

“Wisdom Quest”
1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14
August 9

A retired man moves near a junior high school. He spends the first few weeks of retirement in peace and quiet. However, when a new school year begins, three young boys beat on every trash can they encounter every day on their way home from school. Finally, the man decides to take action and walks out to meet the boys. He says, "You kids are a lot of fun. I'll give you each a dollar if you'll promise to come around every day and do your thing." The kids continue to do a bang-up job on the trash cans. After a few days, the man tells the kids, "This recession's really putting a big dent in my income. From now on, I'll only be able to pay you 50 cents to beat on the cans." The noisemakers are displeased, but they accept his offer. A few days later, the retiree approaches them again. "Look," he says, "I haven't received my Social Security check yet, so I'm not going to be able to pay more than 25 cents. Will that be OK?" "A quarter?" the drum leader exclaims. "If you think we're going to waste our time beating these cans around for a quarter, you're crazy. We quit."

Oh what great wisdom this man must have had to be able to come up with such a solution. Wisdom is one of those gifts in life that is not always easy to find. Wisdom in the Bible is an important part of God's being in the world. It is not just another mental attribute that a person can have such as intelligence or wit. In today's Scripture from 1 Kings, we hear a request by King Solomon for wisdom. This was after King David, his father, had died and Solomon took over the kingdom. The kingdom was still fairly new and the new king had many enemies, even in his own family where his own brothers wanted to take over the rule of the kingdom. So, when we finally hear that the kingship of Solomon was firmly established, we also hear about Solomon praying to God and sacrificing and offering incense before God in the high places. Even though the Ark of the Covenant was in Jerusalem, Solomon also chose to go and pray somewhere else. The "high places" were sanctuaries for the worship of both Yahweh and of Canaanite gods that were on mountains or on hilltops. Some of the high places were designated sites for the worship of Yahweh. But most of the high places and groves were actually dedicated to the worship of Canaanite, Philistine, and Syrian deities. And these deities were nature gods, not gods of history as was Yahweh. We know that, even after he had established the Temple, Solomon did not give up his worship at the high places (11:1-13). This emphasis by the author of the book of I Kings, therefore, is suggesting that Solomon's worship in the high places, even at the beginning of his reign, was not so much the worship of Yahweh as it was participation in the cultic practices of the gods of other religions. Solomon "loved Yahweh" and obeyed "the statutes" and carried them out in public life. At the same time, Solomon worshipped through other religions. So, on one of those occasions as Solomon was praying to God in the "high places," he had a vision in a dream where God asked him what he would want. And the thing that Solomon asked for is wisdom, not wealth, not power, not glory, not long life or anything else. And indeed Solomon receives the gift.

In order to understand what wisdom really meant in that time, we have to dig a little deeper because we are separated in culture and time from that time. In our biblical tradition Solomon has been associated and known as a wise man. In fact, there is a whole book in the apocrypha (the books that are found in Catholic and Roman Orthodox Bibles) that is called the Wisdom of Solomon. Wisdom in the biblical sense was understood as part of the divine presence. Wisdom is understood as a person, a real personification of God's presence in the world, In Job and Proverbs, *Hokmah*/Wisdom is as a host, a judge, a street preacher, a liberator, an architect of creation sender of prophets, a butcher, a beloved, a mother, and a chef. Wisdom pervades the world.

The personification of Wisdom (*Hokmah* in Hebrew, *Sophia* in Greek), was one of the most powerful religious figures for significant groups in Judaism and early Christianity, and was used heavily in the early church's debates about their understanding of Christ and God. Even the Apostle Paul explicitly identifies Jesus with Wisdom (*Hokmah/Sophia*) in 1st Corinthians 1:23-25,30 "By God's action, Jesus Christ has become our wisdom (*Sophia*)."

Wisdom has remained an important image for Eastern Christians, both Orthodox and Catholic. The Emperor Constantine dedicated the principal church in his new capital to Christ as the Holy Wisdom (Hagia Sophia) of God, and the Emperor Justinian rebuilt this "Great Church" as a model for all of Byzantine Christianity. Later generations dedicated cathedrals in Thessaloniki, Ochrid, Kiev, Novgorod and Polotsk (11th century) and Trebizond (13th century) to Wisdom. The imagery of Wisdom's banquet (Prov. 9:1-1-6) often appeared in icons.

