

The Wisdom From Above: A Sermon for New Seminarrians

Morning Prayer
Psalm 37
1 Kings 11:1-13
James 3:13-4:12

When I looked at the passage about King Solomon from 1 Kings this morning, I was very tempted to preach a very short sermon with some concrete applications. So, first, for those of you who are men, and who are beginning your studies here at Trinity School for Ministry—if you can manage to get through seminary with no more than one wife, and no more than one god, you'll be better off in the long run. For the women, if the guy you're interested in already has 700 wives, he's probably not that into you.

On a more serious note, there really does seem to be a common theme uniting all three of the passages we're read from the Daily Office lectionary this morning. All three passages have something to do with Wisdom.

So, beginning with King Solomon. Solomon is an ambiguous figure in the biblical canon. On the one hand, he is associated with Wisdom. At the beginning of Solomon's reign as King, God appears to him in a dream, and gives Solomon the option to "Ask what I shall give to you." In response, Solomon asks for an "understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil." (1 Kings 3:5,9) Then follow several stories in which Solomon's great wisdom is demonstrated. There is the story of the two women with one dead child and one living one who ask Solomon to decide which of them is the mother of which. There is the story of Solomon building the temple, and the prayer in which Solomon prays: "O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above

or one earth beneath, keeping covenant and showing steadfast love to your servants who walk before you with all their heart." There is the story of the covenant that God makes with Solomon, promising to establish his royal throne forever. There is the story of the Queen of Sheba who visits Solomon and tells him: "Your wisdom and prosperity surpass the report that I heard." (1 Kings 3-10)

Canonically, Solomon has historically been associated with three Wisdom books in the Old Testament canon – Proverbs, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes. So Solomon is associated with Wisdom the way that Moses is associated with Law or David with Kingship.

And then there is this morning's passage, where we are told that Solomon "loved many foreign women," and had 700 wives, and 300 concubines, that his wives "turned away his heart after other gods," that he sacrificed to Chemosh and Molech. This is a far cry from the Solomon who prayed at the dedication of the temple, "there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath." (1 Kings 8:23) This is very different from the advice we find in Proverbs, where the young man is told to "rejoice in the wife of your youth." (Proverbs 5:18) So the reading about Solomon raises the question, "What is wisdom?"

In the Psalm and in James, we also find ourselves asking the question, "What is wisdom?" The Psalm gives a practical definition of wisdom: "Trust in the Lord, and do good, dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness. Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart." (Psalm 37: 3-4)

James asks the question right off the bat: "Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good life let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom." (James 3:13) So, there is a common theme this morning, that of wisdom. What is it? How do we find it? And, in only the few minutes I'm allowed for a

sermon this morning, how does that apply to students who are beginning their studies in seminary?

So, very quickly. The first thing you will notice is that in all three of the passages there is a contrast between two ways of wisdom. There is a way that looks like wisdom, but is actually not. And there is a path that might not look like wisdom, but really is. So, looking again at Solomon, there is the path he set off on as a young man—the path of genuine wisdom, and then there is the disappointing way he ended up. By certain kinds of standards, the older Solomon was a success. If we take seriously the bumper sticker that says, “He who dies with the most toys wins,” then Solomon won. He had it all – power, wealth, and not just one, but hundreds of women to choose from. Hugh Hefner never had it so good. Yet the passage says that God was angry with Solomon to the point that he took away the kingdom he had originally given him.

The Psalm contrasts the path of those who “carry out evil devices,” and “prosper in their ways,” with the meek who will inherit the land (Psalm 37:7). Finally, James contrasts a wisdom that comes from above with a wisdom that is “earthly, unspiritual,” and “demonic.” The wisdom from above is “pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial, and sincere.” The earthly wisdom is characterized by jealousy, selfish ambition, disorder, and “every vile practice.” (James 3:15-17)

Now I do not want to give you any illusions. If you have come to seminary with the hopes that you are going to achieve the kind of worldly success that Solomon had in his own age, or even the kind that the Psalmist talks about, the kind of wealth that makes other people jealous, you have come to the wrong place. Ambridge will quickly cure you of those kinds of delusions.

