

SERMON: The Gift of Discernment

TEXT: 1 Kings 3:5-12

I suspect it was something about the way I phrased the question, when the teenagers in the youth group wrote prayers that sounded more like a Christmas wish list. "I pray that my parents would let me have a TV in my bedroom." "Dear God, please let that cute girl say yes when I ask her to the dance." "My prayer is to get all A's on my report card."

To be fair, these are often the kinds of things teenagers consider important. I should have expected that they would include them in their prayers. And, if we're being honest, I'd say that we all have at one time or another treated God like Santa Claus who would give us what we ask for. Even though it may sound like we're praying, sometimes we're asking God to grant our wishes like a magical genie in a lamp.

Furthermore, we even like to make it sound easy for God, like we're not asking for much at all. The word "just" has become

so common in the prayers of many. It's a habit that we've picked up, and we may not even be aware that we're doing it. I don't want to nit-pick, but I wonder why we do this. Is it *just* to make us sound more casual and conversational? "Hey, let's just get together for a cup of coffee sometime." Has it replaced our use of the word "like" or "you know"? Like, you know how overused those words became. Or, do we use the word "just" in our prayers to sound humble and perhaps minimize the enormity of what we ask and expect from God. "I mean, you know, God, like, just let everyone agree with me all the time. But, you know, like, just if you get a chance. I'm just saying, it's no biggie."

Anyway, what is often emphasized in the story of Solomon's dream from First Kings, is the fact that God throws the door open to him. "Ask what I should give you," the Lord offers. Back to my childhood, this is like getting the Sears Wishbook Catalog and being told, "choose whatever you want." And unlike the genie from the lamp, there is no limit of only three, and no rules that

you can't wish for more wishes. The offer from God is wide open:
"Ask what I should give you."

Solomon's response to this offer is deemed a "prayer speech" by one Old Testament scholar. Following that model, it is fairly easy to outline the speech. First, Solomon acknowledges God's faithfulness as shown to his father, David. *"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."*

Next, Solomon deems himself a humble servant of God, and confesses his ignorance and inexperience, in particular as a military leader. *"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."*

Following that, Solomon recognizes the great responsibility before him, as the new ruler and leader of God's chosen people. *"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."*

And finally, Solomon identifies what he needs to be an effective leader. *"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?"*

This really must be the stuff of dreams, because how many of us are that humble and that selfless to only ask for what will benefit others? Solomon's prayer shows an extraordinary level of integrity and insight that even his father David did not possess. Solomon has been offered the moon, but rather than grabbing it and running, rather than asking for prosperity or personal favors, rather than asking for an easy task, agreeable subjects, and a time of peace, Solomon asks God for the GIFT OF DISCERNMENT.

"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.'"

Looking at five different versions of this passage in First Kings, I noted that Solomon's request doesn't vary a lot. He asks for wisdom, a wise and mature heart, a "God-listening" heart, a discerning heart, an understanding mind, an understanding heart. Clearly, wisdom comes from engaging both mind and heart, and understanding grows when we take time to listen.

THE GIFT OF DISCERNMENT does not come with a quick snap of the fingers from the genie in the lamp. And it won't make Solomon's job easier. Discernment is a process. It takes work. It takes time. Discernment requires listening to others, listening to God, listening to and recognizing our own biases, and not

expecting or allowing any decisions to be automatic or quick. Discernment never assumes, and never answers a question before asking more questions. Discernment calls for connecting and consulting with others. Discernment calls for quiet time, self-reflection, Bible study, and prayer.

Discernment is a gift that we all need more of in our day and time. It seems that people already know the answer to issues before ever listening to someone else's perspective. We don't ask questions, we don't seem to want to learn anything new or grow in our understanding.

My sister serves on the Session of the Presbyterian church where I grew up in Minnesota. She shared that they recently made a decision to fly the pride flag on the church grounds as a sign of welcome to the LGBTQ+ community. But the Hispanic church and the homeschool group who rent space from the church have threatened to leave if the pride flag is flown.

The pastor called a special meeting of the Session, and I imagine there were Session members who went into that meeting with their minds made up about what needed to be done. But they met last week and spent two hours discussing this one issue. They have taken a step back, slowed their process, and postponed the action until next Spring. In the meantime, they hope to engage in conversation with the other groups who share their space. The next several months will be a time of discernment: to listen and learn, to contemplate and consider, to educate and explore, to discuss and debate, to ponder and pray.

We still remember today “the wisdom of Solomon.” Eventually, though, he slides away from his servant nature and fails to obey God with his heart and mind the way his father David did. But at least at the outset, when he was young and inexperienced, he knew that what he needed most as a ruler was an understanding mind and a listening heart.

THE GIFT OF DISCERNMENT need not be just a dream for us in our world today. May we pray to God to guide us and give us patience as well, as we strive to develop a spirit of wisdom and understanding. May we use our minds and our hearts to listen, to serve one another, and to share the truth of God's amazing and abundant love... to the glory of God!

AMEN.