

**FIRST PARISH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH  
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST  
East Derry, New Hampshire**

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20 August 2006

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

1 Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14

Ephesians 5:15-20

Most of us grew up with stories about finding a magic bottle, rubbing it and having a genie pop out who offered the lucky one three wishes. And more often than not those three wishes were spent on accumulating stuff that by the end of the story was recognized for the clutter and burden it was, all of its gift-ness having tarnished and worn off. Or the wishes were used to collect beauty – either one's own or a prize maiden who could smile prettily – but usually was a pretty impossible and unpleasant person to get along with, or a knight in shining armor who was a lot more hassle than he was worth. Or the wishes were squandered frivolously because the recipient was distracted and something tumbled out of the mouth while the mind wasn't paying attention. That would be the one I can most identify with. Have you ever wondered how you would handle that sort of situation? What you would ask for if you were given the chance to ask for any three things you might want in life? Or to make the question even harder, what if it got narrowed to one thing that you might have in all the world, whatever your heart desires. What would it be?

I periodically get asked that sort of question, not necessarily by a magic genie who can make anything come true, but by Ben, or by someone who cares and wants to do something to help. Sometimes the answer seems obvious, in part because the question feels focused and on the surface and in the moment. I really need some water, I really want something to eat, I really need to go to bed, I really need to get this writing done because they're collating the newsletter in the morning, I want to get the laundry started and need to get dinner on the table. But there are other times when the question reaches deeper, toward the heart of a huge dilemma or a heavy hurt or an overwhelming burden, and then I'm a lot less sure what to say and how to answer. Partly because I have no idea what will make a difference, and bring healing or lighten the load. Or because I'm not sure there is anything that can be done, what I want and need most is something I can't have, so what's the point in answering the question at all. And sometimes I don't know how to answer the question because I'm afraid I might get it wrong. Do I trust myself to prioritize and sift and focus and discern enough to really reach to the heart of the matter? I tend to want to say, you know best, I can't see the forest for the trees, you decide. Whatever you think is best will be fine. And if that's true for me in responding to an offer of help from Ben or a friend or one of you, how in the world would I answer if God asked? Somehow I trust I would ask for more than a delicious piece of chocolate, but would I find an answer that really speaks to the needs of my heart and the call of my life?

I have to tell you, I'm impressed with Solomon's answer. Maybe it's one I can plagiarize and use for myself if the time ever comes. He was young. As his father David neared his death bed, he appointed Solomon as his successor. Once David was dead and buried, Solomon assumed the

throne, but there followed a fairly unpleasant bloodbath between he and his brother to see who would actually be king. But now it was settled, and Solomon had claimed the place his father wanted him to have. He was getting himself established and settled when God came to him in a dream and said, Ask what I should give you. Not unlike what Jesus said years later when he told his disciples, Ask, and it will be given you. And not unlike when Jesus walked up to blind Bartimeaus and asked, what do you want me to do for you? Those questions always make me nervous because they reduce it all down to one request, and I'm just not sure I could rise to the occasion and ask for noble enough a thing.

There are so many obvious things Solomon could have asked for. One of the most obvious is power and might, political and military strength that he might remain on the throne, that his kingdom might be secure, that he might reign in peace, and if not in peace, that he might at least be victorious in battle. He could have asked for riches and splendor and wealth, more than all the others, in order that people would admire him and he might be comfortable all of his days. There's no limit to what he could have asked for. When God is offering, not even the sky is the limit. You want it – you got it. Just make your desires known, and it's yours, Solomon.

As I said, Solomon's answer impresses me deeply. Every time it comes around again in the lectionary, I'm caught off guard and it catches my breath again. Solomon's answer to God's offer was, Give me an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil. To which God said, you have asked well. I will give you the wisdom you have requested, and the power and might and riches and honor you were humble enough not to ask for.

