

Narrative Lectionary: Solomon's Wisdom/Reformation Sunday

October 28, 2018

It's Reformation Sunday, when we remember Martin Luther posting the 95 theses on the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church, which started the Reformation of the Church.

Here are some of my favorite Luther quotes. To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing. The fewer the words, the better the prayer.

Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree.

God writes the Gospel not in the Bible alone, but also on trees, and in the flowers and clouds and stars.

Beautiful music is the art of the prophets that can calm the agitations of the soul; it is one of the most magnificent and delightful presents God has given us.

Be thou comforted, little dog, thou too in Resurrection shall have a little golden tail.

If you are not allowed to laugh in heaven, I don't want to go there.

Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that a man could stake his life on it a thousand times.

By the way, we Lutherans don't worship Luther; we worship the God known to us in Jesus the Christ. But we so appreciate how Luther re-discovered the Gospel message in Scripture: that we are not made right with God by anything we do; we are simply given the gift of grace through what God in Christ has done for us. We are offered forgiveness through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus.

We acknowledge that we are beholden to Luther and his writings, but we also acknowledge that he was very human. In 1525, when the peasants in his province revolted because of terrible conditions, he sided with the princes, and many peasants were killed.

He said terrible things about the Jews. I have been to synod assemblies where a rabbi was invited, and we apologized to the Jewish community for the anti-Semitic

things Luther said. He endorsed the polygamy of the king and of one of the princes. He was a flawed human being, like we all are.

The point of the Gospel that Luther rediscovered is, It's not about how good we are, but about the goodness of God towards us.

We have a story today of the wisest king Israel ever had, but he was a deeply flawed human being. We don't discover that from this passage, but the overall life of Solomon is a mixed bag. And in case you stop listening before I stop speaking, I want you to know today that God is about the business of using flawed human beings to carry out the work of the kingdom, and that includes us.

We need to catch up with the story. Last week, King David, the second of the Israelites kings, sinned by sexually assaulting Bathsheba, and then killed her husband to cover up his sin. He then married the grieving widow. David was confronted by the prophet Nathan, and he grieved over his sin. God forgave him, but there were consequences. We can be forgiven of our sins, but that doesn't mean the consequences of our actions go away, right? If I drink or drug, and cause an accident, and someone is injured, I can be forgiven, but someone was still injured. David was forgiven, but he had still caused a woman to be widowed.

The baby they conceived died shortly after birth, but the second child they had they named Solomon. At the end of David's life, there are two groups that want to claim kingship, two different factions favoring two different sons. Bathsheba advocates for Solomon as the new king, and she gets her way.

So Solomon becomes king. The story we have is at the beginning of his reign. He is at Gibeon worshiping, because worship has not been centralized totally in Jerusalem yet. The text says that he loved God, and he walked in the statutes of his father. On this particular day, he doesn't just offer one or two bulls to God, he offers a thousand animals. This is what he's doing for God. But this story isn't really about that. It is going to be about what God does for him. This story works well for this Reformation Sunday, because the Reformation rediscovery is not what we can do to get right with God; it's what God has already done for us.

There is a little part of us that keeps thinking, If I do this and this, and maybe this, then God will really love me. God can finally forgive. The Reformation rediscovery is that it always starts with God, and what God has done for us in Christ.

So Solomon sacrifices all these animals to God, but more important, God gives *him* a gift. God appears to him in a dream, and says, “Ask what I should give *you*.” Remember Solomon is fairly young. He needs help. And God says, Tell me what you need to help you rule.

Here is how Solomon answers God. ‘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.

Now, listen to that in terms of the story of King David: he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, in uprightness of heart... What?? Oh, right, except when he was lustng after his neighbor’s wife and assaulting her and murdering her husband. Obviously that’s a revisionist view of David’s history.

The more important phrase that Solomon says is, God, you have kept for David this great and steadfast love. Even when he rebelled from your ways, you were faithful to him. That is the heart of the Gospel that Luther rediscovered, that God does it all for us in Jesus Christ, and that God remains faithful to us.

I am reminded of St. Paul’s words: Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ, certainly not our failures (Romans 8).

Solomon continues, “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.” So what does Solomon ask for? “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?”

Rolf Jacobson, a Hebrew scholar at Luther Seminary, says that the word “govern” in this translation is a poor choice. The Hebrew word really means “judge.” Give your servant an understanding mind to *judge* your people...Jacobson makes the

point that King Solomon could judge pretty well, but he struggled to govern well. I'll come back to that in a minute.

