

Seeking Wisdom

St. John's Evangelical Protestant Church

United Church of Christ

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I Kings 3: 3-14

Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places. The king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, for that was the principal high place; Solomon used to offer a thousand burnt-offerings on that altar. At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, 'Ask what I should give you.' And Solomon said, 'You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart towards you; and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne today. And now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. 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?'

It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. God said to him, '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; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you. I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honour all your life; no other king shall compare with you. If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life.'

John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison, and Ringo Starr first began playing together as a high school band in 1957. It was 1964 when they came to the states as the Beatles and transformed our musical culture. It was like they hit America by storm, and they seemed like an overnight success. However, there is more to it than that. In Malcolm Gladwell's book, *The Outliers*, he gives readers a snapshot of the Beatles' formative years. In 1960, when the Beatles were still a struggling high school band, they were invited to play in Hamburg, Germany where there was this huge non-stop show that went on for hours and hours.

Here is what John Lennon had to say about it:

We got better and got more confidence. We couldn't help it with all the experience playing all night long. It was handy them being foreign. We had to try even harder, put our hearts and soul into it, to get ourselves over.

In Liverpool, we'd only ever done one-hour sessions, and we just used to do our best numbers, the same ones, at every one. In Hamburg, we had to play for eight hours, so we really had to find a new way of playing.

Eight hours?

Pete Best, the Beatle's drummer at the time, said:

Once the news got out about that we were making a show, the club started packing them in. We played seven nights a week. At first we played almost nonstop till 12:30, when it closed, but as we got better the crowds stayed till 2 most mornings.

Seven days a week?

As Gladwell makes sure his readers know, the Beatles ended up traveling to Hamburg five times between 1960 and the end of 1962. During that time period – before their big burst of success in 1964 - they had performed live an estimated twelve thousand times! From the Beatles to hockey players to computer geniuses, Gladwell methodically shows that talent alone isn't enough to succeed: the people who really have a breakthrough and are able to shine have done something at least 10,000 times.

The book is fascinating and the concept is encouraging and challenging for budding talent. The Beatles, by the time they came to the United States, had the kind of knowledge that comes from lots of experience.

The day I read this book, I also peeled potatoes with my eight-year-old niece. She had never peeled a potato before, and I had to stop and really THINK about how to do it so that I could show her and tell her. She got frustrated at first, because it was difficult to put the peeler on the skin of the potato at just the right angle. I found myself smiling as I said, “you will get it with practice,” realizing that I have now peeled thousands of potatoes, and so I can do it without even thinking about it.

That’s fine for potatoes and rock bands, but what about when it really counts, and there is no time for practice? Like when you are a parent and experience the first time your child can’t be consoled, the first time your child tests the limits or the first time he is rejected and comes to you for advice?

Or when you have a friend who is struggling with a heap of problems that seem overwhelming and he comes to you because you are the only person he can trust? Or when you are given a new job, or have been appointed as king and you have never done anything like it before—what happens then?

What happens when someone is looking to us to have the wisdom to know what to do when we really don’t have a clue?

It is tempting to want to fake it. It is tempting to try to go it all alone so that it is not so obvious that we don't have the experience. It is tempting to beat ourselves up because we DON'T know what we are doing, and we don't have all of the answers. It is tempting to think that we should be able to do it all and figure it all out on our own.

Even Solomon didn't do that. We hear about the "wisdom of Solomon," and I always thought this meant that Solomon had it all together and just always knew what to do. When this passage is usually read, the emphasis is entirely on how wonderful it was that Solomon sought out wisdom. It is true that Solomon loved God, and it was true that he came before God with humility, and it was true that he was regarded as a good leader. BUT, Solomon was far from perfect. If we read 1 Kings carefully, we will see that he isn't ALWAYS so selfless. He was concerned with getting his own house built before the temple. There was a scandal with an Egyptian princess. And he disobeyed other laws regarding sacrifices and incense. Solomon did seek out wisdom, but only once God asked him what he wanted.

