

“Discernment”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages
August 19th, 2012
12th Sunday after Pentecost

I Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14

John 6:51-58

God said:

“Solomon, I’m pleased that you asked for this.

You could have asked to live a long time or to be rich.

Or you could have asked for your enemies to be destroyed.

Instead, you asked for wisdom to make right decisions.” I Kings 3:10-11

Let us pray... O God,

Help us in our decision-making to wisely discern the difference
between truth and scam, between spin and validity,
between what is actual and not just factual.

Grant us the wisdom to take into account more than self-interest,
yet without discounting personal integrity.

Amen

In recent weeks our Bible studies have considered the difference between
the conventional wisdom of common sense
and the unconventional wisdom of Christ –
which may seem to contradict each other sometimes...

Consider this situation: A church was holding their annual meeting
when suddenly – an angel appeared and tells their minister that
in return for her unselfish and exemplary behavior,
the Lord will reward her with her choice of either
infinite wealth, infinite wisdom, or matchless beauty.

Without hesitating, the minister says,

“Infinite wisdom!”

“Done!” says the angel, and disappears in the blink of an eye
and a heavenly choir singing, “Amen!”.

Then everyone turns to their minister,
who now sits surrounded by a faint halo of light.

One of the deacons whispers,

“Say something.”

The minister sighs and says,

“I should have taken the money.”

<http://www.fropki.com/instant-wisdom-vt27223.html> by Rahul » Thu Mar 06, 2008 3:33 pm

Willard, p.2

A variation on this theme of “wisdom choices”

comes from a Lakota Sioux storyteller named Joseph Marshall:

A lone, young man comes to a village riding a horse and tells the people there that his village was attacked by enemies.

He is the sole survivor and asks for shelter.

The chief – who was known for his wisdom, makes one request:

That he seek out the poorest family in this village – and give them his horse.

Already overwhelmed by great loss and grief,
the young man sadly turns and rides away.

One of the elders asks the chief,

“Why would you make such a request after he has lost so much?”

And the chief answered,

“There are many horses in this village and if he had given his horse away,
I would have given him one of mine and the whole village
would’ve provided him with all that he needs.

Perhaps when he thinks about it awhile, he will return.”

That would be a hard lesson about wisdom for any of us to pick up on,
but there is truth in it.

There is truth in stories because what is actual is going to be more trustworthy
than what is only factual – which is another way of saying,

“When an ethical issue involves someone you know –
when you know their story, it’s no longer academic.”

That was one of the main points presented by the keynote speaker for
the Network of Biblical Storytellers Festival Gathering I went to last week.

Phyllis Tickle is an author and speaker, who is one of the leading voices
about the Emergent Christianity movement –

of which the United Church of Christ is arguably already a part of
because of our dynamic theology and history.

Phyllis Tickle said that we are in the midst of enormous cultural change –
a cycle that happens every 500 years.

The last one that took place for Christians was the Reformation in the 1500s;
And paradigm shifts of such magnitude are always disconcerting –

and usually violent.

One of the big changes from the Reformation that is now being challenged
is what Phyllis Tickle describes as the great heresy of Protestantism,

“Sola scriptura” which means “Only scripture” –

as in the Bible is the only reliable source of truth.

But this opened the door for more literal-minded people

to take it a step further by claiming the Bible is ‘inerrant’.

Willard, p.3

John Shelby Spong is the former bishop for the Episcopal diocese of Newark –
I actually attended an informal talk he gave at a church I attended
in Morristown, NJ in the mid 1990s.

He made some claims that were quite shocking to me at the time
like Mary had been made pregnant by a Roman soldier and Paul was gay.

He also said that the Bible needed to be reclaimed from
intolerant fundamentalism.

Now, he came from a Southern Baptist background –
and my impression then was that the shoe was now on the other foot
in the form of intolerant liberalism.

I am generally skeptical of zealots who sound as if they have an axe to grind,
who tend to follow that well-known maxim that
after a while, you become what you hate.

