

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

Rev. Dr. John V. Callahan Jr.

Sermon Text: 1 Kings 3:5-15

Sermon Title: "Solomon: Heart and Mind Prayer" (Great Prayers of the Old Testament)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

March 11, 2012

Once in awhile, we like to live in a fantasy world: "If a genie from a lamp granted you three wishes, what would they be?" We will play this imaginary game with genies and lamps, convincing ourselves that something impossible could happen one day.

We usually wish for one million dollars after taxes. I'd wish for a million dollars after all taxes *and* the money is not taken from a place that would cause the police to investigate. You see, I've been thinking. Next we might wish for invincible powers like Superman has, or we may wish for the ability to fly or run fast. My son once said he would wish for control over the four elements of nature: earth, wind, fire, and water. Of course, I told him the second wish should be for invincibly against those elements, so he isn't killed by them. We might be unselfish and wish for world peace – that always sounds nice. I myself would wish for the ability to cancel noise. Some guy sitting next to me at the light has his radio turned up loud, booming and shaking my car, and I would just snap my fingers and poof! the radio wouldn't work anymore. Not until I

want it to work. The guy would have to buy another radio, and pray he doesn't sit next to me again. A loud tailpipe, poof! The train going by at 3:00am, poof! Of course, I could cancel noises in a movie theatre; but people would flip out because their voices would no longer work. So, maybe a sound barrier would be better, in which I could keep annoying noises from hitting my ears.

King Solomon enters into a richly active conversation with God in a place called Gibeon. Solomon is dreaming at night when he enters the conversation with God. The Lord God says to him, "Ask what I shall give you." Not unlike a genie, God is willing to grant any wish to Solomon that he desires, but God's offer is even better. It is open-ended and without limit. "Ask away," God says to Solomon. "The sky is the limit." This is no fantasy; God really means to give Solomon anything.

Wouldn't we want God to come to us with such an offer? We could pepper God with all sort of requests, mixing it up with selfish and non-selfish wishes. Ten million dollars after taxes, but peace in the Middle East. The ability to turn invisible, but give my next door neighbor the job he wants. We could go hog wild. Yet, the Lord God doesn't make the offer to Solomon to

do with as he pleases. God loves him so much that he is ready to give him exactly what he needs to be an effective king after his father, King David's, death.

Solomon knows this from the start. The Lord God opens the floodgates of blessing to him, but Solomon is not going to jump in recklessly. Walter Brueggemann notes that although the prayer of Solomon starts in verse 6 of 1 Kings 3, he doesn't request anything from God until verse 9. In verses 6-8 Solomon does what is necessary in any prayer, opening with doxology and deference. His father David would pray this way, and Solomon the son will do no less.¹

Solomon celebrates the great mercy that the Lord God showed to his father while he was alive. King David received so many blessings, because he walked in truth (or as narrowly in truth as he could). Righteousness was foremost in his heart, and he wanted to do what was right in God's eyes. Solomon says that you, God, have given him a son to sit on the throne, which is further proof that God looked favorably on David. This is the doxology party, praising God for being so good in the not-so-distant past.

Now Solomon turns to the deference part. He

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Great Prayers of the Old Testament*, cf. 50.

humbles himself greatly before God. He calls himself a child, a “lad” who lacks the maturity that properly belongs to kingship. He sees himself in the middle of a multitude of people that cannot be numbered, and he has to govern them! They need a great king like David, but Solomon believes that he terribly lacks “competence to do the things that kings are expected to do,” namely be a military leader and judge over the people.² “In all due deference, my God, you have called me to govern these people, but I am under qualified,” Solomon prayers.

Only after praising God for his blessings and putting himself in submission to God’s authority, will Solomon finally get to the requesting part.

The Lord God, like a genie in the lamp, tells Solomon to ask for any wish. But the new king asks for the thing he needs the most: wisdom. Wisdom to rule, wisdom to command, wisdom to judge. Solomon might have “asked for the moon” and “made extravagant requests of this generous God,” Brueggemann says in his book, *Great Prayers of the Old Testament*. “But he does not. Indeed he asks only one thing, and that one thing is not for himself.”