God is pleased with this request. So God says, '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 honor 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.'

God gives the gift of wisdom, so that Solomon can use that gift to be a blessing to his people. God does not offer us blessings just for us. We are blessed to be a blessing. Luther used to say that God gave us a hand with five fingers so that our blessings could pass through our hands.

So Solomon is given this gift of being able to judge wisely. And then this example is given to us. Two prostitutes with a problem come before the king. The first woman says, We each had babies recently. The other night this woman's baby died because she rolled over on her baby. When she woke up and discovered this, she came and took my baby while I was sleeping, and she's now saying my baby is her baby. I know what my baby looks like.

And the second woman said, No, this baby is mine. So King Solomon said, Hand me a sword, I'll divide the baby and you each have half. The first mother called out, No! Just give her the baby, even though she isn't the real mother. And Solomon said, Clearly, you are the real mother, because you care so much about your baby that you would give her to this other woman to keep your baby from being killed.

Now, this is a wonderful story about the clever use of wisdom to decide the fate of a child. But there are many stories as well of Solomon not governing well. He cannot seem to govern his own appetite for women. He has 700 wives, and 300 concubines. And many of these wives are foreign, because he is marrying foreign princesses for geopolitical reasons, but then he ends up worshipping their gods as well.

He is extravagant in his spending, and bankrupts the country. He uses slave labor to erect his lavish complexes. He is very wise, and very flawed. He is an example of the Reformation principle of saint and sinner, simul justus et peccator. We are at the same time justified and sinful. We are not climbing everyday up the ladder of sanctification. We get something right, and then we realize we need to peel away another layer of sin.

The good news is that God insists on using imperfect people like us, like Solomon, like David. I pray for our president daily. He needs wisdom. Our country needs wisdom when it comes to folks from south of our country who want to come north. I read an opinion article this week from a woman who is an expert in immigration and asylum. She offers a plan that she says will not totally please either Republicans or Democrats, but it could help.

Most of the people in the migrant caravan we are hearing about that is on its way north are from Honduras. They are fleeing drug violence and gangs. If my son Toby were going to be forced into a gang or killed, I'd probably get out of my country as well. This expert says that instead of stopping foreign aid to Honduras, as the president has threatened, we should continue to work with non-profits in that country to provide safe jobs for their youth. Our aid has even provided protection for those witnesses who have spoken out about murders. That makes Honduras a safer place to live.

And she says, we need to enforce our immigration laws, so that if someone goes through the asylum process but is denied asylum, they will not be allowed to stay here. Maybe the wisdom here is in a combination of policies: enforcing immigration laws, giving asylum seekers due process, and using our aid monies to help those countries become safer places to live, so that people don't need to come north. Maybe there is wisdom in that.

I was wondering how a sermon on wisdom impacts *us* this morning. Those of us here today don't govern an entire people, but yet we each need to offer various degrees of leadership. Some of us lead a family; some of us are in leadership at work, some of us lead a classroom, some of us lead in the community and here at Prince of Life. So as we think about King Solomon and wisdom today, I offer you some wisdom about leadership. These are suggestions from a leadership coach in

Portland named Margaret Marcuson. She is a former American Baptist minister who now coaches faith leaders. Here are some of the things she leads by.

1. Notice who is moving toward me and who is moving away. Ask, "Who is motivated?"
2. Stay connected--continue to work on relationships.
3. If I feel anxious about stating my point of view and inclined to be quiet to keep the peace, find a way to say *something* about what I think.
4. Breathe consciously, especially if I feel anxious.
5. Remember my purpose, which is to help leaders grow.
6. Focus on my own growth, and trust that will help others grow.
7. Don't be afraid to challenge people: it's another way to help them grow.
8. Operate out of a sense of sufficiency, not scarcity.
9. Connect with people who are better-functioning than I am.
10. Pray for those who annoy me the most.
11. Pause before saying yes to any requests, especially big ones.
12. Don't click links online that make me anxious.

If there is something there that you can take away this morning, please feel free to borrow it. God calls us to apply wisdom in all areas of our lives. And if you don't have enough of it, pray for it like Solomon did. In fact, James says this in his letter: "If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you." (James 1:5)

Let us pray. Generous God, we need your wisdom. We need it in our personal lives, in our families, in this congregation; we need wisdom in our nation. So we ask today. Give us the wisdom we need to do your will, to accomplish the goals of your kingdom, to expand your reign of justice and mercy. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.