

“Wisdom to Enact Justice”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Edina Morningside Community Church; October 28, 2018

1 Kings 3:4-28

The 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.

At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, “Ask what I should give you.” And 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. And 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. And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. Give 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?”

It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. God 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, I 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. I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor all your life; no other king shall compare with you. If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life.” Then Solomon awoke; it had been a dream. He came to Jerusalem where he stood before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. He offered up burnt offerings and offerings of well-being, and provided a feast for all his servants.

Later, two women who were prostitutes came to the king and stood before him. The one woman said, “Please, my lord, this woman and I live in the same house; and I gave birth while she was in the house. Then on the third day after I gave birth, this woman also gave birth. We were together; there was no one else with us in the house, only the two of us were in the house. Then this woman’s son died in the night, because she lay on him. She got up in the middle of the night and took my son from beside me while your servant slept. She laid him at her breast, and laid her dead son at my breast. When I rose in the morning to nurse my son, I saw that he was dead; but when I looked at him closely in the morning, clearly it was not the son I had borne.” But the other woman said, “No, the living son is mine, and the dead son is yours.” The first said, “No, the dead son is yours, and the living son is mine.” So they argued before the king. Then the king said, “The one says, ‘This is my son that is alive, and your son is dead’; while the other says, ‘Not so! Your son is dead, and my son is the living one.’” So the king said, “Bring me a sword,” and they brought a sword before the king. The king said, “Divide the living boy in two; then give half to the one, and half to the other.” But the woman whose son was alive said to the king—because compassion for her son burned within her—“Please, my lord, give her the living boy; certainly do not kill him!” The other said, “It shall be neither mine nor yours; divide it.” Then the king responded: “Give the first woman the living boy; do not kill him. She is his mother.” All Israel heard of the judgment that the king had rendered; and they stood in awe of the king, because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him, to execute justice.

Each week when folks gather for our Tuesday morning Bible study, we bring together different versions of the Bible. It’s illuminating to see how the same Hebrew or Greek words are interpreted by various translators at different times. This week we noticed a particularly sharp difference in translations of what Solomon asks for in his dream, according to verse 9. Should we understand Solomon’s request of

God as “an understanding mind” (NRSV), “a discerning heart” (NIV), or a “God-listening heart” (MSG)? Which translation is closest to the truth, and what’s at stake in the choice?

The key distinction to be made is between “mind” and “heart”. The “mind” is the place of facts and figures, of information that can be learned in school and measured on tests. The “heart” includes this sort of data, but also adds to it a more comprehensive sense of ethics and character. The heart, which the Biblical tradition teaches as the place of the soul, encompasses a personality, communicates compassion, and makes one human. Seen in this light, Solomon’s request is not simply for knowledge, but is rather for a more complete wisdom, situated as it is in the heart. Information and knowledge, rightly ordered, are necessary but insufficient subsets of wisdom, sort of like the smaller dolls inside a set of Russian nesting dolls. Information is a subset of knowledge, and knowledge is a subset of wisdom, which is the wholistic way of holding together both mind and heart.

Solomon asks for wisdom from God in the early years of his reign, which has *not* been marked by divine wisdom to this point. Solomon is the child of David and Bathsheba (whom we heard about last week), and he is the chosen successor to both the throne and the grievances of David. The fracturing of righteousness in ancient Israel’s civil society comes about because of David’s unjust conquest of Bathsheba, and it continues far beyond him. On his deathbed, David instructs Solomon to kill a number of political rivals. Solomon’s first actions as king are to go down this hit list, deploying the sword against his own brother Anonijah, then against Joab, Abiathar and others, thereby consolidating his reign. This was (and is) the commonplace practice of rulers, using unrighteous commands and the permission of violence to secure power. Deploying dominance and gaining victory over enemies is a well-worn path to other conventional goals of long life and wealth, but it creates violence and war rather than peace. Subsequent battles lead Solomon to attempt truces through intermarriage, which then opens the door to worship of other gods. This is the foolishness of Solomon’s first actions as king, his attempts at following the norms of behavior for people in power.

