

I Kings 3:5-12a; Psalm 119:129-136; Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

**We are in a holy place at this moment in our life together.** It seems to me quite an amazing coincidence that this lesson from I Kings appears on this particular Sunday when this particular community receives the results of the survey we've completed. I really wanted to preach on the Romans passage, my favorite scripture, but if the preacher is listening carefully she doesn't get to chose. In case I don't make it clear, the theme of this sermon is **CAREFUL LISTENING**. I am compelled to focus us on I Kings. And so it is a holy coincidence that a lectionary compiled many years ago invites us on this particular Sunday to look at Solomon as an example of wisdom and discernment.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people.

Notice first that Solomon's prayer occurred at night during a dream. The part of Solomon— what we'd call the unconscious part of the ego that talks to us at night in our dreams—the deepest part of Solomon was humbled by his fears. He expressed the depth of self-doubt, that he was “only a little child, (who didn't) know how to go out or come in” (I Kings 3:7) let alone know how to lead the people of God. **Solomon too was in a very holy place** – the holy place of neediness before God, and the holy place of asking God for what he needed. The NRSV translates the Hebrew words *lebh shomea* for Solomon's petition as “understanding mind.” Another translation I prefer was done by one of my long time spiritual directors in Texas, a Roman Catholic priest Fr. Kelly Nemeck. Kelly was the director of a House of Prayer in the desert wilderness of South Texas where I went for over 25 years for silent retreats. Kelly translated the words *lebh shomea* as “listening heart.” In fact, the name of this House of Prayer is *Lebh Shomea*, taken from this very scripture where Solomon asks God for a listening heart—in order to discern between good and evil.

“Listening heart” better reflects a sense of active spiritual openness and availability whereas “understanding mind” might imply something of an intellectual process. To have a listening heart is not about emotional preoccupations, but soul or spiritual awareness. So using Kelly's translation Solomon's prayer thus reads: “Yahweh, give your servant *lebh shomea*—a listening heart so as to be able to discern.”

“It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked for this,” (v.10), had prayed for the ability to listen and discern, rather than asking for riches for himself. Just beyond where our lesson ends, God puts a condition on his gift to Solomon, a big “if.” “If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and commandments, then I will lengthen your life.” (v.14) In the very next paragraph we find the proof that God had answered his prayer in the most famous story of Solomon's wisdom: the story of the two prostitutes who asked for justice regarding which of the two of them was the mother of the infant son who was alive. It's a wonderful story, and if you're not familiar with it, I'd encourage you to read it this afternoon.

But this isn't the whole story about Solomon. The Bible gives quite a mixed review about the rest of Solomon's life. The moments of brilliance in Solomon's reign as king over Israel turned into a heavy indictment laid at Solomon's feet eight chapters later: the downfall of the kingdom of Israel is the result of Solomon's failure to obey the “if” clause of God's commandments. What had happened? Solomon had started out on the right foot, asking in humility for God's help in governing the people. God had equipped him with what he needed,

and it appeared Solomon had been very successful. But then everything fell apart, literally. The entire kingdom disintegrated. What happened to that magnificent gift of wisdom and discernment God gave Solomon? Why did he so brilliantly use it and then seemingly let that gift slip away?

The pressures of leadership, the influences of the culture around him, the threats of enemies and wars, the pressure to build a great society, the power to acquire great wealth – all those things got in the way of Solomon’s availability to God. Famously known for his 700 wives and 300 concubines, no doubt an exaggerated statistic as OT writers were prone to, it is safe to say Solomon was totally distracted by women! Scripture’s judgment is more cutting: “his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not true to the Lord his God.” (I Kings 11:4)

What started out at the deep subconscious level of soul longing never made it up through the layers of ego that controlled Solomon’s choices in life. What started out as the free gift of God’s grace was never fully received. Despite all the success, in the end it appears Solomon didn’t put into *conscious practice* what he’d been freely given. What was inward did not translate into outward behaviors that could be observed. The magnanimous gift of God didn’t make a thorough enough difference, a complete transformation of Solomon and not only did he suffer for it, so did all of God’s people.

