

RELEASING THE LOVE

RELEASING THE LOVE

Carlos E. Wilton

Lamington Presbyterian Church

May 13, 2018; Mother's Day

1 Samuel 1:9-28; John 17:6-19

***“For this child I prayed; and the Lord has granted me the petition
that I made to him. Therefore I have lent him to the Lord...”***

1 Samuel 1:27-28a

It was not till the evening of my ordination-day that my father told me of his prayer.

That was curious in itself. He was a man of few words, and didn't speak readily of things of the Spirit. What was more extraordinary yet was that the prayer my father wanted to tell me about he uttered not long after I was born.

He was on his second or third old-fashioned by then. No doubt, those spirits had loosened his tongue.

I'd always known that, as a baby, I'd had a severe case of scarlet fever. For a time things were “touch and go,” as they say. What I'd never heard before was that, on the night when my fever was the highest, my father had prayed. He had said, “God, if you let my son live, I will offer him to your service.”

“Why didn't you tell me this before?” I asked him.

“I didn't want you to know. I figured if it was meant to be, it would be.”

And so, on that already-momentous ordination day, I was offered an insight

RELEASING THE LOVE

into something that had taken place decades before, on a night of quiet desperation, between my father and his God — something that, mysteriously, had touched my life more deeply than I could ever know.

I was left, then, to ponder how, in life, everything just may be related to everything else...

In the first chapter of the first book of Samuel, Hannah prays to the Lord:

“O Lord of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite — literally, a ‘consecrated one’ — until the day of his death.”

Hannah’s “presenting problem” (as the psychologists would call it) — the reason for her desperate prayer — is that she is unable to have children. Her community is not especially understanding about infertility. Her neighbors call her “barren” (a perfectly dreadful word). Israelite agricultural society held little respect for women who could not produce up-and-coming young shepherds or field hands every couple of years.

This, of course, is also an age of polygamy; and Hannah’s husband Elkanah has another wife, Peninnah. Now Peninnah has no trouble at all bearing children; she’s already got several. Hannah wants a baby more than anything — and she’s

RELEASING THE LOVE

willing to resort to any measure, even bargaining with God, to get one.

In her case, it works. Young Samuel is born — and, true to her vow, his mother offers him to the high priest Eli, to be raised in the Temple.

Think, for a moment, about what that's like for her. Imagine what Hannah must feel, as she brings Samuel to Eli! Her long-awaited baby boy is still a toddler, barely weaned. How empty she must feel inside, as she holds his hand and walks him to the Temple: to leave him there, to be raised a member of the high priest's household!

Someone has remarked that to be a mother is “to decide forever to have your heart go walking around outside your body.” I suppose Hannah, in giving Samuel up for adoption at such a tender age, is a prime example. Motherhood — and fatherhood too, for that matter — brings great joy; it also brings its measure of pain and heartache.

Parents ordinarily invest 18-21 years of their lives in raising a child — probably one of the riskiest investments of time on the face of this earth. Children don't come with a factory warranty. Parents receive no guarantee that their child will turn out right (whatever “right” means). We who are parents yearn to protect our children when they're young, to shield them from harm; but there comes a time

RELEASING THE LOVE

when we have to let them go. Whether it's sending them across the living-room carpet for those first-ever steps, or handing over the car keys, we must allow them to do it themselves — even if it means allowing them to fall.

The humorist Erma Bombeck was America's poet laureate of the kitchen sink. Here's something she wrote, about being a mother:

I see children as kites. You spend a lifetime trying to get them off the ground. You run with them until you're both breathless...they may crash...you add a longer tail...they hit the rooftop...you pluck them out of the spout...you patch and comfort them, adjust and teach. You watch them lifted by the wind and assure them that someday they'll fly.

Finally, they are airborne, but they need more string and you keep letting it out and with each twist of the ball of twine, there comes a sadness and somehow you know that it won't be long before the beautiful creature will snap that string and soar as it was meant to soar...free and alone. Only then do you know that you did your job.

Hannah lets go of her son sooner than most, on account of her sacred vow — and, to our twentieth-century minds, her actions may seem cold, even heartless. Yet let us remember Hannah as a woman of her times, for whom that sort of adoption — or should we say “apprenticeship” — is not all that unusual.

In any event, Hannah's true feelings shine forth in the language she uses, at

RELEASING THE LOVE

the end of today's passage: "I have lent him to the Lord," she says. Not "given" — "lent." Wherever Samuel may go and whatever he may accomplish, he is, and always will be, Hannah's son — her precious gift from God. With that thought in her mind, she's able to release him.

There's a tale of a man who once climbed a mountain, in search of a holy man who was said to live in a cave at the summit. At long last he found him, and said, "Tell me, wise one, how did you become so holy?"

"Two words," said he.

"And what are they, please?"

"Right choices."

The seeker was ecstatic. This is what he'd come for. It seemed, at long last, he'd found the wisdom he was pursuing! "And how does one learn to choose rightly?"

"One word," said the teacher.

"May I have it, please?"

"Growth."

"And how does one grow?" (This is really getting good, the man was thinking.)

RELEASING THE LOVE

“Two words,” said the teacher.

“And what are they?”

“Wrong choices.”

It’s paradoxical, but true, that part of parenthood is letting go of children, so they can make those wrong choices. It’s a delicate line mothers and fathers walk: trying to determine when to say “No” and when to say “Well, maybe.”

When Hannah lets go of Samuel, there’s no question but that he’ll be safe. She knows the education he’ll receive in the Temple is his destiny. He needs to do this in order to fulfill his high calling. Yet still, something about it feels unnatural. Still, it tears her up inside. It is, for her, a sacrifice — in the deepest possible sense.