There are other kinds of foolishness that sometimes creep into seminary life, however, and your first clue that you have

walked down that path may will be when you find yourself preparing for an awkward conversation with Grant LeMarquand, our Academic Dean. Be forewarned. That is a conversation you would prefer not to have. The epistle of James gives some very practical advice on what to avoid, but you'd also be well advised to read the Academic Bulletin, and note all the things it suggests not to do. Just be aware that there is a path of Wisdom here at Trinity, and a path that is not so wise. So do your own work. Come to class. Don't put off writing papers or studying for tests to the last minute. Take your required courses in the order that Grant suggests. Play nice with the other seminarians.

So leaving aside now the path that you don't want to follow, what is the way of Wisdom that we find in all three of our passages this morning? The clue can be found in the word "heart." All three passages use this word. So, we are told that Solomon "turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God." (1 Kings 11:4) In the Psalm, we are told "Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart." (Ps. 37:4) James talks of having "bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts," and tells us to "purify your hearts, you men of double mind." (James 3:14, 4:8)

What then is the "heart" the biblical writers talk about? At least one commentary I looked at associated the heart with what we call the mind, and also with the seat of morality. I am going to go out on a limb, and suggest an interpretation that is influenced by St. Augustine. The heart has to do with that which we love. So when Solomon turned away his heart after other gods, he did so because he had discovered new loves. As the passage says, his love (if that is the right word) for his many wives became more important than his love for God. In the Psalm, we are told that if we delight ourselves in the Lord, that he will give us the desires of our hearts—those things we truly love. And James says that if we

draw near to God, he will draw near to us. When we do that, we will purify our hearts, and we will no longer be double minded. That is, if we place God as the object of our love, we will no longer be divided by the countless false loves that lead the kinds of conflicts James talks about. As James puts it, "friendship with the world is enmity with God." (James 4:4) We have to choose what and whom we will love.

Wrapping it all up, what does this have to do with studying at seminary? In short, I would say this. You are here to study theology, to learn about the Bible, and church history, and systematic theology, and missions, and pastoral ministry, and a whole lot of other things you will study in your classes. If you study and write papers, and get decent grades, after three or four years, you will graduate and receive a diploma that indicates you have mastered a certain amount of knowledge. That is one version of theological education. And if that's all you do, you may graduate, but you will have failed seminary.

Seminary is not simply about mastering a certain amount of information—although if you don't master it, you won't get the diploma. Studying theology is actually supposed to be a kind of wisdom. At the end of your time at seminary, we are hoping that you will be formed in a certain way. You will be a different kind of person. My colleague, Martha Giltinan, teaches a course in spiritual formation, but, really, all of your time here at Trinity is "spiritual formation." Our hope for you here at seminary is that your hearts will be formed, that you will learn to love. First, of course, we hope that you will learn to love God. As the Psalm says, "Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desire of your heart." (Ps. 37:4) Or, as James says, "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you." (James 4:8) And, of course, at Trinity School for Ministry, the God we want you to learn to love is the God who has shown his own heart to us in his Son Jesus Christ. "We love God because he first loved us." (1 John

4:19) We learn to love God not just through mastering the material, but allowing God to master us through Scripture, through prayer, through worship, through receiving the body and blood of Christ as we break bread together.

But, second, we hope that you will learn to love your fellow Christians. If you are going to be priests and ministers, you will be called to love those whom you serve, so we're going to help you practice. Here at Trinity that means that one of the ways in which you learn to love God will be through learning to love your fellow students, and, yes, even the faculty. And that is not always as easy as it might seem. That is why it is so important actually to have the experience of physically being present day in and day out with one another, why we ask you to not only do your assignments, but to do things like come to chapel every morning, why you hope that you will spend time with one another outside the classroom. You will find that the friendships that you form here will actually make you a different kind of person. It is not a coincidence that when James talks about the wisdom from above, he illustrates it by talking about how we get along with other people. The wisdom from above, he says, is "pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace." (James 3:17)

Our hope is that if you spend your time wisely here at Trinity, you will actually learn to love God, and you will learn to love your brothers and sisters in Christ, and you will be changed.

So in closing. Welcome to Trinity School for Ministry. May your time here be one of growing in not only knowledge, but in wisdom and love. In your next few years, may you learn to love God, and to love his people.