

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Carole Johannsen, BCC
Christ Episcopal Church, Tarrytown, New York
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Imagine, if you will, that you dreamed one night that God spoke to you and said: “Ask what I should give you.” Give YOU, now, not your grandchildren or the rest of the world, but you. I must admit I’m torn between having a thin, muscular body with the capacity to eat anything and not gain weight, and being 20 years younger but knowing all that I know now.

Now imagine that you have been thrust into the position of ruling a nation, like Solomon. He already had wealth as the favored prince in a royal dynasty. And thanks to the political finagling of his father, King David, he now had power as the anointed king. And on his dying father’s advice, he had already either executed or exiled (or fired) anyone from the former regime who might be a threat to him. He didn’t lack for beautiful women around him and he would go on to gather a record number of wives for an Israelite king. Plus he had family who loved him and were unquestionably loyal, or at least his mother, Bath-Sheba was. (All this is written in the fascinating first two chapters of I Kings that precede today’s reading, so any resemblance to anyone living in our times is purely, biblically, coincidental.)

So what’s left? What could Solomon possibly want? Of course, God knew what he needed and with that provocative question: “Ask what I should give you,” was pushing Solomon to consider what might be more important—or at least as important as—wealth, power and family.

And Solomon pleased God by asking for a *listening heart*. Our text calls it a “wise and discerning mind,” which is a reasonable translation of the Hebrew *lev shomaoch*, or “listening heart.” (The ancient Israelites believed the heart was the seat of intelligence so what we call “mind,” they called “heart.”) So God granted him wisdom—a formidable gift and the perfect and necessary complement to wealth and power.

Now about wisdom: the Bible is clear that there are two kinds of wisdom: wisdom gleaned from the world, which is not a bad thing necessarily, but is dangerously incomplete if it is not combined with the second form of wisdom: wisdom from God. Call it a “listening heart” or a “wise and discerning mind,” God’s gift of wisdom is what guides us to know which path to follow if we truly want the fullest life and the deepest peace for ourselves and the world around us.

The book of James in the New Testament—a short pithy document that anyone in power should read and memorize—has this to say about wisdom:

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. James 3:14ff

So where and how do we find this heavenly wisdom that will so enrich our lives? Let me tell you about a game I learned when I was a newby priest. This is an exercise often used for team-building and the idea is this: you gather a group of at least four, preferably more people into a circle in an open, level place. In the middle of the circle

you place a 50-foot length of rope, tied together at the end so you have a 50-foot circle of rope. Then each participant is blindfolded and the rope placed in his or her hands, They are then instructed to form the rope into an exact square. They can communicate in any way that is helpful, but they must remain blindfolded.

It is a most interesting experience in both creative thinking and leadership. There are always those in the group who know immediately how to proceed and they attempt to take charge. Negotiations may follow, conflict is almost inevitable. Procedures begin and may be refined, leadership is constantly negotiated. It is, of course, not an exercise in geometry as much as it is an exercise in cooperation and listening and leading. I first participated in this exercise in a clergy leadership conference and I regret to say, that my group of clergy never did complete the task because we couldn't agree on a common procedure or a single leader! Too much worldly wisdom among us and absolutely no humility.

The next time I encountered this exercise, I was one of the co-leaders of a retreat for confirmands and their sponsors. My co-leader set up the fourteen participants, blindfolded them, set the rope in their hands and explained the goal: to form a perfect square. But then he introduced a new element that completely changed the dynamics of the task. He quietly approached one of the adults, whispered some new instructions to her and removed her blindfold. This one person, now, would be free to move around the circle, helping in *almost* any way she could. Her one restriction was that she was not allowed to talk. And the rest of the group had not been told that she was functioning among them as she was.

It was fascinating to watch as the group moved into the expected process of jockeying for leadership and talking over each other—none of which got them any closer to forming their square. Gradually, however, they became aware that there was another presence moving among them who was there to help, and could do for them what they could not do for themselves. Slowly the group members began to question one another, and the mysterious presence. And she, for her part, tried to communicate by touching their faces and helping them wherever she could.

Eventually, they realized that she was there to assist them, and they allowed themselves to stop rushing blindly ahead and let her guide them. Eventually, too, they realized who she was and they called her by name. And finally, as they came to appreciate her value to them, and realized that they probably couldn't complete their task without her, they allowed her to guide them into forming an exact square with the 50-foot length of rope.

"YES! You've done it!" we told them, and with one hand still holding the rope, they pulled off their blindfolds to admire their work. My colleague then stepped into the center of their perfectly formed square and said to them, "The name of this game is "The Holy Spirit."

In the collect that set the theme for these readings, which I spoke for all of us at the beginning of the service, we prayed, "Increase and multiply upon us your mercy; that, with you as our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal, that we lose not the things eternal." May it be so. Many of the things temporal around us these days are troublesome, and true wisdom seems to be in short supply. So for yourselves, cultivate a listening heart, not just to please God—which it does—but to be your best self. Don't forget to depend on the Holy Spirit who is there to guide you. Through your wisdom, you see—both earthly and heavenly—you cannot fail to make the world a better place. AMEN.

Readings: I Kings 3:5-12; Psalm 119:129-136; Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52