prone to exaggeration and hyperbole. These are devices used to impress a particular feeling on the reader or listener. They are not to be taken literally but rather to communicate a truth. God is on the side of the weak and oppressed. God is against those who do the oppressing and inflict pain on others. And sometimes we see this brought to bear in our life and our time. When it is, we rejoice because what is correct has been honored. Reading anything in its proper context is essential to interpretation and often makes sense out of items that otherwise seem confusing.

I love one of the culminating lines that it is not by strength that we prevail. We understand this even more pronounced with our belief in the afterlife. Ultimately armies and power don't have the final say. The final say belongs to God and God alone, and none of us can stand against it. What a great comfort to those who believe.

As the song ends there is a hint towards what is to come. There is a reference that God will strengthen the king. This could indicate this was a later tradition that knew where Israel's trajectory would lead, or it could be a prophetic word from Hannah. Why prophetic or retrospect? Israel didn't have a king yet and there wasn't any sense one was on the way. At the very least to the reader of 1 Samuel we are given an Easter egg letting us know that royalty in Israel is on the way.

In this song there are two other pieces noteworthy as we strive to interpret all of scripture more correctly. The matter is metaphor and literal.

When Hannah lifts up "she who bore seven", if we take it to mean herself we can be left confused.

According to scripture Hannah only had six children. Do we cheat a little and just imprint that she had another one we don't know about? The literal doesn't make sense. The metaphorical or symbolic, however, does. Seven is a number of completion. Hannah may be using this to proclaim that she has become complete and victorious over her rival Penninah. Penninah then becomes the one with many children who pines away. Pines for what? From the last chapter there is the sense that Hannah was preferred, but Penninah had the edge because she bore children. Now Penninah has no edge because Hannah has given Elkanah children. Perhaps she is pining for the favor she once had and has been lost.

Seven is symbolic.

On the other hand she refers to the "For the foundations of the earth are the LORD's; on them he has set the world." Given our current scientific understanding we might see this as metaphor or illustration. It isn't likely. At that time this is how they understand creation to exist. The earth was flat and supported by pillars underneath it. That would have been her genuine, literal understanding. Grasping this is useful in other passages to interpret what is really being said. Here it doesn't matter if she were describing the earth that way or as it actually is, that's not the. She's using her current understanding to be passionately expressive about the majesty and power of God.

Interpretation and keeping things in their proper context are inseparable.

Transitioning to the next part of the chapter, Elkanah leaves and Samuel continues there ministering. Samuel ministering is a repeated sentiment as these mini arcs within the story shift to another. Notice that as we move forward they are increasingly dropped in as counters to the troubles with Eli's sons. Where is Hannah here? We don't know. Perhaps all that was necessary to communicate that the entire household went back home was to note that Elkanah returned. Perhaps she stayed a little longer to be with Samuel. We don't know.

Then we meet Eli's sons Phineas and Hophni. These are some shady characters. Great care is given to describing the sacrificial ritual that was correct and then how it was desecrated by these two. The cliff notes version is that they had placed themselves above God in importance. Why would the people ask to burn the fat first at the very least? Because it was that burning that sent the "sweet aroma" up to God. They were deprived of that privilege. Why wouldn't they let them burn the fat? Listen to every cooking show. Fat equals flavor, and the boys weren't boiling the meat, they were roasting it. They wanted as much as they could get, and they wanted it as tasty as possible.

To make matters worse, if people objected they were threatened! What effect would that have? How many stayed away from their required sacrifice because they knew they would just be intimidated and robbed? This was a truly bad situation.

How does this criticism end? They were wicked men. Yet here we find Samuel mentioned again. The boy serving the LORD, this time wearing a linen ephod. The ephod was a garment of a priest, but more ornate than a simple linen one. On one side this is a bridge to bring Hannah back in, noting she brought Samuel a robe once a year. On the other this signals where Samuel is headed. His linen ephod may not be one of a full-fledged priest and leader. That he is wearing an ephod at all suggests he's headed that direction.

Next we read what becomes of Hannah. As they come for their annual sacrifice Eli shows what I can only understand as a mark of gratitude. His own sons are wicked, yet they have brought this faithful, solid boy to serve God. He asks that they continue to be blessed with children to take the place of Samuel. They are. They have five more. And Samuel continues to serve God.

As Hannah's story bears out in wonderful ways, Eli has a very different issue with his situation. He confronts his sons. Turns out not only have they been desecrating sacrifices. They have also been sleeping with the women serving at the tent of meeting. All of this serves to give us a full picture of the state of Israel's spirituality and faith. It is tanked out. The ones serving as priests and servants of priests are morally bankrupt. This may not be all, but it's some or in this circumstance enough to represent a spiritual bankruptcy. In Judges, as we saw in chapter 1, the people of Israel were out of control. How could they not be when the spiritual leadership was in this state? Everyone knew what was going on.

