

The Gift of Wisdom
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I Kings 2:10-12, 3:5-14

This morning's text opens with the death of David, the king who united the two kingdoms into one and created the land of Biblical Israel that people still yearn for or strive for today. David dies and his son, Solomon, ascends to the throne. Solomon now has to rule this diverse and complicated kingdom without the benefit of having been a soldier fighting to consolidate it and winning the people on his side as David did. You can imagine him being more than a little worried about the task at hand.

And so when God comes to Solomon in a dream promising him anything he wants, Solomon has the chance to really get a leg up on this kingly rule business. What should he ask for? An army? Loyal followers? Lots of money to buy people off? What would you ask for?

Solomon says, "Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil.

Or as the Message version says, "Here's what I want: Give me a God-listening heart so I can lead your people well, discerning the difference between good and evil."

The ability to discern between good and evil. Wisdom. In reality he couldn't have asked for a more important, though perhaps more difficult gift. For in our own lives isn't this what faces us time and time again? What is the right choice between what is good and what is not? And how do I know the difference?

I clearly remember one worship service that jolted me into thinking seriously about this. I attended my niece's confirmation at her Catholic church outside of Chicago several years back. The service included the bishop giving a homily to the confirmands about the meaning of their confirmation and how their faith should guide them in their lives to come.

At one point the bishop said, "now it is clear that there are some things the Bible and the Catholic Church tradition say are wrong, and you don't do those things. And there are some things the Bible and the Catholic Church tradition say are right and you need to do those things. As for the rest, you can do whatever you want, it doesn't matter so much."

I nearly leapt out of my pew (but didn't for the sake of my niece). I wanted to yell, "no, no, no," that is when discerning right and wrong is the most important and requires the most of us!

Discerning what is right and what is wrong on the extremes can be quite easy--perhaps not necessarily easy to follow, but easy to discern. It is wrong to steal the wallet of the person sitting next to you. It is right to help someone up who falls on the sidewalk. It is wrong to kill your mother because you are angry with her, even if she provokes you. It is right to use less paper to save on waste and deforestation.

But I contend that many, perhaps even the majority, of our choices between what is right and what is wrong are much, much more difficult and far murkier to discern.

President Carter took office in 1975 and was a proponent of social justice, racial equality and supporting public schools. He had a young daughter Amy who was in school when he took

office. Every other president had put his children in private schools both to get them a good education—DC public schools were notoriously substandard-- and to protect the children from so much publicity. President Carter chose instead to send Amy to public school and she went. From all accounts it was a profoundly miserable experience for her, deeply wounding.

Right decision, wrong decision? Is it right to fulfill your principles by sending your child into a difficult and nearly impossible social situation? Is it wrong to sacrifice one's child for your own principles? If the situation were different, say looking at the lives of the young schoolchildren who integrated schools in the south during civil rights, would we level the same criticism at their parents for these children's experience of daily racial hatred, physical violence and social exile?

What is right and what is wrong? And how do we know?

Well, as Christians, we turn to our Bible. And our Bible starts almost immediately with a story of choosing between right and wrong.

Adam and Eve are in the Garden of Eden. God says you can eat anything except the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Enter the snake who sidles up to Eve and says, "don't you want a bite. Try it, you'll like it. You won't die but instead your eyes will be opened and you will be like God knowing good and evil." So Eve eats and Adam eats and suddenly they know good and evil.

Let's stop for a minute. In so much of our Christian tradition we have been told that this was the colossal mistake, this was the Fall, this was when Adam and Eve became sinful and thus all of us have been sinful ever since. This is the roots of "original sin" as theorized by Augustine our third century theologian who did more to promote and solidify the idea of original sin and the utter sinfulness of human beings than anyone else in our history.

So this is the moment when it all went bad. But let me ask you, what would life be like if we did not know the difference between good and evil? Think again back to Adam and Eve in the garden before eating from the tree. They knew nothing of good or evil. Let me ask you this, when someone in our society does not know the difference between good and evil, how do we categorize them?

They are called sociopaths because they do not have a developed sense of right and wrong. We consider these folks missing an essential part of their humanity. It is a hurdle one must clear to be tried in our court system.

So who exactly are Adam and Eve without this part within them? "One of the early church father Ireanus wrote that he envisioned the Adam and Eve in the garden to be toddlers, ones who had not yet developed this sense of right and wrong and when they "fell" So God sent them off into the world for their education Only once they ate from the tree did they become adults and able to go out into the world.

The ability to discern right and wrong is an essential part of being human. From one point of view Eve and Adam didn't fall from grace so much as grow up. Then they were tasked with the responsibility of being discerning adults in the world.

