

Date: August 13, 2006

SUNDAY: Ordinary 19

SERMON: Wisdom's Children

Text(s): 2 Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14; James 3:13-18

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The dean of the faculty of a prestigious university was presiding over a faculty meeting one day, when an angel suddenly appeared in a blaze of light and the sound of celestial trumpets. Naturally, this dramatic appearance got the attention even of these bored academics who didn't much believe in such things as angels. Anyway, the angel said to the astonished dean, "The Lord has decided to reward you for your exemplary work and your deft handling of all the petty academic politics that you have to put up with from this bunch of birdbrains. You can have your choice of enormous wealth, infinite wisdom, or stunning good looks."

Without hesitation, the dean replied, "Infinite wisdom."

"Done," the angel said, and vanished in a crack of thunder and a bolt of lightning.

For several moments, there was stunned silence, as the faculty members stared intently at their dean, who sat there as though he were gazing at something far away, but with a growing frown on his face. Finally, the suspense got to be too much, and one of the faculty members whispered, "Aren't you going to tell us what you've learned?"

Whereupon the dean replied, "I should have taken the money."

That joke came to mind when I read the story of King Solomon's prayer for wisdom at the beginning of his reign, which is our Old Testament lesson for this morning. For Solomon, too, following his request for wisdom, decided that he should have taken the money. It's an old story, from a place and a people far away, and yet, in its essence, it is as contemporary as today's newspaper. In our era, as well as in most eras of human history, the common pattern is to seek wisdom, but in the end, to settle for taking

the money instead.

Solomon starts off well. When he has a dream in which God appears to him and promises to give him whatever he asks, Solomon says, "*O Lord, my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only like a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. And your servant is in the midst of the people you a chosen, a great people. Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people; with the wisdom to discern between good and evil.*" Not a bad prayer, is it?

However, there is really only one story following this prayer that shows Solomon actually living up to the gift of wisdom he has received; it's the story of how he adjudicated between two mothers of newborn babies, one of which had died, and the living baby was being claimed by both mothers. It's also just about the only story about Solomon that many of us ever learned in Sunday School. For some reason, I've never discovered, most Sunday School lessons about King Solomon pass over the stories about what he really did after that prayer— how he squandered that gift of wisdom and discernment in a mad lust for power and greed for wealth that ultimately set the stage for the breakup of his kingdom into two separate kingdoms upon his death. We never read the stories that tell about his policies of harsh taxation that eventually broke the backs of his people to raise money to fill the royal coffers and build his palaces and the grandiose temple in Jerusalem. Nor do we remember all the stories of how he built treasure cities and monuments to his own grandeur by enslaving all of the ethnic minority people in his kingdom and pressing them into forced labor. Sometimes, we do remember, somewhat disapprovingly, that he had a large harem even by the standards of ancient oriental potentates, 700 wives and 300 concubines (Or as one little boy reported to his mother, he had learned in Sunday School that King Solomon had 700 wives and 300 porcupines, which probably wasn't too far off the mark.). No wonder Jesus, when he was warning against the dangers of single-mindedly

pursuing worldly wealth used Solomon as the negative example. Pointing to a flower, he told his disciples, *“Not even Solomon, in all his glory, was as grand as one of these lilies.”*

But the narrator of these stories obviously intends for us to understand the catastrophic consequences for the nation of Solomon’s folly, because he frames his narrative between this pious prayer for wisdom at the beginning of Solomon’s reign and the verdict God renders on Solomon at the end of his reign. In chapter 11 we read, *“So Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and did not whole-heartedly follow the Lord as his father David had done. . . the Lord was angry with Solomon because his heart had turned away from the Lord, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice and had commanded him concerning this matter that he should not follow other gods; but he did not observe what the Lord commanded.”*

The real value of the stories of King Solomon in the Bible is in the unvarnished and unblinking portrayal of what happens to someone who starts out well and with the best of motives and intentions, but decides afterward, that he should have taken the money. That’s what makes these stories so contemporary and so recognizable. There’s a lot Solomon in all of us, I suspect. We start out well, full of idealism, full of great intentions to use our gifts to make the world a better and more just place, but we end up settling for the money, or its equivalent.

Now don’t get me wrong; I’m not against making money or economic prosperity. And this text isn’t primarily about Solomon’s or our relationship to money; it’s about what happens when we start out seeking to live wisely and end up settling for so much less. I have no problems with the notion that we should work hard to earn a good living. John Calvin, the French theologian, whose thought and theology are often recognized as the foundation under modern capitalism and the so-called Protestant work-ethic, while he (wrongly, I believe) saw gaining

wealth as a sign of divine blessing and favor, nevertheless also recognized that the blessing of prosperity was given to some human beings to bring about economic justice and to eliminate poverty for the rest. There’s wisdom in that.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist renewal in the Church of England during the 18th century taught much the same thing: “Earn all you can, save all you can, give all you can,” he told his followers. The wise balance in that statement is breathtaking in its simplicity.