Did we catch that? Solomon asks for a thing that

² Ibid., cf. 51.

will not benefit him as much as it will benefit the people he has to serve. “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?”³ Solomon is focused on what God did for his father. He is focused on what God has to do for him, now that he is king. He is highly aware of being God’s servant, and of the huge responsibility that the Lord God has stuck him in; and Solomon asks nothing for himself.⁴

Solomon asks for something that is one of the greatest things a person could ask for, apart from receiving eternal life from God through Christ. Brueggemann says that Solomon requests “a listening heart,” “a well-equipped organ for decision making.” The heart, in Old Testament understanding, was the locus, or the central location, for decision-making. It could be illustrated as thoughtful and passionate at the same time. A listening heart controls a person’s feelings and thoughts, never separating the two.

A listening heart is still essential today. Oswald Chamber once said in his devotional, *My Utmost for His Highest*, that it is within a person’s nature to expect something in return. We give something to somebody, and we expect that person to give us

³ 1 Kings 3:9.

⁴ *Great Prayers of the Old Testament*, cf. 52.

something similar or different. Commerce is based on this principal: a person gets paid for selling an item or for hours worked. Money is an incentive to give somebody something. Money becomes the driving force for wanting to do anything. Sadly, though, what we do in the world of commerce seems to affect the rest of our lives. We wouldn't do anything for anybody unless they can do something for us. A child won't take out the garbage or do basic chores unless there is an allowance paid out. Some people won't lift a finger to help somebody unless they know what is in it for them.

In the same vein, people don't care what others are going through, because it's their problem, not theirs. We are too busy to worry about the drama of another person. Husbands don't want to hear how difficult their wives' days are, because they themselves had a rough day. Parents don't want to hear it from their teenagers, because they believe their teenagers are just too immature. Teenagers don't want to feel sympathy for their parents, because they are always cramping their style, telling them to do this and that. Somehow our daily schedules have caused us to be less compassionate toward others. Our daily problems have created walls around us to keep anybody from getting too close. We text people – we don't talk to

them face to face. We drive to work in our own cars, creating bubbles of privacy that we don't want others to break.

And yet, the next king of Israel and Judah, a young man who was born with a silver spoon in his mouth, understands that he cannot live in a bubble, isolated from others. He cannot let his own concerns or even the pressures of his job keep him from listening to the struggles of others. King Solomon is given a gift that none of us would receive from God: a chance to ask for anything. Anything – the sky is the limit. Long life, wealth, victory in battle, honor in the eyes of all. Solomon simply asks for an understanding mind, a listening heart, which are one and the same, which will be the tools to help others grow in wisdom and faith.

We are not kings and queens. We don't eat with silver spoons. Maybe we eat with plastic utensils and paper plates from time to time. We may still ask for what Solomon wanted, a well-equipped organ to serve others through thick and thin.

This isn't about winning contests with the kind of brain power that Solomon could have had – it's about being able to view a situation in a different light. It's about realizing there are several options to our

problems, and one of those has got to be God's option, the one we need to take. And this isn't about making great decisions like Solomon was able to do, especially when two women came to him soon thereafter, claiming that one baby was their own baby. It's about having the kind of heart to listen to a person's gripes and complaints without becoming overwhelmed by them. It's about listening compassionately and understanding their struggles, and then working toward solutions that God wants us to pursue.

We can do this. We don't have to be kings or queens. We don't have to have large craniums to contain godly wisdom.

I don't know why I thought of it, but the song "What the World Needs Now" became to mind as I was writing this message. It was a song that Hal David and Burt Bacharach wrote in 1965. "What the world needs now, is love, sweet love, It's the only thing that there's just too little of." Just as in 1965, what the world needs now is love, the kind of heart and mind thoughtfulness and passion that King Solomon had.

Because, you know, God will place us in situations, in which a person comes to us with some concern that seems to come out of left field. We cannot solve the person's problems any easier than he

or she can. We feel the pain or the anger, even though we aren't going through whatever it is. We might want to send the person off as quickly as possible, maybe send him or her to the pastor because he knows how to handle such situations. No, God has placed us next to that person for a reason. God wants us to open our minds and open our hearts. Do not fear, do not panic, just ask for wisdom. Solomon was no more prepared to be king of Israel and Judah than we may be prepared to help another person. So what? He asked for wisdom and got it. We can ask for wisdom, and get it. Say a quick prayer as the person vents his or her frustrations. I do this, because I'm not prepared to face struggles, even though I schedule a visit with the person in my office. Say a prayer, and listen, and allow the Lord to give you the words you should share. God is happy to give us what we request – wisdom – because it is going to help one of his own children, because it is going to cause others to grow in wisdom and faith.

