

"The Wisdom of Solomon"
1 KINGS 2:10-12, 3:3-14; EPHESIANS 5:15-20

From the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
13th Sunday after Pentecost, August 19, 2018
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This sermon was going to be called "Politics As Usual," but it's not called that anymore. It's called "The Wisdom of Solomon."

If you could have anything, what would it be? Anything at all? A trip to Paris? A house in Carmel?

I want the blue thing Jerry Seinfeld talks about in this video clip. This is from his Netflix show, *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee*.

(Video clip: *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee*: guest, Cedric the Entertainer.)

I'm not really a car person, but I love that 1958 S-1 Bentley in Caribbean blue. "It's slanty; it's sloopy; it's irrelevant." And it's a really pretty car.

If you could have anything—anything in the world—what would it be?

When I was a kid my mom use to ask, "What do you want for Christmas?" I'd spend weeks making and prioritizing a list. When I grew up, she'd still ask that funny question: *What do you want for Christmas?* Sometimes, I'd make a list for the fun of it, and it was a practical list: white dress shirts, a subscription to *The New Yorker*. Often I'd tell Mom that I didn't want anything. "Yes," she'd say, "you want something."

"No Mom," I don't.

"We'll I've got to give you something, and you've got to give me a list."

I'd tell her I wanted world peace. I was joking. I wasn't joking. She didn't think it was funny. I told her to give to a charity in my honor. She liked that idea. She began giving to Heifer Project International. (Our youth went there this summer on the Go and Serve mission trip.)

When you give a gift to Heifer, you give a flock of chickens, or a pig, or a cow. If you can't afford a whole cow, you give a portion of a cow, and Heifer gives you a nice card telling you how the gift is used to become a sustainable food source for a family in another part of the world. One year, mom gave me a portion of a donkey for Christmas. The card from Heifer was in my Christmas stocking. "The backside of a donkey has been given in your honor by your mother."

It was a great honor, indeed.

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If you could have anything, what would it be? I suspect you wouldn't be asking for a blue car, no matter how slanty, and sloopy.

No, if you could have anything in the world I suspect it would not be a "thing" at all. It might be another walk down Main Street in your hometown with your grandfather safely holding your hand. It might be a simple meal with your whole family; this is increasingly difficult these days as our families are so scattered. Yes, that would be worth asking for: a supper with your far-flung family in the same town, gathered on the same continent, around the same table, eating slow food, enjoying long conversation, passing around the new baby.

If you could have anything you wanted, what would you ask for? A 1958 S-1 Bentley in Caribbean blue? No, if we could ask for anything, I suspect we yearn for profounder things.

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In our Old Testament passage today God's asks Solomon, "What do you want?"¹

Solomon could have asked God for anything—the Bentley version of a chariot, for example. *It's slanty, it's sloopy.* But Solomon is wise enough to understand there's a difference between what you "want" and what you "need." He's also wise enough to know what he most needs. The *wisdom of Solomon* is that he knows to ask God for wisdom. *You have called my father, David, to be king, O God. And now that duty falls to me.* Solomon knows he needs God's help.²

A good leader knows what he doesn't know. And Solomon, facing the daunting task of being king, asks God for what he most needs to best serve the people. *Give me a discerning mind. Give me wisdom.*

* * *

What do you most want? What do you most need?

A good leader knows what she doesn't know. A good leader knows where her gifts are strong and where her gifts are weak. And a good leader (a good neighbor, a good Christian) also knows what her neighbor needs. Solomon asks himself and we should, too: "What do I need to be the best person I can be in order to best serve my brothers and sisters in God's name? What do I need to be the best parent or grandparent? What do I need to be the best friend? What do I need to be the most faithful disciple?"

Solomon was wise to ask for wisdom. He asked for the thing he most needed to be a good king.

What's the thing you most need to be a good disciple? Like Solomon, may we ask for that which equips us best to be who God calls us to be. We might most need wisdom, or courage, or patience, or humor.

My simple challenge for us today: May we ask God for what we really need, and may we use it to better serve and love others.

And if God, for some reason, gives us a 1958 S-1 Bentley in Caribbean blue, then may we use it to serve our neighbors, to love our neighbors, and to be the best neighbor possible. To God's glory. Amen.

That's the end of my sermon, but I have a footnote (or, another sermon).

Last week I mentioned four things. (1) Our fieldtrip to Salt and Light, (2) Game Night, (3) the Taste of Champaign (which I kept calling the Taste of Greenville), and (4) The Big Event. I suggested that supporting

¹ We say that Solomon was a wise man. But Solomon was no saint. One commentator says that Solomon is full of "human cunning, vindictiveness, pettiness, insecurity, and sheer dishonesty" (p. 34, *New Interpreter's Bible, Kings*). Note that Solomon has his brother Adonijah hunted down and killed for scheming for his throne. This "unscrupulous elimination of his adversaries" might have been an accepted and, even, acceptable feature of Near Eastern politics of the day, but it is morally reprehensible and does not 'fit' God's law, which a godly king is expected to follow. *Ibid*, p. 35.

² "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?"

these events with your prayers, your money, and your actual hands-on participation was one way we practiced being imitators of God. We aren't on a cruise ship, and these events aren't for our entertainment; rather, we are called to be disciples, and events like these help us practice God's love and bear God's love in and to the world.

Thank you for your participation.

I dare to project what our shopping visit to Salt and Light may have accomplished and, tangibly speaking, how it might have mattered. It requires some math.

- 53 of our people were there.
- That's about 25 family spending units.
- Rachel and I purchased \$65 worth of staples.
- $65 \times 25 = \$1,625$
- 6 times/year = \$9,750/year
- Plus the few thousand dollars we already donate from the church.
- If you each share this news with 10 people, who spend a measly \$65 six times per year, that's (300 average Sunday attendance $\times 10 \times 65 \times 6$ PLUS the figures I just mentioned = \$1,182,750 per year.

Church, let's be wise. Let's show up. Let's reach out. And together let us say, THANKS BE TO GOD.

Amen.

Scripture: 1 KINGS 2:10-12, 3:3-14

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.

^{3:3}Solomon 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."

SECOND READING EPHESIANS 5:15-20

¹⁵Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, ¹⁶making the most of the time, because the days are evil. ¹⁷So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. ¹⁸Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, ²⁰giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.