

God's Wise Guy

Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Christian Reformed Church

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1 Kings 3:1-15 (NRSV)

Solomon made a marriage alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt; he took Pharaoh's daughter and brought her into the city of David, until he had finished building his own house and the house of the Lord and the wall around Jerusalem. The people were sacrificing at the high places, however, because no house had yet been built for the name of the Lord. 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 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. 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." Then Solomon awoke; it had been a dream. He came to Jerusalem where he stood before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. He offered up burnt offerings and offerings of well-being, and provided a feast for all his servants.

1 Corinthians 1:18-21

The message about the cross is nonsense to those who are being destroyed; but to us who are being saved, it is God's power. It is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the intelligence of the intellectual I will nullify." Where is the wise person? Where is the scholar? Where is today's expert? Hasn't God made the world's wisdom nonsense?

Since in God's wisdom the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided to save those who have faith through the proclamation of nonsense. Because Jews ask for signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified – to Jews a stone to trip over, to Gentiles nonsense, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ: God's power and God's wisdom! Because God's nonsense is wiser than people, and God's weakness is stronger than people.

Have a look at your own calling, friends: not many of you are wise by human standards, not many of you are powerful, not many of you are well-bred. But God chose the world's fools to shame the wise. And God chose the world's weak to shame the strong. And God chose the world's poorly-bred nobodies, who amount to nothing, to stop the "somethings" in their tracks, so that no one may boast before God, by

whom you are in Christ Jesus, who for us has become wisdom from God, and justice and holiness and redemption, so that, just as it is written, “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.”

Sermon

To recall a theme from last Sunday, there were too many weeds growing along with the wheat in ancient Israel. That was the refrain – though worded differently – during the time of the judges. “In those days,” the Scripture repeats, “there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 17:6, etc.). Life was chaotic, uncertain, unstable. Periods of order and stability were only punctuation marks in the middle of long paragraphs of disorder. Worse, God was doing little to set things right. The pattern repeated again and again. For every step forward, there were two steps backward.

At last, fed up, the people proposed a solution. “Give us a king!” the people said (1 Samuel 8:6). “Give us a king!” They wanted to be like other nations. Other nations had kings. A king would lend them stability and security. With a king, they would be safe and strong. So God gave them a king – a series of kings actually. And their kings were just like everyone else’s kings. And Israel, as a nation, became just like every other nation.

Let’s remember those kings – the first three, at least. It began with Saul. Saul! What a man he was! He was more handsome than any other man in Israel. He was bigger and stronger than any other man in Israel, standing head and shoulders above the crowd – a giant! What a man Saul was! What a king he would be! Except that’s not how it went. Saul, Israel’s giant, was powerless against Goliath, the Philistines’ giant. And he, Saul, fell every bit as hard.

Then there was David. David! The “man after God’s own heart” (1 Samuel 13:14). He would be remembered for thousands of years as faithful before God. (That’s how Solomon would remember him before God.) David would become the foundation of a lasting royal dynasty. Why? Because he pleased God, who saw into his heart. But apparently God was fooled about David’s heart. Despite what God saw there, David would assault Bathsheba sexually. (David did more than commit adultery; it was a sexual assault.) Then David would conspire to have Bathsheba’s husband killed. So much for piety! As the prophet Nathan put it, through these actions David had “utterly scorned the LORD” (2 Samuel 12:14). The results would be anything but safety and stability for Israel. Confusion and violence would dog David’s dynasty.

Which brings us to Solomon. What a wise man Solomon was! He had the wisdom to ask for wisdom, to ask for the ability to recognize, in real circumstances, what was right. Solomon’s wisdom would become legendary. His wisdom would be celebrated in the surrounding nations. His wisdom would be recorded in the pages of the Bible. What a wise man Solomon was! Yet what a fool Solomon was! Right before recounting Solomon’s request for wisdom, 1 Kings 3 tells us about his marriage to pharaoh’s daughter and about his habit of making offerings at high places. These were two things that God had clearly said were not right, in any circumstances. And Solomon, of course, would wind up marrying one thousand foreign women (1 Kings 11:3). He would welcome these women along with their “gods” into Israel, into Jerusalem! Solomon failed to heed clear commands and warnings from the LORD. In other words, he failed to exercise the most basic wisdom. And so the kingdom would be taken from Solomon’s successor. And it would be torn apart.

Saul, David, Solomon – their stories don’t surprise us. We know all about “golden boy” leaders with clay feet. (I don’t need to give examples, do I?) Movie stars, star athletes, political leaders – when they seem too good to be true, we know they are too good to be true. And we know the messes they can make. Only a foolish people would ask God to give them a leader who is handsome and strong, a leader who is visibly pious, a leader who is obviously wise. Only a foolish people would ask for that!

