

An Understanding Mind

by

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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. ³Solomon 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.”

Back in June, I had the opportunity to sit down with friend and local anti-racism activist Anita Friday. Some of you may have already listened to the conversation she and I had in an episode of our BMPC Summer podcast. In that conversation we chatted together about the recent push back in schools locally and around the country around Critical Race Theory and how we teach our children our nation's history and empower them to build a different future for our communities and our country.

That was a very technical conversation, and I would encourage anyone interested in Anita's thoughts on it to go back and listen. But it was something that Anita said at the end of our talk that has stuck with me for weeks now.

I asked Anita her advice on behalf of so many of you who have asked me the same question: How does she think we, as those who advocate for the full humanity of all people, should we respond when we are with our friends and our families, when they make a comment or a statement that conflicts with that deeply held belief.

In more simple terms - How do we respond in love to the people we love when they say something intentionally or unintentionally racist? She offered some suggestions of open ended questions and even some gentle statements of belief, but then she paused and offered a more basic suggestion.

Maybe, she said, before attending that barbecue or family gathering, maybe each of us should say a prayer - a prayer to ask for God's grace and God's wisdom to know what to say, how to say it. She didn't give me a specific prayer to pray, but I would imagine that a prayer like this would work any of us:

Loving God, help me to love others as you would want me to, even when I disagree with them, even when they say things that hurt me, or hurt others. God, give me the wisdom to express myself honestly and lovingly. God, help me to use the foundations of this relationship that I value to challenge harmful beliefs and to open hearts and minds. Amen

Our passage for today says that Solomon traveled to one of the high places to say a prayer to God for wisdom before the temple in Jerusalem had been completed. But I know that God also answers prayers for wisdom said as we take an extra beat

in the car before heading into that picnic; prayers said on the thresholds of the homes of our parents or our children before we go inside for Thanksgiving dinner; and even prayers said in front of a laptop before we log into that zoom call.

Solomon hasn't been King for very long, but his ascension to the throne was not without controversy, conflict and violence. He offers sacrifice and incense in Gibeon and through a dream gives his devotion to God and asks God to endow him with the wisdom to rule God's people.

The writer of 1 Kings wants us to understand not why it is that Solomon is so wise, but to emphasize that wisdom is itself about having the capacity for judicious and discerning leadership, and that the gift of wisdom is rare and remarkable.

Julian DeShazier, Senior Minister of University Church on the south side of Chicago points out that Solomon has already displayed the qualities of a good leader by understanding that he needs a measure a wisdom beyond his own natural capacity.

He writes, "Solomon's response to God's offer to give him anything he wants, reveals not his ability to receive wisdom but his capacity to have everything and still seek transformation. While most leaders would be in too deep to admit their errors, Solomon is at least meek enough to wake up to his errors and seek a new way. This alone is proof that Solomon already has a bit of wisdom.

It is the courage to seek transformation, after being steeped in a particular way of being for a long time, that makes Solomon commendable and ultimately worthy of his post as king. He has no earthly reason to change course; in fact, he stands to lose much. This is the gospel for those who find themselves endowed with new insight and burdened by current commitments—that is to say, for everyone. We do not need to look far to find examples of people who rejected the path to a better way because of what they'd have to leave behind."¹

What is fascinating to me in this passage is that Solomon is asking God to give him wisdom to discern right from wrong. His claim to only be a little child, when in fact he is a grown man, further illuminates his own awareness that he

¹ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/august-15-ordinary-20b-1-kings-210-12-33-14>

actually lacks the kinds of experiences that will eventually make his leadership more thoughtful and in line with the will of God. Tradition holds that Solomon indeed goes on to become the wisest king who ever ruled Israel bar none, and the Biblical book of Proverbs bears his name as a collection of all of his accumulated wisdom.

But Biblical wisdom is more nuanced than just discerning between right and wrong, or even in the end choosing right over wrong. In his reflections on the wisdom literature we find in the Bible, like the book of Proverbs, Walter Brueggemann points to the unique nature of wisdom:

“wisdom teaching contains almost nothing of salvation, miracles or covenantal commandments, only the slow, steady pondering of the gifts and demands of lived life. Wisdom literature asks about “what works,” what risks may be run, what realities can be trusted, and where the practice of human choice, human freedom and human responsibility can be exercised.”²

Not many people need biblical wisdom to know right from wrong or to choose the right over the wrong. That more often takes integrity and courage. Biblical wisdom is much more subtle and often about choosing between two right decisions. Knowing what to do when deeply held values conflict, being presented with two good and right options and discerning which one should be the path forward.

Jesus often provides examples of this kind of wisdom in his ministry and teaching again and again modeling the choice between two commandments - to observe the Sabbath or to save a life, both right choices, both deeply held values. Jesus’ choice of life over the Sabbath has defined our Christian understanding of both for 2000 years. That simple and yet wise choice towards life guides so many of our decisions as Christians today - as individuals and as a community.