Now, I don't believe the Roman soldier story,
but Paul as a gay man seems like a reasonable possibility to me.

I still think Bishop Spong has an axe to grind,
but I always admired his advocacy of the gay community –
especially during those terrible years of uncertainty
about the HIV/AIDS crisis.

My opinion, though, of Bishop Spong has thawed considerably
considering his recent salute to the United Church of Christ –
as well as how he responded to a question about today's Gospel lesson
and the tendency to take Jesus' words too literally.

A woman posed this question to him:

'In the Gospel of St. John, the text says,
"Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood,
you shall not enter the kingdom of God."
Most of St. John's gospel is symbolic or signs.
How would [you] interpret this passage? '

He answered:

'Dear Sister Rose, Thank you for your letter and your comments...
I find John to be the least literal and the most symbolic
of all the gospels.

Indeed, he seems to poke fun at
those who respond to Jesus literally.'

That would include Nicodemus,
who thought that being born again meant that
he had to climb back into his mother's womb,
and the Samaritan woman by the well,
who responded to Jesus' offer of "living water"
by telling him he did not have a bucket.

Willard, p.4

He goes on to say:

‘The secret to John’s gospel is, I believe,
that sense of mystical oneness to which this gospel points.
I see this oneness in the image of the branches that
have to abide in the vine and in the text you quote,
where being at one with Jesus is portrayed as
eating his flesh and drinking his blood.
No, I do not see this as a cannibalistic orgy,
but as the experience of oneness so deep that
it is portrayed as taking the life of Jesus into yourself
in what seems a literal manner.’

Bishop Spong deserves an ‘A’ for that answer!

Yet in breaking from a literal view, then what?

When we don’t already have the answers

and we can’t always see the way ahead... Where do we go from there?

That is especially true in times of crisis and having to make choices –
those times when we are alone in a hospital bed

or wondering how we are going to make ends meet,
or caught up in family bickering, or being urged by friends
to pick sides about politics.

There are also those times of vulnerability

and temptation when we least expect it,

by telemarketers’ phone calls or e-mail solicitations
by some – though not all, who would prey upon others
by pretending to offer help.

Where is God in such circumstances?

What is God ‘still speaking’ when we need to hear God most?

In a recent ‘Stillspeaking’ devotional,

Prof. Mary Luti of Andover Newton Theological School, writes,

‘Sometimes we think that if we work hard at our spiritual practices
we are bound to experience God, to feel God within us.

But not everyone feels God, no matter how hard they try
or how much they want to.

Many know only the ache of absence.

The truth is that God is often silent, dark, and distant—

so much so that it can be painful to be around people
for whom God is cheerful, close, and chatty.’

Willard, p.5

So, don't trouble yourself about having to feel God's presence
when you need to make a decision
or think you have to see a clear vision of which way to go;

Don't blindly trust others either,
yet don't be so cynical that you trust no one.

Don't be deceived and don't be dismayed.
But make room for God just the same.

Jesus said,
"Listen, then, if you have ears to hear...", and he said,
"Watch... for you know neither the day nor the hour."

There is an Indian proverb –
and I don't know whether that means 'Hindu' or 'Lakota',
but it says,

"Listen, or your tongue will keep you deaf."

Listen, or your fears, your shame, your pain, your emptiness, even your excitement
will keep you from really hearing what God is saying to you.

Our thoughts, imagination, pride, and conscience may seem to speak for God,
but they are voices within us.

The voice of God takes others into account
without discounting you.

God's voice is a call to love where there is no love,
to hope where there is no hope,
to believe anyway.

When Jesus was tempted, he responded by quoting scripture,
but in the end he spoke for himself and the temptations stopped.

As Christ – who so thoroughly identified with God,
his words turned out to be what God would say.

The wisdom of that is to 'Be yourself'.

Know yourself and treat others as being like yourself.
And in so doing, you will leave no room for selfish second-best
while making room for God in what you say and do.

