

My friend **Rudolfo**, he smelled bad. It was unclear when he had last had a chance to bathe. He was unhealthily overweight. He could barely see, and some sort of fluid seemed constantly to be draining from his eyes. He pushed around an old shopping cart, mostly full of crumpled newspapers and other odds and ends. And he ate at the soup kitchen where I used to work.

He didn't speak any English, and his Spanish was spoken in a mumbly, under-his-breath, nearly undecipherable sort of way. An elderly gentleman alone on the streets, he clearly needed some help. So, as was the custom in the community I used to live with that ran the soup kitchen, we decided to invite him home to live with us.

That first afternoon, as I fixed him a snack in our home's kitchen, my friend Eric got Rudolfo set up in the living room. He sat him down on a chair right in the center of the room, then draped a big white sheet around his neck. Eric proceeded to take out scissors and give Rudolfo the first haircut he'd had in years. And I watched as a shy, slow smile spread across his face.

He looked like a little boy getting his first haircut. Not like when the child is scared and fusses, but in those rare examples when he is calm, feels somehow special and important, and maybe even recognizes it as a rite of passage. I believe that's how it was for Rudolfo.

“The LORD makes poor and makes rich;

God brings low, and also exalts.

God raises up the poor from the dust;

and lifts the needy from the ash heap,

to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor.”

**Tita** was the middle child of the three girls in the family (not counting their two older brothers). She was smart, but not nearly as smart as her sister Dalyla. She helped out around the house, but certainly not as well as her sister Wendy. Really, she often got lost in the shuffle of the big, busy family who served as my hosts when I lived in Guatemala. And in general, as a nine-year-old poor indigenous Mayan little girl, it’s pretty easy to go unaccounted for.

But I remember the day she spoke at the well. I remember it well! After many months of fundraising tours, e-mails, phone calls...and some diplomatic arm-twisting...on my part, the money had come through, the much-needed well had been drilled, and the whole community had gathered to watch as the first drops of water were brought to the surface. The community school where I taught English had organized a small skit to put on so the children could take part in the celebration. And Tita had a speaking part!

Later that night when we were back home again, she called me over to where she sat weaving. I could tell she had something on her mind.

“*Elizabeth,*” she said to me, “Come here. No come *here,*” she insisted, beckoning me to bend down close to her. “Did you hear me today?” she whispered.

“Of course,” I responded, “you did a great job.”

“That was the first time I ever spoke into a microphone,” she said, both shyly and proudly. “Do you really think I did alright?”

“Oh Tita, you were wonderful,” I told her as we hugged and tears filled my eyes. It didn’t matter to her that she had been dragged on buses all over the region to hear her little sister,

who had been elected the indigenous queen of the town, give elaborate bilingual speeches in Spanish and their native language of Kaq'chikel to large cheering audiences. This was Tita's first (and maybe last) time, and it was special. I felt so humbled that she had chosen me to share this moment with her. She knew I would listen and that she could trust me.

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**Nora** was timid at first when she came into my office at the Women's Resource Center with her two little girls in tow. Grateful to be able to communicate in Spanish, she opened up a little. When I asked her what I could do to help and if she could tell me her story, she just looked down at her hands, uneasy about talking in front of the girls. Once we had them happily distracted as best we could with crayons and coloring books, Nora explained how everything had gone wrong with the love of her life.

Her husband had citizenship; she did not. He regularly beat her, and he told her that if she ever reported it to the police, he would turn her over to Immigration to be deported. She told me she had believed she was worth nothing. Finally, when she could put up with it no longer, and was able to work up the courage to seek help, she came in to see me at the domestic violence agency where I worked. With a little encouragement and the Violence Against Women Act on

her side, she eventually began working on getting her immigration papers and trying to give her daughters every opportunity they deserved.

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\*\*\*This is the work of our God! And it is also our work!\*\*\*

\*It is what God, the Divine One we worship, is all about. And it was what Jesus, the Human One whose example we follow, was all about. Therefore it must be what we are all about! Love, forgiveness, peace, hope, and justice—those qualities Paul preached to us last week that define what we can call “good religion.” That is what Hannah is singing about in this passage we heard Dave read!\*

In the background story to our text this morning, this Hebrew woman saw a reversal of fortune in her own life, so she offered this song of praise to God for having brought it about. Hannah was in a bigamous marriage, and her husband’s other wife had many children, while she had none. In Hebrew culture, this diminished Hannah’s very worth and put her at a severe disadvantage in terms of the power dynamics of family and society. So Hannah decided to take matters into her own hands in her reproductive life and her spiritual life. Facing adversity, she prayed at the temple to be granted a son, and lo and behold (!) like other formerly barren women in the Bible, as the story goes, she did bear unusual offspring late in life as a special favor from

God. Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Elizabeth all fit into this model, and then of course, there is Mary's unusual conception!

It is no coincidence that this morning's passage, often called Hannah's Song, is the literary model for the prayer in the book of Luke known as the Magnificat, or Mary's Song. Now I know some Christians who would read Jesus back into this text, and claim Hannah's son Samuel as just another hero of the Hebrew Bible whose only purpose is somehow to lead up to Jesus' greater prominence, and that the anointed messiah of whom Hannah sings is of course Jesus the Christ. But that kind of reading does justice neither to the intrinsic value of the Hebrew Bible for both Jews and for Christians, nor to the literary masterpiece that the New Testament actually is, by virtue of the way its writers intentionally wove these old stories into newer ones using rhetorical flourishes like this song.