“A sword in the soul.” That’s how Mary, the mother of Jesus, understands it.

Remember that quaint little story about Baby Jesus being presented in the Temple? Mary and Joseph bring their child to Simeon: an ancient wise man, who — God has promised — will not see death before he has seen the Messiah. When Simeon beholds the baby Jesus, he prays,

**Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;**

RELEASING THE LOVE

for my eyes have seen your salvation...

The last thing Simeon says, after prophesying great things for Jesus, is a little aside to Mary: “And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

How typical that is of family life! No happiness without hurt, no laughter without tears, no freedom without limitations! We human beings are such complex creatures — we often disappoint when we should inspire, and frequently turn away when we should be loyal. “You only hurt the one you love,” goes the old saying. Strange, how often that’s true! How true it is that you and I can never love without risking pain!

But risk it we must — for the essence of loving others is found in releasing that love.

There’s a part of us that wants to do just the opposite: to think of love as a prize to be clutched and cherished, a treasure to be hidden away. “Don’t let love out,” croons the seductive voice within. “It may get lost, or run away, or fall down and skin its knee. It may learn of things it shouldn’t know. It may even change — then you would have to learn all over again how to make it part of your life.”

Just *try* to keep love prisoner — prisoner of your hopes and expectations and dreams — and I promise you one thing: eventually, you will lose it for good. For

RELEASING THE LOVE

the nature of love is to give, not receive; to risk, not to play it safe; to shine forth as the light of the world, not to suffocate and sputter into darkness under a bushel basket.

“Parents are like God,” wrote the preacher William Sloane Coffin, “when they provide maximum support and minimum protection.” One person who demonstrated this style of parenting is Jacqui Kess-Gardner, and her husband James. They live in Baltimore.

The story of their extreme parenting challenges began more than thirty years ago, in a hospital delivery room. Jacqui had just given birth to her second child.

“Mrs. Gardner,” said the nurse, “something’s wrong here!”

The doctor shot her an angry glance. “I looked in horror,” Jacqui wrote, later, “as the nurse pulled back the blanket to show us our son. One eye was sealed shut. The other was a milky mass. He had no bridge to his nose and his face looked crushed. Although I knew I should take him in my arms and hold him, I couldn’t. I just couldn’t. The nurse whisked him away.”

Minutes later, Jacqui was on the phone to her mother. She’d been watching the couple's other son, Jamaal. “It’s a boy,” Jacqui sobbed over the phone. “His eyes won’t open. His face is deformed. I don’t think I can handle this. What am I

RELEASING THE LOVE

going to do, Mom?”

“My question hung in the air.” Jacqui continued. “Then Mom said in quiet, measured tones, ‘You will bring him home. These are the children we hold dear. Bring him home and nurture him.’”

Jacqui’s mother’s words, it seems to me — could be the mission statement for all Christian parenting. “These are the children we hold dear.” No apologies. No conditions. No explanations. Just a statement of fact. “We do it because it’s what we do. Any questions?”

Raising children is always a challenge; but raising a special-needs child, even more so. Jacqui knew her son Jermaine would never be able to see, and his face was shocking to look at, but he seemed normal in every other respect. Later on, he would be diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome, a form of autism, but there were no signs of it during his early years. What his parents did notice, at the age of eight and a half months, was how extraordinarily gifted he was.

Jermaine's older brother, Jamaal, had just finished practicing for a piano lesson. Jermaine was in a high chair next to the piano. Jacqui and Jamaal were in the other room when they heard music coming from the piano. It was “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” — the very same tune her oldest son had just been practicing. But it wasn’t her older son playing; it was his eight-and-a-half-month-old brother.

RELEASING THE LOVE

He was playing the tune perfectly, by ear and touch alone.

The Gardner family knew, then, they had a musical prodigy. They began Jermaine on piano lessons at two-and-a-half, and he gave a concert in the White House at age 5. When he was thirteen, Stevie Wonder invited him to play with him in a studio session.

Some wealthy people saw Jermaine playing piano on television, and paid for him to have plastic surgery. He ended up being a rather good-looking young man. And his musical career continues to grow.

“These are the children we hold dear,” said Jermaine’s grandmother, on the day he was born. His mother couldn’t utter those words, in the confusion and heartache of the moment, so grandmother stepped in and said them for her. Maximum support; minimum protection. Love released...set free...allowed to blossom in abundance.

When love truly is set free in this world, there’s no end to the wonders it can accomplish. In the famous words of the Roman Catholic priest and theologian Teilhard de Chardin:

“Someday after we have mastered the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity we will harness for God the energies of love; then for the second time in the history of the world the human race will

RELEASING THE LOVE

have discovered fire.”

That fire is the stuff of which motherhood, fatherhood, family relationships and friendships of every description are made. It is a force of nature: and, a gift of God — perhaps the greatest of all gifts. It’s a gift that cannot be hoarded, preserved or protected. It can only be given away: freely, extravagantly, faithfully.

On the cross, Jesus shows us how this is done. And in his resurrection, he shows us how this love of his — this love of ours — never ends.

Let us pray:

**Lord, we thank you for our mothers,
and for others who have shown us motherly love.
We thank you for love that does not fear to risk,
to dare, to sacrifice.
We pray for courage to love freely and fiercely,
without counting the cost,
without calculating risks and returns.
Release us from the fears that hold us back,
so we may be freed to release our love.
In the name of Jesus, Amen.**

Copyright © 2018 by Carlos E. Wilton. All rights reserved.