No one put a stop to it. Likely there were many who avoided sacrificing and festivals because they would have to encounter these bullies who had no regard for the God they were supposed to be serving. Phineas and Hophni won't listen. They didn't want to. Because their father was so old and they so young, they didn't have to. Who would make them? God as a result intended to see them die.

As this sad situation is conveyed, what else is conveyed? "And the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favor with the LORD and with people."

This is a tip of the hand to the prophecy that follows. It's also something that hasn't ceased throughout history and even today. What has to happen to solve the spiritual destitution of Israel? The core of it has to die. Yet at the same time the way to right the course is on the way. Eli's leadership has to go away. Samuel is being raised up to correct the situation.

Today sadly we see the same thing. Scandal after scandal. Pastors too many times caught up preying upon congregants, even minors, to indulge their sexual urges. Pastors and leadership manipulating church resources to live high and luxurious while there is great need not only around them but in their congregation. Look no further than the prosperity gospel movement to see this in action. People are turned off as a result. These scandals take a lot of air and noise, and sadly too many honest and good pastors and congregations get associated with the stigma. Certainly this was happening with Phineas and Hophni. As a whole we haven't come far.

God won't tolerate it.

Even churches with a solid foundation of integrity have to look at this reality from a different angle. Is what we're doing accomplishing what we want? Are there ways of thinking and doing that need to die so a more fruitful way can come alive? What has to pass away to get things moving in a direction that speaks to our hear and now rather than our there and then?

In the case of Israel, God is saying that things are going to change. The unnamed prophet comes with a sad word for Eli. First he reminds Eli of the gravity of the responsibility he's let down. He traces all the way back to the first priest in Egypt. This would likely be Aaron. The charge is deep in history and ancestry. Eli has let down the responsibility of his heritage.

Again, significant to our tradition today. If we are charged to represent Christ, are we doing it? This is our heritage. This is our responsibility. We have no excuse as we have the scriptures. Forget whatever twists humans have made to the gospels, we have them for ourselves. Accountability is real.

We see that Eli's accusation is twofold. There is a sense that he at least by accessory participated in his sons' sin. Even if he didn't coerce the sacrificial meat personally it seems he ate it. This is approval by association. More significantly he has put "honoring his sons over honoring the LORD". This is idolatry, which at the time was a huge issue in Israel given their influence from surrounding nations. Eli has allowed giving way to his sons' sin to take priority over his service to God.

Again, this speaks to today. How often does the church, or those within it, act in service more to the agenda of self rather than the agenda of God? How many are alienated and hurt as a result? Sacrificing personal agenda to God's agenda isn't easy. Eli's story is a model of what happens when we allow ourselves to do so.

Ultimately a curse is placed on his family. They and their descendants will not live to old age. It's a chilling and sad prophecy. It also helps us remember the difference between conditional and unconditional promise. God reminds Eli that yes, his family was promised to endure in priestly service forever. The next line corrects Eli's understanding that there was a condition that wasn't followed. Honor God and be honored. Despise God and be disdained. Long service to God isn't an unconditional promise. It holds so long as we serve faithfully. Anything otherwise is God's self sabotage. To promise unflinching longevity even if the service is destructive makes no sense.

This message is very important to those who would suggest that a confession and a baptism secures salvation no matter what comes after. The promise of God isn't foolish. If we accept the promise then there is expectation. If we accept the promise our lives will reflect that. If our lives do not then there hasn't been a genuine acceptance. As Hannah's prayer at the beginning suggests, God knows what's going on. We can fool everyone, even ourselves, but we can't fool God.

The signal that this turnaround where the wicked will pass and a correction will occur is the death of Eli's sons. Phineas and Hophni will die on the same day. Then the turnaround will come. For me this is a cast forward or a look back to when the wicked Saul will turn over kingship to the man "after God's heart", David, would come into rule over Israel. Saul's son Jonathan died in battle, and in profound grief Saul threw himself on his own sword. Two men died on the same day and ushered in a true change in the leadership over Israel.

Who would right the ship? While not explicitly named here, he's been named all chapter long. Samuel is constantly referred to in opposition to the wickedness of Eli's house. Who will be raised up? Samuel. Someone who will follow God heart and soul, and be obedient. What follows confirms this sense as the writer is clearly driving the story forward. In chapter three we will see the official calling of Samuel by God!