

Wisdom: Past, Future, Fear of the Lord

August 18, 2024

Wisdom

Are any of you familiar with morel mushrooms? They're an edible mushroom that is foraged in the Northern Hemisphere. Because those who hunt for them are quite secretive, morels can fetch anywhere from \$30 to \$75 a pound.

A good friend of my mother's is a morel hunter, and a few years back, she gave my mom a whole brown paper lunch bag of the delicacy. I happened to stop over at mom's house that day, and admired the overflowing bag, to which she said, "If you want them you can have them — I don't trust them." Let that sink in. My MOTHER said, in effect, "Here, I think these are poisonous, you eat them."

This story comes to mind whenever I read of King Solomon because of the story that comes a couple of chapters after the passage we read today in which two women come to King Solomon, each claiming a baby is their own. Solomon in his wisdom, suggests the baby be cut in down the middle and each woman be given a half. When one woman protests for the sake of the child and tearfully says the other woman can have the baby, Solomon declares she must be the true mother because of her selfless regard for the child's wellbeing.

In my morel story, I joke that my mother failed the Solomon test because giving me what she suspected were poisonous mushrooms did not display regard for my wellbeing. By the way, they were delicious.

In our passage from 1 Kings today, we hear of Solomon's prayer for wisdom. If God invited you to ask for anything, what would it be? Would it be money or power or success or status or even health? World peace? Would it be hard to limit yourself to just one request? Would you attempt the cosmic work-around, asking for infinitely more wishes, as if God were a genie in a Disney movie?

If you did limit yourself to just one request, would it be for something you desire or would the needs of others override those concerns? Would you ask for something that would benefit one person or the common good? Over the years, I've talked with many people who struggle to pray "for themselves and their needs because they have internalized the falsehood that praying for oneself is selfish." (Cheryl Lindsey)

Others have internalized our individualistic society and struggle to ask God to bless others. What we find when we dive into Solomon's prayer today is that this struggle to either pray for oneself or others is a false binary. We may lean more heavily in one direction or another, but the subject of our prayers doesn't have to be an either-or. With Solomon, we find a brilliant both-and.

"He asks for something for himself that will benefit those subject to his leadership and influence. Solomon requests an understanding mind to govern and discernment to recognize good from evil. Interestingly, he recognizes that they are not necessarily the same thing."

(Lindsey)

The Scriptures

Let's take a closer look at our text. After King David dies, his son Solomon rises to the throne. We pick up the story with Solomon offering sacrifices in a place that has great cultural and religious significance to his people.

When in a dream the LORD asks Solomon what the LORD should give him, Solomon starts his response by honoring his roots, saying:

“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.”

(1 Kings 3:6)

So first, Solomon honors his roots, both by practicing the rituals of his ancestors and also by acknowledging the grace and blessings of God that have landed him where he is currently. If we want to be wise like Solomon, we would do well to do the same — hold fast to the sacred rituals and exercises of our ancestors, and acknowledge the grace of God that has gotten us to his point. But Solomon doesn't stay mired in the past.

“He faithfully honors his roots while setting a course for the future.”

(Kyle Brooks)

This, again, can be instructive to us. If we seek wisdom, having a hand still reaching behind to our roots while having another leaning forward is a powerful stance.

The next aspect of wisdom our text shines light on is humility. Solomon acknowledges his limitations. He's young. The job he's facing is huge. He doesn't belabor this point. He doesn't engage in self-deprecation. But he's honest and humble. Word to the wise!

Finally, after acknowledging his roots and blessedness and humility, we get to Solomon's request. He says:

“Give your servant, therefore, an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil.”

(1 Kings 3:9)

Understanding, wisdom, and discernment. Understanding illuminates the choices at hand. Wisdom provides better evaluation and judgment. Discernment helps to make the right choice beyond superficial considerations.

In the example of the morel mushrooms my mom's friend foraged, understanding is knowing that there are some mushrooms that are safe to eat and others that are not. Wisdom is putting this together with my knowledge of how truly meticulous mom's friend who foraged the mushrooms is as well as doing some research about mushroom safety once I got home. Discernment is taking all of this into account and not just eating the mushrooms because of their purported value or flavor ... or just to spite my mom.

... but back to the scriptures

What's interesting as we end this reading is that God's granting of Solomon's request is conditional. God says, IF you walk in my ways. Of course, this demonstrates God's wisdom, that God knows humans. God knows that absolute power corrupts absolutely, and so even sets limits on wisdom. If you behave in Godly ways, wisdom will be yours.

And this brings us to the passage we read from the Letter to the Ephesians today. Here, we are told to clothe ourselves with the ways of God, to wear truth as our belt, to lace up our shoes to share the gospel of peace, to defend ourselves with faith, and to protect our heads (or maybe it's our minds) with salvation.

Conclusion

Because we only read a portion of the scriptures each week, many may not realize that Solomon taking the throne after his father King David died was not a given. There were political machinations and violence. It wasn't pretty, and it wasn't a given. I think that's important to know as we look to explore how these texts are relevant to us today.

Our ancestors in the faith struggled with politics and leadership, struggled with flawed leaders with checkered pasts, received God's blessings and sometimes used them to build the reign of God in our midst and other times disregarded God's ways and bloated themselves on their good fortune. The divine core in our scripture today is that Solomon sought wisdom. We've all heard that if you give someone a fish, they'll be able to eat for a day, but if you teach them to fish, they'll always be able to feed themselves. We've all heard people bemoaning "teaching to the test," that is, giving students answers without really teaching a concept. Praying for wisdom rather than an outcome is the equivalent of teaching someone to fish, teaching a concept.

I started out today with the story of my mom failing the Solomon test by offering me a bag of what she feared might be poisonous mushrooms. The lesson could be, I suppose, a riff on that old line from Car Talk, "Don't be like my mother." But that's not the real lesson. I used understanding and wisdom and discernment and had a lovely meal. I also did not share it with others, just in case my discernment was off.

Friends, I've said it before and I'll say it again, prayer is not a vending machine, nor is it a genie in a bottle. We don't fold our hands in prayer and put in the equivalent of an Amazon order. When we approach prayer, we would do well to steep ourselves in both of our readings for today. Rooting ourselves in our sacred past and blessedness in humility, seeking understanding and wisdom and discernment, and clothing ourselves in God's ways. If we do this, like Solomon, we will be part of God's redemption of the world. May it be so. Alleluia and Amen.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Psalm 34:1-8, Ephesians 4:25-5:2
August 18, 2024