

New Beginnings: Solomon
A Message on 1 Kings 3:5-15
For Huntsville First United Methodist Church
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1 Kings 3:5-15 (NIV)

At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon during the night in a dream, and God said, “Ask for whatever you want me to give you.”

Solomon answered, “You have shown great kindness to your servant, my father David, because he was faithful to you and righteous and upright in heart. You have continued this great kindness to him and have given him a son to sit on his throne this very day.

“Now, Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?”

The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. So God said to him, “Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be. Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for—both wealth and honor—so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings. And if you walk in obedience to me and keep my decrees and commands as David your father did, I will give you a long life.” Then Solomon awoke—and he realized it had been a dream.

He returned to Jerusalem, stood before the ark of the Lord’s covenant and sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings. Then he gave a feast for all his court.

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Today as we continue our sermon series on “New Beginnings,” and as we celebrate back-to-school and “blessing of the backpacks” Sunday, I think it is appropriate for us to examine the life of a man who became known for his wisdom: Solomon.

Solomon was the son of King David and the one that took over as king right before his father died. He was the one that built the temple in Jerusalem, using the plans and resources his father had organized.

In the scripture we read today we find that the Lord appears to Solomon in a dream and says “Ask for whatever you want me to give you.”

When I was a kid the myth going around was that if you made a wish on your birthday, before blowing out the candles on your birthday cake, then it would come true. It’s sort of like the genie in a bottle thing from Aladdin, you know. And you couldn’t wish for more wishes. That didn’t work.

I remember one year instead of wishing for a specific toy, my wish was that it wouldn’t rain on my birthday the next year (as it was raining that year). I thought it was a pretty good wish. It didn’t work, though. The next year it was raining as well. (Don’t y’all wish it was my birthday now! We could really use the rain.)

What would you ask for if God said he would give you whatever you wanted? Wealth? A new vehicle? New house? (I must admit that one sounds good to Pam and me!) Supernatural abilities like Superman? Physical attractiveness? The possibilities are endless, aren’t they?

Solomon was presented with that question, but his answer flies in the face of conventional, worldly thinking. He asked for wisdom, and not just wisdom but wisdom to “govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong.” Wisdom with an application.

Today is Back-to-School and Blessing of the Backpacks Sunday. We have prayed over and blessed the students and staff of schools here at the beginning of a school year. And I think it’s appropriate to pray for wisdom for both the students and the educators.

Now we sometimes get confused between intelligence and wisdom. Here’s the way I like to think of those two terms. Intelligence is knowing things, but wisdom is not only knowing things but also the ability to apply that knowledge in practical and meaningful ways.

Let me give you an example. When I was in seminary my roommate, the esteemed Rev. Tommy Earl Burton (who is an expert in the medieval mystics, by the way), and I had a class together. One of our classmates was extremely intelligent. He knew all the answers and was quick to quote

different sources to support his answers. He was really, really smart, and if I am honest, I have to admit I was envious of him. I didn't have that vast knowledge.

But this person was also... how should I put this... well... kind of pompous and arrogant about it. He had ways of making others, especially Tommy Earl and me, feel inferior to him. And I think he enjoyed doing it.

We had class with this person right before lunch time, and one day as we were leaving class all three of us were walking out of the building into the parking lot. Tommy Earl, a great jokester, said, "Hey Doug, let's go get some lunch. We can go in my Toyota Pious."

"Pious?" asked Mr. Know-it-all.

"Yeah," said Tommy Earl. "When I found out I was going to seminary and found out that Toyota made a hybrid car called the Pious, I just had to have it. I thought, 'That's the perfect car for me to drive back and forth to seminary.'"

Mr. Smarty-pants rolled his eyes, made a scoffing sound in his throat, and proclaimed "It's not a 'Pious.' It's a 'Prius'. A Toyota Prius. There is no car that is named 'Pious.' Ugh!"

Now Tommy Earl knew that. He was making a joke about the similarities of the two words. But smart guy didn't understand that. He thought Tommy Earl was serious. So Tommy Earl played along.

"Oh no! Are you serious? I bought that car for its name! I'm devastated. What am I going to do now?"

Mr. Brain huffed one final time, stuck out his chest just a little bit more for having enlightened a couple of poor, dumb, simple-minded seminary students, and walked off on his way.

I was about to die of laughter. Here was this adult man, who was so smart in the classroom, who completely missed a great joke and, in doing so, became the source of humor himself.

Did he make a better grade in the class than Tommy Earl and I did? More than likely, yes. Was he more intelligent than us? Probably so. But was he more wise? I don't think so.

When Solomon faced a new beginning of being King and leading God's people, he didn't ask God for academic intelligence. He didn't ask God to make him smarter than other people so he could lord it over them. He didn't ask God to make him the smartest person in the world so he

could become rich and famous. No. He asked God, “Give me a God-listening heart so I can lead your people well, discerning the difference between good and evil.” 1 Kings 3:9 *The Message*

In 1 Corinthians 3 we find these words from the Apostle Paul that describe the difference between being worldly wise and heavenly wise: “Do not deceive yourselves. If any of you think you are wise by the standards of this age, you should become “fools” so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God’s sight.” 1 Corinthians 3:18-19

The students and educators in our church and in our community face a new beginning as the school year begins. I urge all of them, the students, the educators, and the staff, to be like Solomon and to pray to God for wisdom.

I know tests are important to measure learning, but I find it sad and somewhat disturbing that in our educational system today so much emphasis is placed on those “assessment instruments.” Students are valued based on their test scores. The tests are emphasized so much that some kids have massive anxiety about the tests, for some of them their performance on those tests can even negatively influence their self worth.

And teacher effectiveness is evaluated based on how their students do on the tests. It doesn’t matter if a teacher has many students who have a horrible home life and whose parents don’t emphasize the importance of education. How did the teacher’s students do on the test? Good? Well then she/he is a good teacher. Not so good? Well, it must be the teacher’s fault, right? Wrong!

So my challenge to students this year is to seek wisdom. Academic learning is important and I want you to do your very best at that. But also seek wisdom. Learn how to apply the things that you are learning. Learn how to think critically and independently. Learn how to communicate and get along with others. Learn how to ask good questions, and pursue the answers to those good questions.

Jesus did that. When the disciples asked Jesus questions, why do you think so many times he answered with more questions than with answers? And why did he tell all those parables instead of just coming out and saying what he meant? It was so that the disciples, and us, could practice wisdom.

Jesus turned the intelligence of the world upside down and replaced it with heavenly wisdom. His sacrifice on the cross is perhaps the epitome of wisdom as he who was sinless died for us who are sinners. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians: “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” -- 1 Corinthians 1:18

My challenge to educators and staff is to teach wisdom. I know, I know, you have to teach for the test (and I still don't think that's right), but in doing so encourage your students to seek wisdom. Teach students the difference between intelligence and wisdom, model wisdom to them, and help them develop the skills necessary to have true wisdom.

And for those of us who no longer have kids in school or who don't work in education, my challenge is to pray for those students and employees to have wisdom. Find a student or a teacher in our congregation here to kind of "adopt" and pray for them daily. Lift them up in prayer that they may seek wisdom.

And if you are in the market for a car to drive to seminary, I highly suggest the Toyota "Pious." That way if you run across a pompous, arrogant, super-intelligent person, you can have some great "smiles" to the gallon.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.