

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B

Transforming Wisdom

August 19, 2012

Pastor Samuel B. Adams

1 Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14, Ephesians 5:15-20

Our presidential is approaching its final heat. Both parties have named their standard bearers. Wherever your political allegiances lie, the root questions facing our nation all center on the nature of wise leadership. Our nation faces huge challenges. Our leadership has become so polarized that decision making is nearly paralyzed. Visionary leadership is crucial. We need a leader who can help us bridge our differences and find a positive path into an unseen future.

By coincidence, today we meet a young leader in scripture, claiming his moment to take the reins in the family business of governing. Solomon walked to center stage at the death of his father, David, the charismatic leader who united the twin kingdoms of Israel and Judah. He knew from the beginning the task would take require his all. He had watched at close range as his father governed. He had also seen – and participated in – life threatening intrigues within the royal household. He knew his first challenge as king was to survive. In this he was ruthless. In the verses we skipped in today’s reading, he systematically ordered the assassination of his rivals.

But Solomon brought more than ruthlessness as a leader. One special characteristic shone above the others as he claimed Israel’s throne. He was a man of faith. 1 Kings narrates, **“Solomon loved the LORD, walking in the statutes of his father David.”**

He understood that governing God’s own people involved a very special partnership. God would take the flawed human being that he was, and reshape him to lead God’s people. A pivotal moment came at a holy place called Gibeon when Solomon encountered God. Listen:

“At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, ‘Ask what I should give you.’”

Solomon answered the voice in his dream with this request.

“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?”

Here is an echo from Eve’s temptation in the Garden of Eden. An understanding mind, able to discern between good and evil. This gives a strong hint that he had some awareness of his own character flaws, and how they could mar his faithfulness as he ruled in God’s name.

I understand his caution. I was employed for several years providing social services to people having brushes with our legal system. I worked, for the State of Idaho, with juvenile offenders and with families who acted out their desperation in child neglect and abuse. Time and again I would sit with a kid, or with a family in crisis, trying to help them sort out what was going wrong. I heard personal stories that would curl your hair. And many that touched my heart.

I had to prepare to go with them before the judge, usually Bill Black, a Presbyterian elder, and a good friend. I had to put together as much insight as I could. My reports were a tool to help him discern good and evil, and to recommend what we hoped and prayed would be a path

toward healing and growth. Sometimes we were right. Sometimes we were wrong and things just got worse. The responsibility was terrifying. Young, sometimes very young lives depended on us.

I learned quickly how challenging it is to discern clearly and to judge rightly. I saw very ordinary human beings, flawed like the rest of us. Some had just made mistakes. Some had slid into slippery situations and did not know how to get out. Some needed more – or different – structure at home or at school. I prided myself that I was good at what I did. And, often, I was.

But there were the other times. We were under funded and short handed. Caseloads got impossible. I got tired and overwhelmed. My listening skills deteriorated. Then, as my “youth rehab” kids would say, I got conned! My own preferences, and sometimes my prejudices, cropped up in unexpected ways. I had to learn that anger, even desperate rage, sometimes masked much goodness and, even, a deep thirst for right. And now and then winsomeness and charm disguised destructive, hurtful evil. I had to figure out which were which. I needed what Solomon had.

Judge Black needed it even more! He made the decisions. I learned over time as I worked with that crusty, gruff old man, that he was far wiser and more caring in the court room than he seemed over coffee. In court with Bill, I saw in him a gift like the one for which Solomon prayed as he undertook his life calling as king. Others saw Bill’s gifts, too. He served for many years as chair of his presbytery’s Committee on Ministry, and on presbytery, synod, and general assembly Permanent Judicial Commissions. These church courts handled our denomination’s most difficult and intractable conflicts, seeking to do justice with loving kindness. Sometimes tough love.

Solomon, along with his duties of statecraft, functioned among his own people as a judge. During the years of his reign he became famous for his wisdom and his discernment. Some of us remember stories of disputes he moderated, and conflicts he resolved. His was not simply the accrued wisdom of kings and princes, of politicians and candidates, but a deeper wisdom, a gift from God. Solomon opened his heart and spoke to God out of his need. God was faithful. Solomon became a vehicle for God’s presence – a good shepherd for God’s chosen people.

As this church prepares to seek your next pastor, I see here a crucial lesson about leadership and wisdom. Life itself is a good teacher. Books and teachers, classes and mentors have wonderful insights. But the inner consciousness – the “in-sight” – which makes it all work often comes as a gift from God, a gift of the Spirit. It surfaces in the context of a life offered to God, and lived before God with honesty and humility. It is the fruit of a disciplined life, where the seeds of understanding are carefully tended and nurtured while they sprout and grow.

As we surrender our lives – and our talents – to a power beyond ourselves, our particular gifts continue to ripen. Whether our gift is discerning and judging, or listening and being present in God’s name. Or whether our gift is sharing, and serving, and helping. These are the paving stones on the path of discipleship. Our gifts empower us to pursue and fulfill God’s purposes.

One of the core qualities of wisdom is knowing our place. Not simply knowing who we

are, but knowing whose we are. That was the heart of Solomon's gift. As king, he was in charge. He was tempted to believe he controlled everything. But that prayerful night at Gibeon, God was showing him how to keep his priorities in their proper order.

"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."

As people of faith, our wisdom is always shaped by the way we live our lives before God; by our willingness to give ourselves, our talents, our insights, our very lives to God. And to expect that God will use us, not simply to meet our needs or to fulfill our dreams. God's wisdom shows us the way to fulfill God's purposes, and to meet the needs of God's beloved world.

Centuries after Solomon the writer of Ephesians wrote to believers in a different corner of the Mediterranean world sharing a similar vision of discipleship, to guide their life together.

"Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is."

These words of wisdom helped shape many emerging communities of Christians. They envisioned not simply a gifted ruler like Solomon. But *communities* – gifted to live the wisdom of Jesus into their daily lives and their life together, in cities scattered throughout the Roman world. Believers were learning they had a unique gift to shape their own troubled times.

In the climactic words of today's reading, this writer describes the transforming practice that powers this visionary path. And exhorts the Ephesians to pursue it.

"...be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Perhaps you noticed. These verses celebrate worship as the driving force for a community seeking to be faithful. Singing. Giving thanks. God's Spirit is still using the scriptures as a tool to reshape us as individuals, and as a community. That's what happened to Solomon. Seeing himself in the Eden story, he asked God for what he needed. God's wisdom reshaped his reign.

Pastor Jan and I have watched with joy as this community of faith has created a vision for your future ministry. In your Mission Study process, you have sought to wisely discern a faithful future together. And begun to form an idea of the wise leader you need as pastor to help you live it. Your shared wisdom is already transforming your mission. Today the session meets to finalize your Mission Statement, which outlines tasks for all your Councils, going forward. The task is transformation. Ephesians 4:1-3 has words that are apt – and powerful – for us now.

"I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in

the bond of peace.”

I couldn't say it better! Thanks be to God! Amen.