A cynic would point out that in his dream encounter, Solomon doesn’t need to ask God for long life, riches, or victory over enemies because he’d sought after those things already, using tried and true methods. He’s tried to live by the conventional wisdom of his day and ours, [which has been summarized](#) as “Might makes right; Power is superior to compassion and Despair is stronger than hope.... ‘Money is God’ and ‘The one who dies with the most toys wins’”. But Solomon sees that such apparent knowledge is bankrupt, like chasing after wind. The only thing left—the heart of wisdom which Solomon asks God for—is the ability “to discern between good and evil”. This is not mere knowledge according to the ways of the world, but rather is “understanding to do what is right”, as God tells him. Even though wisdom is uncharacteristic to the earlier Solomon, God comes to him and equips him with wisdom, “to execute justice”.

In response, Solomon lays aside conventional understandings and begins to enact this divine wisdom for justice. The next things we see from Solomon give glimpses of such wisdom. Solomon’s immediate reply to this God-moment is to sacrifice, and to provide “a feast for all his servants”. That is to say, he shows his regard and gratitude for God with the sacrifice, and his regard and gratitude for human beings by providing a feast, including especially those whose servant labor has helped him as king. God’s wisdom seeks to maintain right relationships of faith and compassion, loving God and loving the neighbor as well. Solomon also demonstrates divine wisdom as he adjudicates the legendary dispute between these two women. Faced with an impossible she-said, she-said situation, where there are no other witnesses and a child’s life is at stake, Solomon finds a way where there seems to be no way. Calling for a sword—the same sword that was once deployed to kill political rivals—Solomon creates a moment where the child’s true mother comes to light. God’s wisdom uses the sword not for vengeance or dominating power, but for the revealing of truth and the protection of the weak.

Consider the swords today, beloveds. We have survived a week marked by violence, division, and condemnation of the other, perpetrated in the name of White supremacy and Christian domination. We've seen mail bombs create domestic terrorism in the service of political ideology, a white man targeting and killing black people at a Kroger's grocery store in Kentucky, and the slaughter of eleven Jews during worship yesterday in Pittsburgh. These are only the latest high-profile events in a season of growing racial violence and anti-Semitism, which has gone up significantly in recent years. Chants of the "Jews will not replace us" by white supremacists in Charlottesville a year ago, have spread in examples of violent speech and action too numerous to count. These are the natural consequences of the dark arts of political psychology, deploying divisive rhetoric and attack ad smears to depress electoral participation, tear down opponents, and do whatever is necessary to win, no matter the cost or consequences. These are the ways of worldly practice and belief, pursuing long life for partisan rule, for the riches gained through unjust policies, and for victory over political enemies. From a congressional baseball game to worshippers in synagogues and churches, the consequences of this bigoted feuding continue to grow more deadly by the week. So much for conventional wisdom.

Over and against such destruction, God equips us with discerning, protective, and faithful wisdom. This is the wisdom Solomon receives and passes on to us by his better examples, the wisdom "to execute justice". God calls us to a higher level, a more transcendent practice of Christ-like faith, which welcomes the stranger, acts with mercy, and forgives even the enemy. This religious ethic is shared among people of faith of various traditions. In fact, writer [Bari Weiss points out](#), "The heartbreaking coincidence is that the Jewish emphasis on the open door, on welcoming the stranger, is exactly what the Jews of Tree of Life and the Jews of every synagogue big and small in every far-flung corner of the globe were reading about this Shabbat morning." That ethic of welcome and hospitality is at the heart of God's wisdom, and of our response in these times.

Of course, just because one has the gift of divine wisdom is no guarantee that one is going to use it, as we can see from the rest of Solomon's life. The same goes for us. Will we exercise the wisdom to enact justice—through our leaders, and in the votes where we elect those leaders—or will we indulge the passing fads which masquerade as wisdom today? How will we put the swords of white privilege and the generational accumulation of misbegotten gains to new use today? How will we resist the accumulation of violence on our city streets, in domestic abuse cases, and in our places of worship? In the words of [writer Paul Raushenbush](#), "[This] is a time for people of all faiths to come together, reject the hate and work for the future of our nation where...there is no supremacy by any one group, and all are welcome, there is equity for all and that the tree of life bears fruit for all." Or in other words, to enact God's wisdom "to execute justice". May it be so. Amen.