

“The Gift of Understanding”
Sermon Notes for the Rev. Joyce Kelly
Knox United Church on December 11, 2011 – Third Sunday of Advent
Based on verses from I Kings 3:1-15 and Matthew 2:1-12
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So, what do you want for Christmas? a new shirt? a new putter? Or - when friends ask, do you say, “Oh, nothing, dear. There’s not a thing I need. Just you”, which is sweet, but doesn’t really answer the question, which was “What do you want”, to which you answer, “not a thing I need.” Want/need – interesting!

In this season of God’s greatest gift to the world, God wants to know - not what you want - but what you need. So think beyond ‘things’, even experiences, as much as we like a trip to the theatre or lunch with a friend - think deeper/wider - past what would be nice, past what your heart wants – all the way into what your soul needs. And, if again you say, “There’s not a thing I need.”

Remember - this is God you’re talking to - who already knows the needs of your soul and wonders if you do. God presses you, just as God urged Solomon in today’s old story. God says, “Ask for what I should give you.”

I

Solomon blustered out his own version of “There’s not a thing I need - only you, my Lord.” He said, “You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant, my father David, and have given him a son (me) to sit on his throne.”

Solomon’s father, David, highly esteemed first king of Israel, built the kingdom and expanded the territory, mixed bag that he was: strong, weak, faithful to God, unfaithful to wives, humble shepherd boy, mighty warrior – through it all, loving God and loved by God.

Now it’s up to the next generation (as it always is) to be a wise and humble steward of all that has been given.

Newly-crowned and wise Solomon goes to a holy place - to figure it out, to pray it through. And there, God says in a dream, “Ask for what I should give you.” Now Solomon is not new to talking with God, so he does not hesitate.

First, he praises God - and humbles himself. “I am just a child; I do not know how to go out or come in.” Actually, he’s about 20. Or, is this Jesus-speak, “Unless you become as a little child, you will not enter the Realm of God”? He continues: For who can govern these great people that you have given me?” - words echoed by many wise leaders down the ages. Then Solomon says, “Give me, I pray, an understanding heart.”

This is not to say that, thereafter, Solomon was always humble. Humility didn’t build the marble walls of Solomon’s Temple, or the even greater palaces – where

slaves fell beneath giant boulders every day of construction. And it wasn't humility that greeted heads of state in absolute decadence, kept a dalliance with the beautiful Queen of Sheba for years, and had 700 wives and concubines.

No, Solomon is neither humble nor perfect, but God loves him anyway - and can work with a willing heart!

II

Then wise Solomon says, "Give me, I pray, an understanding heart" - which would not probably be our first prayer. Not having the heart of St. Francis, most of us would say, "O Spirit, grant someone in my world to understand me."

Being understood is not frivolous or selfish, but essential for survival. "A man marooned on a desert isle, or confined in a solitary cell may survive," says Reality Therapist William Glasser, "if he knows that someone he cares for cares about him" – the power of Amnesty International!

Who here has not born the agony of being misunderstood? A teenager slams her door; nobody understands. At work, at home, again and again we explain – nobody hears us; we justify what we've done or not done, or give up, and just stay silent; nobody understands anyway.

Platitudes do not lead to understanding. "If I were you ... I know just how you feel ... when I went through that." None of this helps. Telling your story does not help the other to feel understood. There's a place for that, but not at the beginning of a conversation. No two people ever face the exact same circumstances.

A man in Hugh MacLennan's novel, *Two Solitudes*, refuses to pass judgment on a woman, "I can't unwind her 74 years of act and thought."

Jesus says, "Let the one without sin cast the first stone."

There is no one here this day, or any day, who can unwind the life of another. Yet parts of our society are misunderstood every day - those who live in poverty, whose skin is a different color from our own, whose faith is beyond us, whose nationality or dress or age slots them into a category. And that's before we even look into their eyes and see what they bring to our day – if we get that far.

You can't unwind even ten minutes of the life of the one to your left, to your right, let alone truly understand. You may weigh me, know the color of my hair, my academics, family history, how much money I make and how I spend it. You may know these things about me - but you do not know me. You see the way I dress but miss the resonance of my soul. You hear my words but not the passion of my heart. You catch my anger - but not the fear that fuels it; my lie - but not the insecurity that propels it.

III

“Lord, give me an understanding heart.” The world aches for understanding hearts, yes, every one of us, but also everyone we think we already understand - across the table, across the street, across the sea.

Understanding looks into our eyes and sees us as we really are, hurts in our hurt, bends with our burden, and stands under it, under-stands, literally ‘a heart that listens.’

Whoever wrote the 139th Psalm knew this Spirit of Understanding: O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You know all my ways. Where can I go from your Spirit? If I ascend to heaven you are there; if I make my bed in hell, you are there. Such knowledge is beyond my understanding - no dark night hides me from your understanding; it presses in on me, close, past names and categories and limits people lay on me, even past names I give myself in the wrestling night.

People in other religious families hear this warm and forever good news in other ways. But, for us, it comes through the Bethlehem babe, the Christ-heart of God come walking on earth, to the place where we stand, standing right here with us, under-standing - standing under humanity’s trials.

“Lord,” Solomon says, “give me an understanding heart able to discern between good and evil.”