Give me an understanding mind, able to discern between good and evil. Help me to know and do what is right. Give me wisdom. A few centuries and a new religion later, Paul picked up the theme and instructed a young church to live with wisdom, making the most of the time they had. They were told not to be foolish but understanding of the will of God. And not to get drunk with wine, not to seek their ecstasy in food or drink or money or physical comfort – but rather to be filled with the Spirit of God.

So what is this wisdom thing that both of these texts are talking about? We've developed a scale to measure intelligence; we've established an abundance of schools to increase knowledge; and all too often we overlook wisdom altogether. But we do so at our own peril, for as one person writes, "Learning without wisdom is a load of books on a donkey's back." (Zora Neale Hurston)

There's a strand of biblical literature that's known as wisdom literature, the most specific of which is the book of Proverbs. One definition I read refers to wisdom literature as a cross between reading a Chinese fortune cookie and an Ann Landers column. The same person also says, "Wisdom and godly living begins with letting God be God. In that sense, Proverbs (and wisdom are) not for the general public. (They are) for God's people, calling them beyond the theoretical to the practical, beyond the intellectual to the actual, beyond abstractions to application, and beyond belief to behavior" (Heidi Husted, *The Christian Century*, August 2-9, 2000, page 790). Wisdom involves letting God be God, and seeking to ground ourselves and our lives in the ways of God. Wisdom involves looking beyond ourselves toward God, listening less to the voices around us and more for the voice of God, adding to what we've learned from books and teachers with the truth and insight that come only from God. Billy Graham says that,

“Knowledge is horizontal. Wisdom is vertical – it comes down from heaven.” And one more author writes that, “Common sense suits itself to the ways of the world. Wisdom tries to conform to the ways of heaven.”( Joseph Joubert (Neale, Graham and Joubert quotes: The Living Pulpit, July-September, 2000, pages 32, 34)

The third chapter of 1 Kings moves from Solomon's dream and God's promise into one of the most powerful examples there is of what it means to live by wisdom. The story tells us that two women came to King Solomon and asked him to settle their dispute. They held between them one baby; perhaps one holding the head and the other the legs, each unwilling to let the other woman claim the entire child for herself. As they stood there, one woman spoke up and launched in to her story. She said, we both live in the same house, and I gave birth one night to a baby boy. Three days later, this woman also gave birth to a boy. We were the only two people in the house, no one else was there with us. In the night, this woman lay on her son and killed him; and while I was sleeping, she got up, took my son as her own and left me with her dead son's body. When I woke in the morning, my first reaction was deep grief because I thought my son was dead, but then I looked more closely and realized that this body was not my son's. At which point the other woman spoke up and denied what was being said. She countered: the living son is mine, the dead son is hers. In an extreme case of she said, she said, with no witnesses to prove either of them wrong, they argued before the king about who was the real mother of the child.

Since this was before the days of DNA testing, a different resolution had to be found; and Solomon proposed a solution. He told them to stretch the child out before him, and while they did this, he reached for his sword. He offered its handle to the two women and told them to cut the child in half, giving the left half to one woman and the right side to the other woman. This is the only fair way to settle this matter. He hadn't even gotten the instructions out of his mouth when woman spoke up and pleaded with the king. Please don't let this happen; the other woman can take the child; just don't let him be killed. By contrast the other woman agreed with the king's proposal that the child be cut in half and divided between them. To which Solomon said, leave him whole and alive and give him to the woman who is willing to give him away. Clearly she is his mother, because his life matters more to her than her rights. To which all of Israel stood in awe of their king, perceiving that the wisdom of God was within him, because of the ways in which he executed justice.

Wisdom is the ability to discern what is good from what is evil, and being willing to choose what is good and right and just. Wisdom is the gift of an understanding mind. Wisdom involves letting God be God, and seeking to ground ourselves and our lives in the ways of God. Wisdom involves looking beyond ourselves toward God, listening less to the voices around us and more for the voice of God, adding to what we've learned from books and teachers with the truth and insight that come only from God. While common sense suits itself to the ways of the world, wisdom conforms to the ways of heaven.

May we, like Solomon, know what to ask for when the riches of heaven are offered.

Amen.