

I

Years ago, Amy and I started using an online service that helps keep track of all of our various bank and investment accounts. It's very convenient to be able to have all of that data in one place.

Every time we log in to that service, it automatically pulls our latest balances, and after a few seconds, there's a number that pops up on the left hand side of the screen. And that number is our current net worth – the number that is derived by taking stock of every asset we own – cash, investments, our house, our cars, and the like, and subtracting from it everything we owe – like the remaining mortgage balance on our house. Every time we log into that service, we see an up-to-date net worth number.

II

That idea of financial net worth – total assets minus total liabilities – is an important concept in our modern society, isn't it? No wonder we generally only share that number with people who have a need to know it, because by looking at that net worth number, we can make all kinds of few assumptions and judgments about a person or a family or a business or a non-profit.

And in case you hadn't heard, there's an election coming up, and much has been made in this particular election cycle about candidates for public office their willingness or reticence to disclose information about their net worth.

In the world in which we live and move and have our being, net worth has become a kind of short hand for assigning value in our society –the greater your net worth, the more valuable and potentially useful you are, but woe to you if your net worth is small.

But do assets and liabilities work the same way in the kingdom of God? Do we really have the capacity to own things? Or is there something larger at stake here?

III

This fall, we've been doing a broad overview of the Old Testament, and when we left off last week, the people of God were still in the wilderness at the base of Mt. Sinai. But we're skipping ahead in the story this morning – quite a bit, in fact.

Eventually, the people of God finished their sojourn in the wilderness and returned to the Land of Promise. However, they weren't yet what you'd call an organized nation. They had no real governing structure, no national capital, no standing army. They were really a loosely affiliated collection of 12 mostly independent tribes. Whenever disputes would come up between the tribes, or whenever a military battle needed to be fought against a foreign adversary, they appointed judges, but the judges didn't have very much political power. It was a terribly violent and turbulent time in the history of the people of God, and you can read about it in the biblical books of Joshua, Judges, and Ruth.

The last few weeks, we've looked at grand, sweeping stories. But the person at the center of our story from 1 Samuel this morning is not a judge, or a general, or a priest. The center of our story today is a woman by the name of Hannah.

And simply on that basis alone, that she was a woman, we can surmise quite a bit about her net worth. Because in those days and in that culture, women were not viewed as whole people made in the image of God. In the eyes of the culture, they were viewed as the property of their husbands or fathers. So we know right from the start that simply because she was a woman, she had no assets or liabilities. Her net worth wasn't zero. It was simply something that wouldn't compute.

In those days, it was not uncommon for men to have more than one wife, and such was the case with Hannah's husband Elkanah. He loved Hannah very much, but he was also married to a woman named Peninnah.

Hannah had yet to be able to conceive a child, but Elkanah and Peninnah had many sons and daughters. In those days and in that culture, having children was viewed as a sign of God's favor, whereas barrenness was viewed as a sign of God's judgment, something of which Peninnah never hesitated to remind Hannah.

So listen now for a Word from God from 1 Samuel 1:9-11, 19-20, 27-28, and 2:1-10.

1:9 After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose and presented herself before the Lord. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the Lord. 10 She was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord, and wept bitterly. 11 She made this vow: "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 until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head."

19 They rose early in the morning and worshiped before the Lord; then they went back to their house at Ramah. Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and the Lord remembered her. 20 In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, "I have asked him of the Lord."

27 And she said, "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; as long as he lives, he is given to the Lord."

2:1 Hannah prayed and said, "My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in my victory. 2 "There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God. 3 Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed. 4 The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. 5 Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil. The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is

forlorn. 6 The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up. 7 The Lord makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts. 8 He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor. For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and on them he has set the world. 9 "He will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness; for not by might does one prevail. 10 The Lord! His adversaries shall be shattered; the Most High will thunder in heaven. The Lord will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed."

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Hannah is a model of biblical stewardship.

In many churches, whenever the word “stewardship” comes out of the pulpit, people instinctively clutch their wallets and purses, because we church leaders have accidentally trained the people of God that “stewardship” means that it’s either time to build next year’s budget, or we’re going to build something, and it’s going to be expensive, or we built something expensive and we need to pay it off.

But stewardship is about so much more than just dollars and cents. To be a steward of something is to manage it on behalf of someone else.

And while the bank and the neighbors might be keenly interested in your net worth, the biblical truth is that you’re just like Hannah – you don’t actually own anything. Everything you have, everything you are, everything you will be, is a gift from God. Not just your home or your car or your financial assets – your relationships with your family, your friendships, your citizenship in this country – all of it is a gift from God.

Hannah is a model of biblical stewardship. She understood that her son Samuel didn’t belong to her or her husband Elkanah; he belonged to God. And she said, “As long as he lives, he is given to the Lord.”

A few minutes ago, we had the privilege of administering the Sacrament of Baptism to young Will.

And one of the things I am certain of is that as he grows and comes of age, Will is going to hear all kinds of messages about who he is and who he belongs to. Will is going to hear all kinds of messages about his worthiness or lack thereof. Some of those messages, will be biblical and life-giving.

But you and I know that some of those messages that he hears will be both false and harmful. Some of those messages that Will will hear will tell him that he has more worth than others, simply because he is a white boy on his way to becoming a white man, and therefore, the world belongs to him and there for the taking.

Oh, the message won’t be that explicit, of course. It will come in a thousand different ways in a thousand different forms, often with a wink and a nudge, but as a white man who was once a white boy, I know of what I speak.

But part of what we did when we baptized Will was we said “No, Will, your inherent worth is not based on your gender, or your race, or your age, or your ability to formulate a theological statement of faith. Your inherent worth is not based on how likely you are to be economically useful or successful or whether or not you’re able to dominate your sisters and brothers with whom you share this planet.”

When we baptized Will, part of what we were doing is saying, “Will, you are a gift from God, a child made in God’s very own image, and you are worthy not because of anything you’ve said or done, but simply because you belong to God. And we are declaring here and now that you don’t belong to us. We are declaring here and now that the God whom we worship and serve, the Triune God into whose name you have been baptized, is the God of radical reversals, the God who is on the side of the poor and the oppressed, the God who brings low and lifts up. We are declaring here and now that you are a gift from God, but you don’t belong to us – you have been entrusted to us by the God who will go to the cross for you before living without you, and in the waters of your baptism, we give you to God.

IV

And here’s the gospel news, my friend. The promises we made for Will are the same promises for you, in the waters of your baptism.

You are worthy, you are loved, not because of your net worth, not because of your faithfulness or lack thereof, not because you’ve got it all figured out. You are worthy, you are loved, because you belong to God, and in the waters of your baptism, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has claimed you and marked you as God’s own forever.

And if you’ve never been baptized, or if you’re not sure if you’ve ever been baptized, then, as the say, come on in, the water is fine. For the promises are not just for children. In our Presbyterian way of being the church, we proclaim that before you could ever know the name of God, before you could ever speak the name of God, before you could ever claim the name of God, God has known you. God called you. And God has claimed you.

V

For all of us, baptism is a reminder that our lives are not our own. Baptism is a reminder that in the kingdom of God, in the church of Jesus Christ, there is no such thing as “other peoples’ children,” because every child belongs to God, and therefore every child is worthy.

Baptism is a reminder to all of us that everything we have is a gift to be stewarded, to be managed, with the kingdom of God in mind. Everything – our financial assets, our physical bodies, our relationships, our votes – are a gift.

For as our grandmother Hannah sings to us this morning, the very pillars of the earth are the Lord’s, and on them he has set the world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.