So let's wonder about a different sort of leader. Suppose God chose a leader who was anything but a "golden boy" (or "golden girl"). Someone who wasn't handsome (or beautiful). Someone who wasn't tall and well-muscled (or shapely and well-curved). In other words, someone who had "nothing in his appearance that we should desire him" (Isaiah 53:2). Suppose God chose someone who wound up on the outs with all the religious authorities. Someone whose piety was repeatedly questioned. Someone who spent too much time with disreputable people. In other words, someone who would wind up being forsaken even by God. And suppose God chose someone whose wisdom would apparently peak at age twelve. Someone foolish enough to return repeatedly to a place where he was a wanted man. Someone who foolishly walked head-first into a death sentence. In other words, someone who would be labeled "king" only by those who were busy snuffing him out. Suppose God made that kind of choice for the leader of his people.

And so we have Jesus. Jesus! He lacked the strength to carry his own cross, but in him is the power of the world's salvation. Jesus! He was forsaken by God as he hung, cursed by heaven and earth, but he is all holiness. Jesus! He submitted to the powers. He went down into death, from which there is no returning. The powers gloated at their victory and at his folly. But he is wisdom from God. He is the divine "nonsense" that outstrips all human wisdom. Forget about your Sauls and your Davids and your Solomons. We have Jesus!

Now let's imagine what this might mean for the church. Suppose God fills his church with unusual suspects. There may be exceptions to the rule, but in general the church is not glutted by people with exceptional wisdom. There are lots of intelligent people in the church, certainly. But wisdom is something else, something more, than intelligence. The church is not glutted by people with wide-ranging power either. Some weight-lifters go to church. Some political heavy-hitters go to church. But power is not the church's long suit. Nor is the church glutted by people who are well-connected. Some churches have a high ratio of people from the "best" families, or they used to. But family connections are not a membership criterion for the church.

Actually, the church is filled with ordinary people. Not exceptionally wise people. Not exceptionally beautiful people. Not exceptionally connected or powerful people. Just ordinary people doing our best to live ordinary lives in the everyday world.

If this is the kind of people God fills the church with, then where will the church's leaders come from? The answer is obvious. Church leaders will be ordinary people. But – and this is an important "but" – but God equips these ordinary people with what they need in order to be leaders.

Every one of us who is, or has been, a church leader is not up to it. We may have some native abilities that are useful. Maybe we're well-organized. Maybe we're good at turning a phrase. Maybe we're naturally empathetic. But none of that is enough for the church. The church represents Christ in the world! We are ambassadors for Christ, and good ambassadors need to be well-qualified! We declare the gospel and embody the gospel! We manage the affairs of the church, keeping the life of the church in line with what we proclaim!

Now, who of us is up to that? Who of us has what it takes to keep the church on track? Who of us has what it takes to keep the church attentive to the word and Spirit of God? Who of us has what it takes to keep the church patient in prayer? Who of us has what it takes to keep the church disciplined? Who of us has what it takes to keep the church focused on what really matters? Who of us is up to that? Who of us? None of us! None of us is up to it.

But God chooses, God appoints, and God equips. When we ordain elders and deacons, we ask them, "Do you believe that, in the call of this congregation, God himself is calling you to this holy office?" In other words, "Do you believe that when the church calls, God is calling?" If you answer "yes," then you can count on being equipped. God will provide what you need. I have seen this and experienced this again and again.

Back at the end of 1999 when I was installed as the pastor of Olentangy Church, I was asked that same question: “Do you believe that, in the call of this congregation, God himself is calling you to this holy office?” To be honest, I hadn’t given that a single thought, not in any of the activities that took place here and at home over several months. But I started thinking about it when I heard the question. Inside I was scrambling for an answer. The best I could come up with at the moment was, “I guess so” – which came out as “yes.” As I said that “yes,” I knew it was true. And suddenly I had some extra confidence for what was ahead. Not confidence in me, but confidence in God and in God’s purpose. I began to remember how God had used me in the past, with all my flaws. And I was ready to see God use me again, with many of those old flaws intact and with new flaws on top of them. Because that’s how God works, always with the unqualified.

Consider Paul the apostle. Was he gifted? Certainly. Was he exceptional? You bet. But he knew he was a clay vessel. Fragile, easily chipped or broken, full of cracks and flaws that sunlight would clearly reveal. Paul knew he was a clay vessel, but he also knew that what mattered was the gospel. What mattered then, and matters still today, was the presence of Christ with the one he had called to be a leader. And so Paul said what he had experienced: “I can do all things through the one who gives me strength.” He summed it up this way: “When I am weak, then I am strong.” Because the strength, he knew, was not his, but Christ’s. When we lead in the church, Christ is our strength. Christ is our wisdom. Christ is our justice, our holiness, our redemption.

We in the church, even those of us called to be leaders, don’t measure up to the highest standards. We lack the star quality of Saul. We don’t reach the depths of devotion and piety that David did. And we are without the intelligent perception, the wisdom, of Solomon. That’s okay. They all failed anyway.

We don’t measure up. But in the church, it’s not about measuring up. Jesus Christ, who seemed a failure, a loser – he measures up and beyond. And he stands in for us. He leads us. He equips us. And so we do as we have been called, with all our confidence not in ourselves, not in the leaders appointed among us, not in ourselves as the leaders. We do as we have been called with all our confidence in Christ alone. Because he is everything we need.