
Wisdom and Koinonia

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler

Proper 15 – Year B

God [was pleased and] said to Solomon, “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, I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind.” 1 Kings 3:10–12

The Wisdom of Solomon! Whatever else has occurred this summer, this has certainly been a season for weddings. Congratulations to all of you who have celebrated those occasions and who are planning to celebrate. When I was a young priest (only a couple of days ago!), I heard one of the easiest blessings a priest can give at a wedding – maybe when the priest has run out of any other thing to say. It goes like this:

“May you have the wisdom of Solomon, the patience of Job, and the children of Abraham!”

Yes, Abraham is regarded for his children (well, faith really) and Job is esteemed for patience, but I want to say a word, today, about Solomon. The Wisdom of Solomon. Even though our Old Testament reading today describes Solomon humbly asking God for wisdom and discernment, please don’t make the mistake of believing that everything Solomon did was wise! It is generally thought, for instance, that he used excessive taxes and forced labor to build the splendid Jerusalem temple and that those excesses led later to revolution and civil war in Israel. And certainly, no matter how virile a man might be, it could not possibly be wise to have seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines! (Surely only Job could be that patient!)

Nevertheless, biblical traditions ascribe wisdom to Solomon. His name is attached to aphorisms and proverbs and wisdom verses all over the Bible, almost too many of them, really. Scholars believe he is portrayed that way because biblical writers wanted to remember that age as golden, a period of tranquility and peace and prosperity (sort of like a president of the country writing his official memoirs). And, after the great skill of King David in uniting Israel, the kingdom did have prosperity under his son, Solomon, for about one generation; then it disintegrated.

It may be that Solomon asked the Lord for wisdom because he came from one of the more successful, and yet most dysfunctional, families in the Bible. That is the family of David, both privileged and dysfunctional. Solomon, remember, was born to David by Bathsheba, in one of the most unsavory stories of the Bible. After illicit relations between David and Bathsheba, their first son died quickly, just after childbirth; Solomon was their second son.

In fact, David’s true first son was the scoundrel Amnon, who brutally assaulted his half-sister Tamar. So, Absalom, another son in David’s family, takes revenge for his assaulted sister, Tamar; Absalom plots to kill his brother Amnon, and he does. (And you thought YOUR family had problems!) Then, beautiful Absalom, almost narcissistic, tries to seize the kingdom from his own father, David. Finally, Absalom himself is killed by David’s forces, and David is forced to lament, “Absalom, O Absalom, my son, my son, would that I were killed instead of you.”

It should be no surprise that Solomon, probably the tenth of David’s sons, desires wisdom as a way through this dysfunction.

It is Solomon's simple request for wisdom that I salute today, in our own time. Some of us consider our own era as overly opulent, even decadent. We lament the violent actions of our neighbors and allies. We criticize simplistic thinking and immediate gratification, which too often defeat calm and careful reason.

Thus, we pray for wisdom, for something truly wise in this era of cheap and quick fixes. Even if we spend a lifetime trying to define exactly what wisdom is, it is good enough that we merely and consistently ask for it. What is the wise decision here? What is the wise move there? What is the decision that will prove beneficial and life-giving over time?

Solomon is the sign for us that wisdom can be requested; indeed it must be requested, even in the context of privilege and dysfunction. In our own time, those two words characterize many of us at our worst: privilege and dysfunction. Some of us in this room today know privilege and dysfunction.

Well, Solomon certainly knew both privilege and dysfunction, too. And, whether or not he was as wise as what tradition ascribes to him, I believe he was at least wise enough to ask for wisdom. May his desire be our daily desire: to seek wisdom, the wisdom of God, daily, over and over again.

The Christian Church—and this church, the Cathedral of St. Philip—seeks to be a new kind of family in this world. Today, as we baptize new Christians, and as we celebrate Homecoming Sunday, it is worth claiming, it is worth remembering, what kind of new family we are supposed to be. No matter how much privilege or dysfunction we might come from—and no matter how much emptiness has been a part of our lives—we gather today to celebrate a new kind of community.

I want to give us a particular word today, a strange word. We will have to practice it today, and throughout the fall, and throughout the year here at the Cathedral. It is a word that comes from the Bible, so its original form is in Greek. And we actually use this word whenever we baptize. In the baptismal covenant, one of the questions we answer goes like this: "Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers?"

(Remember that question? That question is actually from the Bible, at Acts 2:42, where it says that the early Christians "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." Hah! It's amazing again how much of the Bible uses material from the Episcopal Prayer Book and liturgy!)

Well, it's that word "fellowship" that I want to emphasize this year at the Cathedral of St. Philip. It's not just "fellowship." It is the Greek word, "koinonia." The word means "community," and it means "spiritual community." Koinonia means God-given community, God-graced community. It means community not just for people's sake, but for God's sake. Koinonia means fellowship and care and service, but it also means connection to something transcendent and life-giving.

It is my prayer that every parishioner and friend of the Cathedral of St. Philip experience koinonia this year. I pray that every one of us experiences community, true agape-love community.

Ultimately, the wisdom that Solomon so wisely asked for is never achieved, by any of us, only individually. We know wisdom not by ourselves, but within community. For it is in community that we know patience and care, and forgiveness and service. Those are hard things to learn in this life, and we cannot learn them alone.

So it is that we baptize children into a community. We baptize children into a community of love and service and care. This baptismal water is not magic, by itself; it does not transform us immediately. Rather, it is blessed and touched by community; and it is that community that teaches and transforms us.

The word is "koinonia." It means agape-community. It means God-community. It means where we learn about intimacy and companionship, but also about transcendence and greater truth. I daresay, it is what the word "church" has been supposed to mean for a long time!

AMEN.

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