But it is a fact that it is often money, or the power that money represents that we end up pursuing instead of wisdom. Which is why, perhaps, Jesus, though he never condemned money or its usefulness, did issue some fairly blunt warnings about its dangers, and identified it as the chief rival to God for human loyalty and devotion. *“No one can serve two masters,”* Jesus said, *“you cannot serve God and wealth.”*

About six or seven years ago, we were back in the U.S. one summer for our annual home leave, and we were visiting our daughters in New York City. Late one balmy evening, we went with our younger daughter Kate to the promenade in Brooklyn Heights to enjoy the spectacular view of lower Manhattan by night. This was a year or so before the destruction of the twin towers, and they formed the centerpiece of that particular view. If you know Brooklyn Heights, you’ll know something of what it would cost to own one of the townhouses along the Promenade. Most of us probably couldn’t afford to even fantasize about it.

It was nearly 11:00 at night, as we strolled along the Promenade, and we were surprised to see many people, particularly younger twenty and thirty-somethings, all dressed in business suits and carrying bulging briefcases, just making their way from the subway stop to their townhouses or apartments in that exclusive, high-rent neighborhood. They were just coming home from work in the investment firms on Wall Street

at that hour, and the next morning would be back across the river in their offices by 8 o'clock to work another 13-14 hour day. It was quite obvious that they had made the choice to "take the money" rather than have a life.

No, it's not wealth or prosperity that troubles me, but the single-minded devotion to acquiring it and the insulating and alienating power that it exerts over us that seems to drive both individual actions and the actions of nations. It doesn't appear to be very wise to devote such extraordinary energy and time to acquiring wealth if we have to sacrifice gaining the wisdom to know to use it for good. I know that in some respects, I'm preaching to the choir when I'm talking to people who live in Maine. After all, isn't that why both native Mainers and those of us who are "from away" value the lifestyle here, just because it's not as passionately devoted to the single-minded pursuit of wealth as in other parts of the country?

But if the Maine lifestyle is commendable because it is not as single-mindedly devoted to the pursuit of wealth, it can sometimes be just as self-centered in its pursuit of leisure to the point where we fail to address the real and pressing needs of other people around us. There's a tendency here for people who have both wealth and expertise to cocoon themselves away from the very real issues of systemic poverty and unemployment and affordable housing and health care that make life a struggle for so many in our communities and in our state. The scarcity of church people in the Brunswick area who are willing to volunteer for Habitat for Humanity builds is just one marker of that tendency. There's no more wisdom in a lifestyle that insulates us and coddles us with year-round leisure opportunities while we tune out the cries of the victims of genocide in the Sudan or ignore the plight of people without access to adequate health care in our own country or the consequences of our foreign policies in the Middle East than there is in one in which we are

blue or white-collar slaves to making money.

If there's one thing we desperately need as a nation today, it's a collective wisdom that seems to elude us, and I suspect that it eludes us just because we have forgotten or ignored what both of the authors of our texts today know—that there is an inseparable connection between wisdom and justice. Real wisdom is a question of getting our priorities right, and for people of faith, that means, lining up our priorities with God's. And God's priorities, if we give any weight at all to the testimony of the scriptures, are about establishing communities of justice and truth and peace. The one story that portrays Solomon as a wise king, is a story showing him dispensing justice for a powerless and despised woman. He was considered wise to the extent he gave justice to the poor or the powerless.

Where do we search for such wisdom that is also just? Where do we get it? Once when Jesus' critics tried to undermine his popularity with the people by smearing his personal character and labeling him a fool, he replied, "*Wisdom is vindicated by her children,*" (LUKE 7:35). In other words, look at the results. Wisdom reveals itself in the results that follow from concrete decisions and deeds. We heard the author of the Epistle of James say exactly the same thing, "*If anyone lacks wisdom, let him ask of God who gives generously and ungrudgingly to everyone. . . the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits. . . And a harvest of justice is sown in peace for those who make peace.*"

Seeing ourselves and our lives in their proper relationship to God and to others is a place to start our quest for wisdom that produces justice. Even Solomon knew that. He started well; his humble acknowledgment of his own lack of, and need for, wisdom brought him God's gift. If he later squandered that gift, it wasn't because he didn't know where it was to be found.

If we're not to squander that gift, which God gives freely to any who ask, there are some specific things we can do to develop it. We can, for example, make a deliberate decision about our priorities in life, putting higher priorities on developing our relationships with God, with our families, with our neighbors than on our jobs. Who was it who said, "No one on his deathbed ever said, "I wish I had spent more time at the office?" We can, to the best of our abilities (although in a complex world such as ours, we can never hope to attain it perfectly) covenant to live in justice and peace with our neighbors. For some of us that may mean getting ourselves out of our own parochialism that insulates us from knowing about the larger issues facing our world and particularly those places where human life is so diminished by poverty and injustice. And we can hold our elected leaders accountable for their actions by demanding that they make decisions that foster justice and peace rather than divisiveness and greed and violence. We can sanctify time by deliberately giving some of our time to serving others who are in need, we can make deliberate decisions to give away a percentage of our wealth in order to help others who do not have enough of life's necessities. By doing so, we begin to bear the fruits of wisdom.

But we can't do this alone. True wisdom issues from and produces a just and peaceful community. We can only find the power to resist the prevailing culture of greed, injustice, and violence, by creating an alternative culture, a culture that values other things more than simply "taking the money." That's what the church is called to be— that alternative society. Wisdom is known by its children, and its children are the fruits of lives centered in God and in the welfare of others. Wisdom, more than power or ambition or wealth, is what makes us truly human, which means, truly in the image of God. Only when we learn wisdom, will we know the harvest of justice sown in peace.