Amen

*Our first scripture lesson today comes from I Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14
and it describes how Solomon was visited by God in a dream
and became associated with great wisdom.*

I Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14

¹⁰⁻¹¹ David was king of Israel forty years.

He ruled seven years from Hebron and thirty-three years from Jerusalem.

Then he died and was buried in Jerusalem.

¹² His son Solomon became king and took control of David's kingdom.

³ Solomon loved the LORD and followed his father David's instructions,
but Solomon also offered sacrifices and burned incense at the shrines.

⁴ The most important shrine was in Gibeon,
and Solomon had offered more than a thousand sacrifices on that altar.

⁵ One night while Solomon was in Gibeon,
the LORD God appeared to him in a dream and said,
"Solomon, ask for anything you want, and I will give it to you."

⁶ Solomon answered:

My father David, your servant, was honest
and did what you commanded.

You were always loyal to him,
and you gave him a son who is now king.

⁷ LORD God,

I'm your servant, and you've made me king in my father's place.
But I'm very young and know so little about being a leader.

⁸ And now I must rule your chosen people,
even though there are too many of them to count.

⁹ Please make me wise and teach me the difference between right and wrong.
Then I will know how to rule your people. If you don't, there is no way
I could rule this great nation of yours.

¹⁰⁻¹¹ God said:

Solomon, I'm pleased that you asked for this.

You could have asked to live a long time or to be rich.

Or you could have asked for your enemies to be destroyed.

Instead, you asked for wisdom to make right decisions.

¹² So I'll make you wiser than anyone who has ever lived
or ever will live.

¹³ I'll also give you what you didn't ask for.

You'll be rich and respected as long as you live,
and you'll be greater than any other king.

¹⁴ If you obey me and follow my commands, as your father David did,
I'll let you live a long time.

John 6:51-58

[Jesus said,]

“I AM THAT BREAD THAT HAS COME DOWN FROM HEAVEN.
WHOEVER EATS OF THIS BREAD WILL LIVE FOREVER;
AND THE BREAD THAT I GIVE
FOR THE SAKE OF THE WORLD...
IS MY FLESH.”

THE GALILEANS DISPUTED WITH ONE ANOTHER, SAYING,
“HOW CAN HE GIVE US HIS FLESH TO EAT?”

JESUS SAID TO THEM,

“I AM TELLING YOU THE TRUTH,
UNLESS SOMEONE EATS THE FLESH
AND DRINKS THE BLOOD
OF THE SON OF MAN, THE HEIR OF HUMANITY,
THEY WILL NOT HAVE LIFE WITHIN THEMSELVES...
THOSE WHO FEAST ON MY FLESH
AND DRINK MY BLOOD HAVE ETERNAL LIFE.
I, IN TURN, WILL RAISE THEM UP
AT THE END OF TIME.
FOR MY FLESH IS TRUE FOOD
AND MY BLOOD IS TRUE DRINK.
WHEN SOMEONE IS SUSTAINED IN THIS WAY,
THEY ABIDE IN ME AND I ABIDE IN THEM.

JUST AS I WAS SENT BY THE LIVING, BELOVED GUARDIAN,
IN THIS WAY, I, TOO, AM SUSTAINED BY THE BELOVED GUARDIAN.
AND THE ONE WHO FEASTS ON ME
WILL BE SUSTAINED BY ME.

THIS IS THE BREAD THAT COMES DOWN FROM HEAVEN –
NOT AS THE ANCESTORS ATE AND STILL DIED.
THE ONE WHO EATS THIS BREAD WILL LIVE FOREVER.”

John 6:51-58

[Jesus said,]

[51] I am the living bread which came down from heaven;
if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever;
and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh."

[52] The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying,

"How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"

[53] So Jesus said to them,

"Truly, truly, I say to you,
unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood,
you have no life in you;

[54] he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life,
and I will raise him up at the last day.

[55] For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed.

[56] He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.

[57] As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father,
so he who eats me will live because of me.

[58] This is the bread which came down from heaven,
not such as the fathers ate and died; he who eats this bread will live for ever."