

Wisdom in Our Weakness

1 Kings 3: 5-12

Romans 8: 26-39

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1 Kings 3: 5-12

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 toward 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.

Romans 8: 26-39

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

“Look for the helpers.” This famous and wise quote from Mr. Rogers is sage advice for people of all ages whenever there is trouble, whenever there is disaster. In the aftermath of 9/11, he came out of retirement to again share that message with families. Those words were spoken again after the Boston Marathon bombing and in many other harrowing, devastating times. And we have said his words, “look for the helpers,” many times since the Corona virus has dominated our lives, our world, as we have stopped taking for granted store clerks, post office employees, medical care providers, teachers, and all other essential workers. There has been wisdom, comfort and assurance in those words. In the midst of so much that is negative, difficult and challenging, we are reminded of the light that shines in as well even in the darkest of moments.

I read recently of a woman who had been relying on these words as they became a beacon for her through the pandemic. As time has gone on and there is no end in sight to the virus and its effects that ripple everywhere, she began to consider other wise insights that Mr. Rogers had offered as she sought wisdom, hope and guidance for herself. She soon found herself adapting his famous phrase to be, “look for the wise ones.” Look for the wise ones.

Look for the knowledgeable ones who will show you what is helpful, genuine and true. Look for the ones who will honestly help you understand what is happening around us. Look for the ones whose guidance offers safety, care and values. Look for the wise ones.

Wisdom is the ability to think and act using knowledge, experience, understanding, common sense and insight and is associated with attributes such as unbiased judgment, and compassion, and virtues such as ethics and benevolence. Wisdom is often considered something that comes with age and life experience. It is a guide for the good, it is understanding that has an action.

Knowledge tells us how to take care of ourselves; wisdom is practicing healthy habits.

Knowledge tells us racial injustice is wrong. Wisdom calls us to take a stand, to react in a way that heals.

Knowledge means we know that masks, social distancing and clean hands are helping to battle Covid-19. Wisdom means that we wear a mask, stay 6 feet apart and wash our hands frequently.

One of the most well-known stories from the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, is Solomon asking God for wisdom. Even beyond Judeo-Christian circles, the cliché “the wisdom of Solomon,” is known. In a dream, God offers Solomon, son of the Psalmist King David and now the new Israelite king, whatever he would ask for. Solomon responds to God with a childlike faith, simplicity and humility. He recognizes the awe-inspiring responsibilities of his reign “in the midst of the people” God had “chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted.” Rather than riches, long life or the death of enemies, Solomon is already wise enough to ask for more wisdom to lead God’s people. “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?” God was pleased by Solomon’s request and granted him “a wise and discerning mind,” with the affirmation that no one like Solomon had ever lived before, nor would anyone else in all time to come. Beyond our reading today, God also rewards Solomon with riches, long life and honor as long as Solomon continues to walk in God’s ways, in other words, to use his God-given wisdom in ways that are faithful and just.

Solomon though began his request to God from a place of personal weakness, referring to his new role and power as “I am only a little child.” He recognized that in order to lead God’s chosen people, he would need wisdom above all else.

Wisdom is strength, care and leadership at its very best, but an opposite, weakness, is the natural human condition. We are reliant on one another, and on systems and structure. We are never as independent as we think we are. Our culture denies weaknesses as we strive to cover up the chinks in our armor. We ‘play to our strengths,’ we ‘fake it till we make it.’ Our job reviews reward our strengths and see our weaknesses as something to be improved upon, as little failings that keep us from being the ideal employee. We want to be strong, capable and decisive when facing a challenge; we do not want to say, “I am only a child.”

Yet there is an amazing paradox here, as for people of faith there is wisdom in our weakness.

From a faith perspective, strength is indeed found in weakness. It is from our weakness that we reach out to God in a humble dependence, that we recognize that we cannot rely on just ourselves. It is no accident that wisdom emerges from a position of weakness.

Pastor Henry Fernandez offers some wise insight into this paradox. “You may be wondering, How is it even possible to get strength through weakness? After all, they are two extreme opposites. Well, when you look at it in the natural then you’re absolutely correct. But taken from a spiritual perspective, weakness is the very thing that produces great strength. You see, in the context of our spiritual lives, strength that is generated by our faith in God and His Word, is what carries us through the difficulties of life. Sometimes, we may be going through something and we don’t feel we are strong enough to endure it. But.....God reassures us that we can make it because His love for us is strong enough to overpower our weakness.”

The ultimate revelation of that truth was Jesus dying on a cross apparently in utter weakness, yet redemption and resurrection were born out of the crucifixion.

Paul, in his letter to the Romans, and to us today, reminds us that the Spirit helps us in our weakness. Even in those frail and tender moments when we do not have words, but instead have only tears, sighs and groans beyond language, the Spirit intercedes on our behalf. We are reminded that in all things--- in absolutely all things--- God is for us.

Our weakness reminds us that our very life depends on God and this reminder bears the strong spiritual fruits of gratitude and humility.

Our weakness reminds us that though we may deserve God’s anger, we instead receive forgiveness and grace. This reminder bears the strong spiritual fruits of sympathy and kindness.

Our weakness reminds us that the signs of spiritual maturity are not the abilities admired by the world. This reminder bears the strong spiritual fruits of hopefulness and faithful endurance.

The Spirit is our Advocate who helps us in our weakness and offers the spiritual gift of wisdom, the gift of seeing life from God's perspective. This gift offers a sense of divine direction, of being led by the Spirit to act justly and appropriately in a given set of circumstances, and rightly applying the knowledge in ways that move people towards peace and unity. The gift of wisdom offers spiritual intuition in problem solving.

In these days of uncertainty, anxiety, insecurity, look for the wise ones. Look for the knowledgeable ones who will show you what is helpful, genuine and true. Look for the ones who will honestly help you understand what is happening around us. Look for the ones whose guidance offers safety, care and values. Look for the ones led by the Spirit to act justly and appropriately in a given set of circumstances, and rightly applying the knowledge in ways that move people towards peace and unity. Look for the wise ones. Amen.