To them and to Solomon, seeking wisdom was about seeking God's presence. It was about being guided by God's loving presence that creates and leads people to the right path. This explains why Solomon's wisdom did not carry him through all of his years. At first he begins his reign practicing politics as God intended them to be practiced – a concern for justice being done, seeking to wisely discern the right from the wrong and compassion for the people. However, over the years, he increasingly became concerned with accumulating wealth and power for himself and the monarchy (9:15-28). And that in turn, undermined his wisdom and his practice of justice. So, what happened to the gift of wisdom that was given to him? Did he lose it? Or did God take it away from him? Solomon did not experience a change in personality. What really happened is that Solomon strayed away from his focus on the presence of God. When wisdom guided his life he was able to allow God's presence to be the center of his life. But when other things filled his heart and his life, wisdom lost its central place and he became an unjust king.

The invitation for us today is to invite wisdom into our lives. This is not an invitation for more knowledge in our lives. It is an invitation to go deeper in our relationship with God. It is an invitation to make the presence of God the center of lives. This is not easy because with the presence of our minds, it is easy for us to assume that we are on our own and that all of life's questions and answers need to come from our minds. But if we know that wisdom is truly part of the divine presence or being in our lives, then we can rely on a greater source of power, creativity and discernment in our lives.

In his book, *Simplicity*, Richard Rohr writes, "I believe that what we lack isn't love but wisdom...We all want to love, but as a rule we don't know how to love rightly. How should we love so that life will really come from it? I believe that what we all need is wisdom. I'm very disappointed that we in the Church have passed on so little wisdom. Often the only thing we've taught people to think that they're right-or that they're wrong. We've either mandated things or forbidden them. But we haven't helped people to enter upon the narrow and dangerous path of true wisdom. On this path we take the risk of making mistakes. On this path we take the risk of being wrong. That's how wisdom is gained...I believe that there are two necessary paths enabling us to move toward wisdom: a radical journey inward and a radical journey outward. For far too long we've confined people to a sort of security zone, a safe midpoint. We've called them neither to a radical path inward...to contemplation, nor to a radical journey outward, that is, to commitment on the social issues of our time...Jesus came to teach us the way of wisdom. He brought us a message that offers to liberate us from both the lies of our world and the lies that are lodged in ourselves...Jesus called this new foundation the Reign of God...Jesus never promised us security in this world, and yet we're ready to buy any political system that promises

us quick and easy security, instead of living in this essential insecurity, in this deep inner poverty, where we really grow in wisdom.”

I know from personal experience that the path of wisdom is not always easy because for me, my mind is always active and is always working to manage my life. I am thankful for the gift of my mind, yet many times I find myself overusing this gift which blocks my ability to listen to the greater wisdom that is available to me. I remember about three and half years ago, I was working on a speech that I had to give at the Churchwide Gathering for Women in Louisville, Kentucky. I was getting stressed out because I couldn't seem to find enough time to do my preparation. I was fretting because this was an important gathering of almost four thousand women and I wanted to give them my best. As I shared my worries and fears with my spiritual director, she asked me if I wanted to trust in my own mental ability or to invoke the greater wisdom of the divine. She said, “If you think you can do better than the creator of the universe, then go ahead and keep fretting, but if you want to use the great author of life for the speech, then you need to let your presentation come from a deeper place.” Those words have stayed with me since that time and I often ask myself these questions, whenever I find myself pushing and managing things with my mind only. This is a great lesson of wisdom because what the mind might consider to be wise or profitable for us, can be different from what is truly wise and beneficial. In fact, the wisdom of the gospel of Christ is often considered foolish in our world. The cross of our Lord Jesus Christ is scandalous to the mind because it is a sign of weakness and defeat, yet through the wisdom of God's love, we have a different view.

In India, there is a story about a kind, quiet man who would pray in the Ganges River every morning. One day after praying, he saw a poisonous spider struggling in the water and cupped his hands to carry it ashore. As he placed the spider on the ground, it stung him. Unknowingly, his prayers for the world diluted the poison. The next day the same thing happened. On the third day, the kind man was knee deep in the river, and, sure enough, there was the spider, legs frantic in the water. As the man went to lift the creature yet again, the spider said, “Why do you keep lifting me? Can't you see I will sting you every time, because that is what I do.” And the kind man cupped his hands about the spider, replying, “Because that is what I do.”

This man was living according to the wisdom of God's love. This was the wisdom which Solomon received after his prayer. It was not the wisdom that led him to pursue wealth and power. It was the wisdom that led him to rule justly and to love abundantly. The invitation is for each one of us today to live in the presence of the wisdom of God as our center and our companion. Amen.