Today I want to offer just a few insights I think we can glean from this text about seeking wisdom.

- 1. Wisdom is a gift from God that we can receive if we are attentive to it.** There are some people who have had all sorts of experience and still don't seem to learn from it. There are others who seem to catch on to it readily. One of the keys is openness and attentiveness. Remember the story in Luke of Mary's conception? Mary had no idea what was going on. What was she to do with everything the angel was telling her? What

did she say in Luke 2:19? “Mary treasured all of these things and pondered them in her heart.” Perhaps if we do the same thing with the things that are new to us, or don’t make sense to us, or are even frightening to us, God will grant us wisdom.

2. We are not going to get it all right all of the time. No one will, not even Solomon. I remember when I was a new parent. I was SO CONCERNED with using the “right words” with my kids. There were things I didn’t want to say that I found myself saying, and there were things I knew I should say but I didn’t. I didn’t want to lose my cool, and then I would. It seemed like every day I could find something that I did wrong, but focusing on what was going wrong was doing nothing to build my confidence as a parent. Then I heard a lecture by some “expert” on child development and parenting who said something that was so freeing to me: “Shoot for 80%.” If 80% of the time your words and actions with your children are consistent, they will catch on. So the first insight is to recognize and accept that as much as we might try, none of us are going to get everything right 100% of the time.

3. Wisdom comes from all sorts of people and places. How often do we think that one person or one group has all the answers? You may think that your pastor knows what is going on with everyone, or that the consistory knows everything, but we don’t. We are dependent on the entire community to share what is on their hearts and minds. And that is the same with every organization and every group and every family. Don’t assume that one person or one group of people know everything there is to know!

If we jump ahead in 1 Kings to chapter 5 after Solomon has been granted wisdom, he

goes about building the temple. Wisdom doesn't mean that a person knows it all, it means that he or she knows that everyone is important and has something to offer the outcome. In chapter 5 we see Solomon bringing all the tribes and all different types of people and skills together for the cause.

This past week we had a listening session for parents, and it was wonderful for me.

While I am a parent, my experience as a parent is not the same as the experience of all of the parents in our congregation. I am doing my best to seek the wisdom of our parents and from as many sources as possible before we make some changes to our programming for young children. I heard, too, that these parents were seeking the wisdom of others and knew that that their own parenting would be enriched through connections to other parents.

- 4. Don't assume that one person knows everything, but do assume that everyone knows something.** Eunice Kennedy Shriver knew this truth when she started Special Olympics and became a champion for people, who (because of their challenges) were often discarded as people who did not have any wisdom to contribute. The world saw otherwise this past week when Loretta Claiborne shared her remarks at Shriver's memorial service. She said,

Eunice Kennedy Shriver worked on behalf of the weakest of the weak, the cast aways, the throw aways of society – they would say “the mentally retarded” and I am one of those people. Today she is a fighter for humanity. Some people say we have lost the king of pop. Today I say, the queen of humanity is gone. Today I celebrate and I hope you will celebrate cause she will have no more pain. I am wearing bright colors to celebrate her, to celebrate the color of brightness.

Loretta Claiborne, someone who many would have discarded as having nothing to offer, spoke words of wisdom to the country this past week.

Any new parent, any new leader, any new *anything* doesn't have the benefit of practicing what they are about to do 10,000 times. That is why it is called new ... and that is okay. We can smile and say, "Oh, it will come with practice," but as a community of faith we say way more than that.

Today we have promised to Ryan, Alissa, and Gabriel that they don't have to worry about having all of the answers or doing it all themselves. Today we have promised that we will share our collective wisdom with them any time they are open to receive it, and we will seek their on-going wisdom as an important part of this community as well. As a community of faith we not only commit these things to Ryan and Alissa, every time there is a baptism we also commit these things to one another.

May it be so.

Amen.