Another wise man, Chief Black Elk, tells his grandson that the battle between good and evil is within all people - like two wolves fighting for territory. One is evil: jealousy, regret, fear, greed, arrogance, self-centeredness, lies. One is Good: love, serenity, humility, truth, generosity, compassion, faith. His grandson thinks for a minute, then asks, “Which wolf wins the battle?” “The one you feed.”

And like every Christmas season, we are pawns in the commercial marketing battle.

Solomon asks for understanding - discernment, wisdom - to know God’s Truth in the ongoing inner struggle that does continue – in every one of us, and in our world - until Good prevails and evil is vanquished.

So let us prepare as Solomon did, in prayer - the only place we can learn discernment, the only place we can claim God’s gifts.

Prayer is where we learn to recognize the good wolf who lives in the soul of those who trust you and hope in you, and expect the best of you – and you of them.

Prayer is where we learn to recognize the bad wolf, even those in sheep's clothing.

When we meet the bad wolf, we must send it off, quickly, turn away from it. Do not feed it or even think about it. Give it no energy or time. Vanquish it as firmly as Jesus casts out demons and sends them away.

IV

"An understanding heart able to discern between good and evil!" God is pleased with Solomon's choice, and grants him not only what he asks, but more. God says, "I give you abundance ... No one like you has been before, and no one like you shall arise after. I give you also what you have not asked ... I will lengthen your life."

Never underestimate the generosity of God.

I don't know if this abundance God is giving is really about calendar years, but it is surely about long full days and years.

Never underestimate the generosity of God.

Our generous God pours out an abundance of gifts of every kind - upon all of God's creation, and us in it. William Countryman says that 'gift' is the principle on which the Creator bases human existence. Even if we don't notice, God's gifts are the most pervasive reality of our lives.

Look into the eyes of a newborn baby – and you look into heaven's Mystery. Breath in the brisk winter morning and you feel the cycle of all the seasons, all your seasons. Tell a child the real story of Christmas, and the mystery and majesty of the ages fills their hearts. Abundance!

Generosity surrounds us; it enables our lives. Think of an understanding teacher you had, the support of friends in tough times, smiles from strangers on the street. Our whole life is a bundle of abundance.

As God said to Solomon, "No one like you has ever been here before, or will ever be again." As God says to every one of us, "This is your time. Embrace it!"

Generous-hearted giving (expecting nothing in return) is our response to the Great gift-giver, and has been throughout history. 2000 years ago, mysterious travelers from the East followed a light for months - or was it years? Magicians? Astrologers? Magi? Kings? Who were they? How many? We don't know – just three gifts remembered.

We usually hear about them arriving after the shepherds, but not this year. I've invited them to be first this year. And since we're all on our way to the manger

this year in this Advent time, I've let Matthew in first, ahead of Luke, and the Magi with him.

All we know for sure about them is that they followed where God led, and gave the best they had. Wise Men!

Like Solomon before them, they kneel humbly before that which is holy, the Christ Child - God's Understanding cradled in a lowly place.

And, able to discern good from evil, and warned in that same dreamland where God spoke to Solomon, they do not return to evil-wolf Herod. No, they turn their backs, and go home by a good way.

Wise men (and women and children and youth) follow the same path.

So, again - what do you want for Christmas? Amen

△△△△

Here's a story about King Solomon, son of King David, near the beginning of his reign – from I Kings 3:1-15. Listen:

Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David ... He went to Gibeon to offer sacrifices, for that was the main high place; Solomon offered 1000 burnt offerings on that altar. And, at Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night.

God said, "Ask what I should give you?"

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 uprightness of heart; and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love ... 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 your people, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. Give your servant, therefore, an understanding heart to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?"

This pleased the Lord, and God said, "Because you have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for 'understanding to discern what is right', I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning heart; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after. I give you also what you have not asked, riches and honor all your life; no other king shall compare with you. And, if you will walk

in my ways, keep my statutes and commandments, as your father David, then I will lengthen your life.”

Then Solomon awoke; it had been a dream.

He came to Jerusalem, stood before the Ark of the Covenant, offered burnt offerings, and then provided a feast for all the people. ... God gave Solomon great discernment, wisdom, and breadth of understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore; Solomon’s wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east ... His fame spread through all the nations.

And still on the way to Christ’s manger, we have these words from Matthew’s gospel (2:1-12)

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem village - during Herod’s kingship - a band of scholars (who had been traveling for months) arrived in Jerusalem from the East.

They asked around, “Where can we find and pay homage to the newborn King of the Jews? We saw a star in the eastern sky that signaled his birth. We’ve come to worship him.”

Word got to Herod, who was terrified - and most of Jerusalem with him... Herod lost no time. He gathered all the high priests and religion scholars together and learned what scripture said about where this king was to be born.”

Then Herod arranged a secret meeting with the magi from the East. Pretending to be as devout as they, he got them to tell him exactly when the birth-announcement star appeared. Then he told them the prophecy about Bethlehem, and said, “Go find this child. Leave no stone unturned. As soon as you find him, send word and I’ll join you at once to worship.”

When they set off, the star appeared again, and it led them on until it hovered over the place of the child. They were so excited.

They entered the house and saw the child in the arms of Mary, his mother. Overcome, they knelt and worshiped him, and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they went home by another route.

May God speak wisdom into our dreams. Amen