(They fail their first test miserably. When God shows up and asks them if they ate from the tree, Adam says "well, Eve gave me a fruit and I ate." Then Eve says, "the serpent tricked me." They may know right and wrong, but it doesn't mean they have chosen to accept responsibility for their choices.)

So Solomon, many generations later, asks God for wisdom to know right from wrong. To discern. To choose wisely.

And now here we are, many generations later. How do we know right from wrong?

There is a debate right now about what to do about Fanuel Hall, the iconic building in downtown Boston. It is a prominent part of the city's life, tourist industry, and architecture. It was named for Peter Fanuel a wealthy 18th-century merchant who donated the building to the city of Boston in 1742. He was also a slave owner and slave trader.

Should the building be renamed?

Some folks want to change the name to Crispus Attucks Hall after a black man who is widely considered to be the first person killed in the American Revolution.

Some folks want to put up a replica of a slave auction block right in front of the building to educate those who pass through the area while keeping the name in place.

Some folks want to leave it as it is, a piece of Boston's history.

What is the right thing to do?

Unlike Confederate monuments that went up in the Jim Crow era as deliberate visual symbols erected to remind black folks of their lower place in society and the consequences of challenging that structure, Fanuel Hall came into being in the midst of the era Fanuel lived in.

At the same time Boston has frequently been noted as a city that has not addressed adequately its racist past and present, sometimes being called the most racist city in America, and just last year struggling with racist taunts being shouted during Red Sox games.

Do folks who are most impacted by racism, people of color, get a greater say?
Do only Boston residents get a say?

I'd love to call up my niece's bishop and say, what does Catholic teaching and the Bible say that will make this clear? And if we don't find clarity there, can we really do whatever we want?

Truthfully it can be overwhelming. Two weeks ago I preached about "why be good," why do we choose the good? But today's question I think is even harder. Once we have chosen to be good, how do we be good, make good decisions, and discern right from wrong?

What is right and what is wrong? In an increasingly complex world it is hard to tell. It takes hard work to discern. It takes conversation that ensures there is a place at the table for all people. That is one reason we gather as a faith community, to discern these things together. Especially hard things.

Is it right to help Saudi Arabia bomb Yemen in order to defeat the rebels who took over last year even if it means we hit a school bus carrying 44 children who die like they did this week?

Is it right to offer the right to die to terminally ill people in this state? What if pressure is then put on those who disabled or mentally impaired to make the choice to die?

Is it right to put chemical pesticides and herbicides on my lawn so it is nice and green? But what about the impact to the local environment and watershed if I do? But what about the effect on my neighbor's property value if I don't?

I see my friend's husband out on what appears to be a romantic date at a restaurant with another woman. Do I tell my friend? Am I reading the situation right? Do I mind my own business?

What do we draw on to help us decide?

One year in my class I had a student Mark who was working on launching his new business career. Mark was involved in selling discount cell phone service and phones through a multi-level marketing company which meant as he signed more people up, he received more money. He had just come back from a seminar where folks learned how to market themselves to gain more customers. Mark told me, Yeah they said a great place to go to find people was outside food pantries. Go and talk to those folks.

I sputtered and said, wait a minute, that's not right. Mark said to me, genuinely puzzled, why not? It's not illegal?

I struggled to explain to him why trying to capture the most vulnerable of the population when they are at their most vulnerable, getting free food, was not right.

Why not?

As people who come together to work on figuring out what is right and then doing what is right, I am grateful for what we can lean on.

Yes, our scripture helps us greatly. Love the Lord and love your neighbor as yourself helps us decide what is right. Care for the poor, the stranger, the alien, the imprisoned. That helps us figure out how to act, how to spend our money, how to vote.

Yes, the tradition of the church can help. We look at how the UCC was first in so many ways. First to ordain women and LGBTQ folks, First to have a Black president of a mostly white denomination. A leader in abolition and in divestment. To be first you often have to be counter cultural.

Wisdom, as Solomon so rightly thought, is a great gift. And maybe you have a wise person in your life that you can turn to in times of discernment. Solomon became that person for the people of Israel. I turn to my friend Mary, a fiesty 80 year who tells it like it is and is one of the most faith-filled people I know.

And then we come together--the gift of being a church-- to talk, to argue even, to listen, to disagree and to listen for the Spirit. To look around and see who isn't represented here? What voices are missing? Here we wrestle to figure out what is right and to "do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God" a theme our children's church will be exploring this fall.

Discerning what is right is essential. It is hard work. It is a moving target. And I'm glad we are in it together.

Amen.