Solomon was human. Like Solomon, we are simply human. Our performance in life is uneven. Amidst moments of brilliance there are entire seasons of ineptness and failure to listen for the voice of God. We have our own 700 wives and 300 concubines of distractions and things that become idols – all our possessions, all our techno gadgets, all our treasured activities and strivings for our place in the world. Like Solomon, we have all been given graces by God-things we don’t deserve and can’t earn- because of the magnanimous love of God for us. Before we even know what we need, deep in our souls there is a longing for love and the peace of God that passes understanding. As if in a dream, God seeks out the depths of being and finds us in our unknowing neediness. And God responds to our inchoate seeking, and we begin to wake up to the possibilities that God really is blessing us. Waking up, becoming conscious that we are deeply loved by God takes a very long time. **It is the holy place to which we are called, the holy place of being transformed in Christ.** It is a lifelong process of conscious surrender of our ego-driven agendas. It is the hard spiritual work of pulling back the layers of things that get between God and us. Character change does not become outwardly evident as behavior change without lots of practice. In a society of instant everything that determines image by what cosmetic surgery can alter, the transforming works of God are painfully slow. In a culture of accreditation by week-end workshops and diplomas by online coursework, the transformative processes of God look totally inefficient, and are not in the least cost effective. God’s ways are not our ways, the pace of God’s work doesn’t fit with our hurry up attitudes.

**There is another holy place to talk about, the one we experienced last Sunday–** The way Bishop Rickle exercised part of the ministry of bishop allowed me to see this holy place. It was the care he took that helped me see, the time he took as he acknowledged the commitments of faith made by Sean and Cheryl and Marilyn and Kaycee and Gordon and Kathryn and Lynne and Princess Mary. Throughout the sermon I watched the faces of these eight dear souls. I saw their attention to every word that was said. I saw their tearfulness and hopefulness and peace. At the baptismal font I saw the definite grasping of each person’s head as the Bishop laid his hands

on them. I felt the unhurried space of silent prayer as each person's head was held, realizing because of sufficient silence what the Bishop was doing. He was praying through his hands for each person, and the length of his prayer drew me alongside. Maybe you too joined in silent prayer. I heard the prayer called for by the liturgy, said individually rather than collectively, for each person particular to their commitment. I heard those prayers said carefully and deliberately with not one nod toward hurry or efficiency. I saw in those moments the whole church gathered to receive the sacred commitments of these eight. And I saw in real life through this bishop's ministry what I believe the church is supposed to be: *the sacred place that carefully receives the trust given when people offer themselves in faith.*

I saw then what it might mean to become a church beyond all the trappings of a hierarchy of clergy wearing special clothes. What it could mean to be a church that truly discerns its mission without the creation of more programs or finding better marketing tools. I saw instead a church that discerned its mission through the prayerful care-full receiving of everyone who acknowledges their need to start, or restart, wherever they are in their relationship with Christ. I wondered what it could mean to be a community of faith that does not surrender its collective soul to the 700 wives and 300 concubines of distractions and idols, the images of success determined by our culture, and yes, even our own denomination. What it might mean to be a parish that doesn't cave to church growth definitions of success that somehow equate the number of activities as authentic spiritual formation. A parish that doesn't use up good hearted faithful people by failing to provide a diet rich in sustenance for the needs of the journey of discipleship. A parish where everyone knows they really belong to a community where faith in Christ makes an outward and visible difference in the way their lives are lived.

**We are in the holy place of God bidding us to listen carefully** to what the survey can show us about ourselves, not as individuals, but as a community. In the end, what will be said of this church? What will be the judgment of this community? What are the 700 wives and 300 concubines of St. Augustine's church? Will we be known as the church that squandered its potential in busyness and distractedness? Will we be known as the church that was equipped by God with immense gifts of opportunities but yielded instead to the idols of individualism and ego-driven agendas? Or will we be known for having listening hearts and understanding minds that kept us focused on fully living the solemn vow we say at every baptism or confirmation or reception or reaffirmation? At every occasion of new commitment of faith we are asked, "Will you who witness these vows do all in your power to support these persons in their life in Christ?" And we say, "We will." But will we? Will we let the deep longings of our collective soul be so transformed in Christ that God's graces within are outwardly visible? Will we, can we be that *sacred community that carefully receives and faithfully responds to all who entrust their faith in God within this place? Will we?*