

Pentecost 8A. July 30, 2017. Dungeness Valley Lutheran Church, Sequim, WA. I Kings 3:5-12, Psalm 119:129-136, Romans 8:26-39, Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52.

I Kings 3:5-12

⁵At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, ‘Ask what I should give you.’ ⁶And 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. ⁷And 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. ⁸And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. ⁹Give 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?’

10 It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. ¹¹God 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, ¹²I 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.

Solomon, Israel’s wealthiest and wisest king, had a rocky beginning. He was the son of David, Israel’s most beloved king, and Bathsheba, David’s neighbor’s widow. David, if you recall, had connived for Bathsheba’s husband to be killed in battle so he could marry her. Their first child died and Solomon was born to them later. He was not David’s oldest son, and Bathsheba schemed for years to arrange that Solomon would succeed his father on the throne. Not the best situation for a young, would-be ruler. Rivals were everywhere.

It’s possible that Solomon may have been as young as 12, and probably no older than 21 when our first lesson takes place. That’s why he says to God, “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.”

Solomon asked God for wisdom rather than for long life, riches, or victory in war. It seems he knew how to pray as he ought. He was blessed with wisdom which became legendary. We speak even today of the “wisdom of Solomon.” When two women came to him carrying a baby and each claiming to be its mother, the story goes that he came up with a way to decide who the real mother was. He ordered his soldiers to cut the child in half and give each woman one half. The first woman agreed. The second said, “If need be, give her the baby, but don’t kill it.” Thus Solomon could discern that the second woman was the real mother: the one who would part from her child rather than allow it to die.

Later in life, Solomon acquired wealth, power, and hundreds of wives. His empire included trade routes linking Africa, Asia, Arabia and Asia Minor. Revenue from trade enabled him to build not only great palaces and halls, but also a magnificent temple to God, a temple rich with gold, fine wood, and exquisite workmanship.

But power and wealth did to Solomon what they seem to have done to some of our corporate leaders and politicians – and to some of us. Solomon began to think he could do anything he wanted. His foreign wives brought their own non-Jewish religions into the palace and the land. Political murders, high taxes, and forced labor eroded Solomon’s reputation. After he died, his kingdom was divided by rival kings.

Although he seemed to know how to pray humbly for wisdom when he was young, when you look back on his later life you see the trouble he got into – perhaps due to his wealth and success. We all do well to take a lesson from the once-wise king. When one can set oneself up with the comforts of the world and believe the illusion that one is master of the universe, of what value are Jesus’ promises?

Paul, in his letter to the church at Rome, says we don’t know how to pray as we ought. Some of our lives are hectic attempts to buy the things we need, pay our mortgages, fill our gas tanks. Sometimes our family time is minimal. Some of us spend hours isolated from others in front of TV or computer. We plan vacations and forget to plan for “down time” – time for God, time for quiet talk with one another. Many of us have trouble caring properly for ONE spouse, let alone hundreds. And some of us are just plain lonely and don’t know what to do about it.

Being separated / alienated from one another/ usually means we are separated / alienated from our Creator. And if that’s the case, how can we possibly pray as we ought?

God does listen, however, because there is One who is stronger than the forces that would pull us apart internally and try to separate us from one another. Through Jesus we find out that God really IS for us. Not for our stress-riddled schemes and lives, but for our souls, for our hearts, for our minds and our wills – desiring for each of us abundant life, the peace which the world cannot give, the serenity we so dearly miss, and the community that builds us into the Body of Christ. That’s what Jesus offered when he forgave sins, healed people, and prayed for his followers.

How can we believe this? The Holy Spirit “helps us in our weakness.” The Holy Spirit gives us the faith that we, by ourselves, cannot gain or create.

Now, Paul says, “all things work together for good for those who love God.” Unfortunately, these words are sometimes not used kindly. If we are feeling depressed, lonely, disappointed or discouraged, a well-meaning friend might say to us, “Remember, all things work together for good for those who love God.” And our first instinct is to punch that person right in the nose. “Nothing is working together for good today. What can you possibly be thinking?”

LATER, maybe much later, we might find that the friend was right. Or maybe not. But somehow the Holy Spirit can give us the faith to expect things to work together under the creating and re-creating hand of a loving God.

I am constantly amazed and overjoyed when I hear one of the faithful say, “I have a so-and-so percent chance of being cured by this treatment or this surgery.” And when I shake my head in sadness, they answer, “But that’s o.k., because I am not afraid to die.” That’s faith.

The words we hear at almost every funeral begin to work their comfort, “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.” *[Text I used at Westville Community gathering two days after 9/11]*

The powers that separate us from one another and that cause us to fear separation from God – those powers are overcome by the reconciling, connecting love of God for us in Christ Jesus.

We might paraphrase the verse, “For I am convinced that neither fear, nor money, nor greed, nor drugs, nor depression, nor conflict, nor the stock market, nor unemployment, nor anger, nor sickness, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.”

Our faith connects us with God and with one another – and intimately with the persons with whom we receive Holy Communion.

A fantastic benefit comes along with this God-connection. The Spirit prays FOR US. Prays with sighs too deep for words. You know those sighs. You know the joys and sorrows you can’t talk about. The Spirit knows also. You don’t need to have perfect words in your prayers. You don’t need to feel guilty when your mind wanders during your prayers, or when you fall asleep while praying. The mind of God knows what you need before you ask.

And your every action of love toward a family member, a friend, a loved one – these actions are prayers too. And as you grow in faith, you begin to trust God to remove your worries, your failures, your troubles. And regardless of the rocky beginning your prayer may have taken, or the rocky road your feet are traveling, you find yourself praying like the young, uncorrupted Solomon: “give me an understanding mind, an ability to discern between good and evil.”

Jesus asked his listeners in today’s Gospel of simple-sounding but complicated parables, “Do you understand this?” and they answered, “Yes!” Perhaps we will answer more humbly, “I believe, help my unbelief. Guide me in your ways. Give me an understanding mind, a believing heart, a faithful life. And pray for me with sighs too deep for words.” For Jesus’ sake. Amen.