

Wisdom with Humility

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For Friendship Presbyterian Church
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13th Sunday after Pentecost

1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14 (NRSV)

¹⁰Then David slept with his ancestors, and was buried in the city of David. ¹¹The time that David reigned over Israel was forty years; he reigned seven years in Hebron, and thirty-three years in Jerusalem. ¹²So Solomon sat on the throne of his father David; and his kingdom was firmly established.

³Solomon loved the LORD, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places. ⁴The king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, for that was the principal high place; Solomon used to offer a thousand burnt offerings on that altar.

⁵At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, "Ask what I should give you." ⁶And Solomon said, "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you; and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne today. ⁷And now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. ⁸And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. ⁹Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?" ¹⁰It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. ¹¹God said to him, "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, ¹²I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you. ¹³I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor all your life; no other king shall compare with you. ¹⁴If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life."

The concluding verse of our Psalm reading for today reads, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” (Psalm 111:10a) But I would rephrase it as “*Reverence* for the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,” because the word *fear* has such a negative connotation. To our contemporary ears, *reverence* seems like the better term to describe a right attitude toward God. But through my study this week about Solomon and his request for a discerning mind, I’ve come to the conclusion that humility – rather than fear *or* reverence – is actually the beginning of wisdom. Eventually, I came to believe that humility is very near the meaning the Psalmist originally intended – humility and respect for the reality of God.

King Solomon shows he has some smarts when he asks God to grant him wisdom in the first place. He considers it’s essential for governing God’s people. Solomon realizes from the beginning that he needs wisdom to discern between good and evil, to establish justice for his people, and to maintain peace in his time. But for Solomon, even the gift of wisdom will prove insufficient. For though the king knows what is right, he still sometimes lacks the will to carry it out.

If we read only the portion of Solomon’s story that our Lectionary includes for today, we won’t see how Solomon’s wisdom eventually fails him. We only read of him requesting and receiving a discerning mind as a gift from God. We’d have to review the much longer narrative of Solomon’s reign to realize that even wisdom granted by God fails to establish this man as a wholly righteous king for God’s people.

The revealing word in the previous sentence I think is the word *man*. Solomon may be a great king, but he’s still just a man, a mere mortal, a human being, and therefore flawed as all human beings are flawed. So while it’s easy for us to sit in judgement of him from our vantage point these thousands of years later, it’d be another matter entirely for one of *us* to significantly improve upon Solomon’s success. For we, too, are mere humans – flawed and inconsistent. *I* wouldn’t volunteer to fill Solomon’s shoes, or Joe Biden’s, or any other world leader’s.

Further along in 1 Kings, Solomon gets the chance to demonstrate his wisdom when he decides the case of two women, both of whom claim to be the mother of a single living child. The women live in the same house together, and each one recently gave birth to a son. But upon waking one morning, one mother discovers that her newborn son has died during the night, so she lays claim to the live one. Because no one else is able to establish the truth and resolve the dispute between

the women, they end up in front of King Solomon to plead their cases. Both women claim to be the mother of the living child.

As you probably know, Solomon's proposal is to cut the live infant in two, giving half to one mother and half to the other. But then the woman who's actually his mother objects. She cries out, "No, give her the child, but certainly do not kill him," while the other woman passively agrees to Solomon's solution. Of course, the king then immediately awards the infant to the woman who's shown compassion for his life, declares her to be the child's real mother.

The thing that strikes me most forcefully about this story at this point in my life is that Solomon's solution to the women's dispute shows he has not only an understanding of how justice works, but also of how people work. Solomon comprehends something about human nature that took me a long time to come to. All of us are desperately selfish - and selfishly desperate. Life can be painful, and cruel, and is many times unfair. It isn't that one of these mothers deserves to lose her child. It's just that when one of them does, they both want the one living child that remains. And what mother wouldn't? Given half a chance, what parent wouldn't lie and plead for the opportunity to replace their dead child with a living one? To resolve the dispute before him, Solomon has to discern the motivations which drive the women to claim what they claim. And the King has to understand, too, the higher motivation of a parent's love for her child.

I'm not nearly as good as Solomon at persuading people to admit the truth when the truth is the last thing they want to admit. I'm just not that smart.

Several of the commentaries I read about this text point out that the phrase the NRSV translates as 'an understanding mind,' the gift for which Solomon asks God, can be more literally translated 'a listening heart.' Solomon literally asks God to give him a heart able to listen intently for the will of God on earth. What an exceptional request! Consider, too, that a heart that listens becomes more an action for leaders to practice than a state of mind to once attain.

Which suggests to me that the call to wisdom may be more a call to discipline – dedication to a practice - than to a competency. Perhaps this is how Solomon fails to live up to his potential as the wisest king of Israel. 1 Kings 11 reveals that Solomon's married seven hundred wives. My husband, for one, would be quick to point out that this fact alone proves the man to be a fool and not a sage. For how could anyone hope to reconcile himself to the interests of seven hundred different

allies and expect to survive the countless tensions and disputes between them? Obviously, Solomon's excess becomes his downfall.

Which brings me back to the idea of humility as opposed to fear. I believe Solomon asks God for wisdom from a humble heart, for in the very asking, Solomon acknowledges his need of God's superior understanding. But if wisdom really is 'a listening heart,' then even the wisest king of Israel isn't able to sustain the listening which he begins. Rather, the popular king grows wildly successful, prosperous, and broadly honored, and so *stops hearing* what he no longer wishes to hear. It isn't the king's abilities that fail him in the end, but his willingness – his willingness to continue the practices of listening and following that are the true hallmarks of wisdom.

I would never claim to be wise. As a matter of fact, I've noticed that people who make such claims appear more foolhardy than wise, for they seem to be tempting fate to prove them wrong. Rather, I will admit to always needing wisdom, not just knowledge that can be acquired, but also the humility that makes a person willing to keep listening for God's voice, for divine sign amongst the noise of human life, for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Leadership is difficult under the best of circumstances, and wisdom is a constant necessity – rather than a goal to be achieved. Wisdom is the humble and faithful practice of discovery, of dedicated openness to unexpected lessons, of willingness to encounter truth more complete than what we currently possess. I believe life has much to teach us, and that God has made us more capable of learning than we're even aware. I'm not a king – or any kind of world leader - but even I can pray for wisdom to discern the will of God in my decisions, and choices, and actions. Wisdom seeks a heart humble enough to ask for, and courageous enough to hear, divine solutions to humanity's difficulties.

(Silent Reflection)

Amen.