Last summer I began a new graduate program at the business school at Villanova University. While I like to call it an MBA, it is actually a Masters of Science in Church Management. You might imagine the kind of classes that I am required to take - Financial Reporting, Church Security, Information Technology, Organizational Management, Human Resources etc. But the whole program for

² Walter Brueggemann, *Reverberations of Faith: A Theological Handbook of Old Testament Themes*. Westminster/John Knox. 2002. pg. 232.

each cohort is kicked off with an intensive class not in any of those typical subjects, but with an entire course on ethics and how to discern between two right choices.

While our text books for the class helped us understand the numerous ways that a manager can find themselves in a right vs. right decision when it comes to caring for employees, working to the benefit and profit of their organization, and maintaining the mission of their company, as a course in church administration we would pour over case studies trying to tease out the good and the values that would be in conflict in the midst of a church's or a pastor's defining decisions; values of responsible stewardship, value of protecting and advocating for the poor, the value of community, the value of human equality, the value of the common good, and the value of human life. While those values all find their foundation in the roots of our Christian tradition, they too can come into conflict when we are asked to choose between them.

In this pandemic we have been consistently confronted with making the choice between two right decisions, needing to weigh the benefit between two choices that have good within them. And this moment again is one of them. The choice between the tangible good that we have all experienced in being able to be back together in one another's real physical presence, to hug and embrace, to reconnect, to breathe an incarnate spirit back into these places. And then our other choice - to return to previous COVID restrictions for the health and safety of the vulnerable among us in this moment, especially our children.

Both choices have good in them. Even though we are being asked to leave some things behind as we move into yet another new moment in this pandemic, this decision will cast a shadow forward into the future, and we hope that we will be defined and shaped as a community who values the lives of the most vulnerable over our individual comfort.

But our need to ask God for the wisdom to choose between two good options has not just been a church struggle. Over the past 18 months we have all as individuals, families, employers, employees, needed to do this over and over again.

Just a month into the pandemic, right around when we all started wearing masks and more interestingly that period before you could buy cloth masks and many of us began making them at home, my own mother was out delivering a mask

she had made to an elderly friend. On her way out of the apartment building and back to her car, she fell on her shoulder shattering it. She wound up needing a complete shoulder replacement. In that moment my choice was between getting in the car after her surgery to spend a few days helping to take care of her, grocery shopping, cooking and freezing meals and just generally supporting her physically in her recovery, or staying here to observe strict COVID protocols, keeping my family safe, and my colleagues safe in one of the most strict moments of the shutdown. Both were good choices - and after being in conversation with my parents, and my family, and my colleagues, I made the decision to travel and to be with them for a few days in her recovery.

Any number of you have been faced with remarkably similar choices. Some of you chose the other right answer, and that was good and right as well.

Of course beyond the pandemic our lives are full of these kinds of choices and the stress that we experience because of them, the wisdom we crave to be able to deal with them, and the grief that we experience when we turn away from one good or the other are very real.

The choice for a parent to stay home to care for children or to choose to work outside of the home. The choice to promote one qualified employee over another equally qualified employee. The choice to make our children experience the consequences of life in the world over the impulse to always offer them a safe place to land in a crisis. The choice to stay in our homes for as long as possible maintaining independence and autonomy over moving into a retirement community where so many of the hassles and burdens of life are taken care of by others. Even the choice to speak up and confront a family member or friend in their ignorance over choosing to not damage or break a lifelong relationship.

I wish that there was a special prayer for wisdom that I had to give you for each of these dilemmas and the numerous others just like them.

St Ignatius of Loyola wrote a prayer for wisdom and in fact developed an entire spiritual practice around choosing between the good, seeking the joy of God and trusting God to make God's will known -

“Take, O Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will. Whatever I have or hold, You have given me; I restore it all to You and surrender it wholly to be governed by Your will. Give me only Your love and Your grace, and I am rich enough and ask for nothing more.”

Some days for me, I relate much more to Marian Wright Edelman’s short prayer for guidance: “Dear Lord, give me good sense and a good spirit today. I am sorely lacking in both. Only you can help me overcome me.”³

For each of us our prayers for wisdom will sound different.

I know for me, naming the good always helps. Considering what will be lost, what we will walk away from when we choose one over the other. Being attentive to the joy or the comfort that one good offers over the other. Asking for help, for insights from those who are also holding these choices in the balance or who have walked these paths before us. Cultivating a community of wise people around us who will encourage and support us in whatever choice we make.

May we be that community of wise people for one another, and may each of us continue to earnestly seek God’s wisdom in the days weeks and months ahead. Amen.

³ Marian Wright Edelman. *Guide My Feet: Prayers and Meditations on Loving and Working for Children*. Beacon Press. 1995.