Biblical scholars suggest that Hannah's Song itself was inserted into the text at a much later date to increase religious and artistic appeal. It is really a song of national thanksgiving, and the first-person "I" of the prayer is the nation as well as the individual worshipper, which are often mutually identified in biblical poetry.

\*\*\*And let me ask you: Can you *imagine* if this were *our* nation's prayer? If our national anthem praised God for breaking the bows of the mighty while the feeble gird on strength? If our nation anthem praised God for forcing the full to hire themselves out for bread while the hungry grow fat with spoil? If our national anthem praised God for raising up the poor from the dust...to make them inherit a seat of honor? Can you *imagine* if we as Americans stood and sang that one does not prevail by might, since only God holds that power?\*\*\*

Yet the thing is that as progressive Christians, when we read this prayer, and if we have the *audacity* to pray it along with Hannah, we also have to ask ourselves if God really does have the power to do these things—if that is how God acts to intervene in our world. Or rather, is it for us to understand that this realm of justice is what the Holy One *dreams* of for us, and it is our own responsibility to make it reality?

And I have to admit that I relate to this woman's prayer on another level personally as well. She sings in the opening line, "My heart exults in the LORD" as she gives thanks because something she has prayed for for so long has come to pass. Today I truly understand that prayer! For many years now I have been praying for my future congregation and praying that God would form me to serve them. And for so long it was just an anonymous, amorphous prayer. But now here we are—and you're real, and it's happening.

I loved the work I did at that soup kitchen with Rudolfo, in Guatemala with Tita, and at the domestic violence agency with Nora—I really loved it. And while I know I'll always bring it into any work I do, it was also a sacrifice to give it up to go back to school for seminary. But I had known for a long time that *this* is what I am called to do. To be in church community and serve a congregation, to walk together through years of life's ups and downs, to preach the gospel, and offer the sacraments, and go out into the world together with the church to work on bringing about God's realm of justice.

Having had the opportunity to meet many of you over this past week, and Paul and the search committee before, and the opportunity to experience your welcoming and generous hospitality towards me, and to learn about IUCC's commitments to progressive Christianity, both in terms of theology and activism, I am in awe of what this church has been in the past, humbled

that you've chosen me maybe to become a part of what it is in the present, and very excited about what we together can make it into in the future..

And in our biblical story, as much as Hannah wanted that little boy she gave birth to, do you know what she did as soon as she weaned him? ... She gave him right back to God to serve in the temple. I have been thinking about and working toward this goal of ordained ministry for many years now. And at the end of that journey, I stand here today offering myself right back to you. If I do have the honor and privilege of signing a Letter of Call later this afternoon, I will happily and wholeheartedly accept the covenant therein, as it states, "to join with this congregation in its faith and ministry, and exercise the pastoral office with love, faithfulness, and prayer."

And as I think of the work ahead, I see again that we might use Hannah's example to guide us down our path together. Hannah gave her son Samuel over to God's service. What shall we do with the children and youth of this church? No, don't be alarmed, I'm not advocating a new program of little sanctuary servants like Samuel was!

\*\*\*But I have heard from many members that they want the children to learn from the same perspective that the adults do, to gain an understanding of God and church with a progressive Christian theological basis that offers love and guidance and also calls upon them to love others. That the youth desire to be challenged to go beyond the church's walls to serve their community, and to live out their faith through action.\*\*\*

My vision for this congregation is that we work together to create an environment that both lifts up and cherishes the children and youth as beloved children of God, and also teaches them the progressive Christian "family values" of love, forgiveness, peace, hope, and justice.

\*\*\*So that these young people may know that they belong to a church that is Christian and *proud* to be Open and Affirming to LGBT folks, a community that is Christian and *outspokenly* a Just Peace church. And with God's blessing, I pray that we are able to bring this message to other young families seeking such a faith community in this area and that they feel welcomed in and invited to join us here.\*\*\*

When I was a child and young person growing up at Pilgrim UCC in Carlsbad just a little ways south of here, I used to love to come to church. I felt a sense of reverence in the worship, a sense of community with the congregation, and a sense of direction for my life through the church's ministries. Those early experiences of faith truly formed the way I think about the world and my place in it, and the way I have come to understand how we are called to love God by loving and serving one another.

So yes, "my heart exults in the LORD" to be here with you all and to be standing at this precipice now. One Sunday just a few weeks ago, I sat in a tea shop in Cambridge, MA the day the search committee introduced me as the candidate for your Associate Pastor. And as I sat and contemplated the possibility of moving back to sunny Southern California, it didn't hurt my prayers any for IUCC and for the relationship that may exist between us, that we had the first snow of the season in MA that afternoon, which I'll remind you was October 18!

So I will continue to pray for IUCC and for our relationship and journey together. I pray that we might learn to sing together Hannah's Song and to learn how to answer our own prayers through the way we live out Hannah's Song. That together with each other and together with our God we might continue the work of this church to raise the poor from the dust and make the needy inherit a seat of honor in our own midst. And I pray that we will remember always to

keep in our hearts, and to offer prayers for *all* those whom God lifts up—for Rudolfo, for Tita, for Nora, for the children of this church: for Brian , for Katie, for Sofia, and also for all those nameless families we don't even know yet who will someday join *this* church family and decide to sing, pray, walk, and live beside us here as well.

*Amen.*