

August 19, 2018

1 Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14

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“The Wisdom to Know the Difference”

It may be the biggest “only” ever written. In the third chapter of the Book of 1 Kings, as the writer describes the transition of power from the reign of King David to the reign of his son, Solomon, we read this about the newly seated monarch, “Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David; **only**, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places.” (1 Kings 3:3) That “only” becomes the defining characteristic of the king who ruled over Israel for 40 years. He loved the Lord. If only Solomon’s life could have been defined just by that but it wasn’t. He loved the Lord; “only he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places.” What were the high places? What was so troublesome about them? The high places were mountaintop shrines for the purpose of the worship of pagan gods. The first commandment comes to mind, “Thou shall have no other gods before me.” Idolatry is at the top of the list. The location of Gibeon was a high place and, perhaps, the greatest of them all. Our reading says Solomon was particularly fond of the Gibeon shrine, laying down there a thousand burnt offerings. So, here’s the picture. Solomon, son of the great King David, who grew up in the covenant faith of the Hebrew people and was educated in the ways of Torah, loved the Lord. The bible says he faithfully carried on the tradition of his family, “walking in the statutes of his father David...**ONLY** he gave sacrifices and offered incense in the high places.” We might say it like this: “Solomon trusted in God but not all of the time...Solomon was faithful, except when he wasn’t...Solomon was committed to God except when it was more advantages to trust other powers...” When we say our hearts are broken we know what that means but what about when our hearts are divided? It’s as if Solomon’s heart was divided into pieces. He gave his heart to the Lord but only part of it. Yes, he loved God. The bible tells us so. Yes, he practiced the faith but we’re told he regularly worshiped whatever “god of the day” promised to increase his power and position. A biblical commentator I read describes Solomon this way, “as both undoubtedly great and dangerously flawed.” This fact about Solomon draws us into the scripture today because there’s some of that two-edged reality in all of us. Our hearts can be divided. It takes a good dose of honesty on our part to see it but we know how both a desired faith and a shaky commitment can exist inside the same person. So, what are we saying? Well, King Solomon was human, just like us. To be human is to feel the tension of a divided heart. On the one side we love the Lord. We believe in God and we want to live in a way that is pleasing to God. At the same time, we are pulled away toward other promises and powers in this world. Like smaller gods that demand we bow down to them, the status of wealth or position or security or influence can steal away our passions and before we know it our hearts are divided up. We love the Lord **ONLY** we live or think in ways that compromise God’s desire to be at the center of life. It’s not easy to acknowledge this about ourselves but it is important to recognize it. Solomon’s life was defined by the **ONLY** and the **ONLY** can shape who we are, too.

The very recent grand jury report on the findings of abusive priests in Pennsylvania point to the incredible harm that can come from a divided heart. Servants of God who professed their loyalty to Christ acted in ways that deeply wounded the most vulnerable charged to their care. This is a harsh example of how a passion for the Lord can be weakened by passions that are hurtful and destructive. I mention this not because it is the latest news or to point a finger at the Roman Catholic Church but to underline the point the bible makes through the story of Solomon. No one is above or beyond the dangers of a divided heart or a fractured faith. Even Solomon, in all his glory was vulnerable. It was Solomon, after all, who had 700 wives and 300 concubines. All of that was largely the result of Solomon covering his religious and political bases. Clearly, it was more than a passion for the Lord that motivated the king’s priorities and values. Scripture is full of the evidence of Solomon’s divided heart; worshiping pagan gods, marrying the daughters of rival kings, greasing the wheels of political and military alliances, all to satisfy his passion for wealth and power. While the story of Solomon is ancient history, this morning we are invited to learn what it means for our lives.

A couple of Sundays ago I mentioned our family was coming together that following Saturday to help my mom downsize her home. She was moving from a bigger place to a smaller place and she didn’t have room for all of her things. I shared that we children were experiencing the sometimes sensitive maneuvering of deciding who gets what of the furniture mom could no longer keep. With the moving underway I came across an antique chair that has been in my folk’s possession for as long as I can remember. It had a tag on it that lead me to believe it was to be donated to a second-hand store and I thought to myself, “No way should this be given away. This chair needs to stay in the family.” I scooped it up and tucked it safely in my car. A short time later all of us were talking about how the day was going and the subject of the chair came up. “Don’t worry,” I said, “I grabbed it. It will stay with the family, as it should.” To which my sister said to me, “Did you take it?” “Of course,” I said. To which she said, “I was going to take that.” To which I said, “The tag didn’t have your name on it.” To which she said, “Well, I didn’t want to

presume too much by sticking my name on the chair but I really want it.” To which I said, “That’s OK. No problem. You can have it. But,” I said, “you’ve got to let us know what you want.” Everything was fine but I did feel it would have been helpful for my sister to tell us what she wanted. Maybe this is one of the reasons we get into trouble in life. We’re just not clear about what we really want.

God came to Solomon in a dream and said, “Tell me what you want.” I love the way the bible reveals to us who God is. The scripture says that God moves into a divided heart to bring a unified clarity and commitment. God knew all about Solomon. God knew about his divided loyalties and his political maneuvering. After all, it was at the high place of Gibeon after one of Solomon’s incense burning sessions that God spoke to him. Oh, the good news that is revealed to us in the scripture. God never turns away. God never gives up on us. God never decides we’re too far gone to love. No, God came to Solomon, at that high place and in the midst of his divided heart to ask him what he needed most and God works like this in our lives, too. No matter how confused our loyalties or how shallow our commitment, God gives us another opportunity to express what we really want and to discover how God is the answer to our deepest longings.

“What I want,” said Solomon to God, “is wisdom to govern well over your people.” It was a good answer and God blessed him but Solomon squandered that blessing as his foolishness overtook him time and time again. God blesses us, too, and when God asks us what we want maybe that’s where we start. “Give us, O God, the wisdom to live this life of blessing well.” Now, if that were the end of it we might end up like Solomon, making one faithless mistake after the other, but that’s not where it ends for us. “Give us what we need,” we say to God and God gives us Christ. Christ, full of wisdom and grace. This is one way to think about who Christ is for us, the one who shows us how to stay centered in God’s eternal blessing of love, grace and peace. Oh, we know it can go either way. The choice is always before us. There the path that takes us deeper in love with God, where we grow in trust and live God’s way. And then, there’s the path that trusts the fleeting powers of the world where we put ourselves at the center and decide we’ll make our own way. So, yes, it can go either way but with Christ we have all we need to know the difference.

Whatever moments of discernment or decision come our way this week, may we keep Christ in the mix. There’s always the potential we can get it wrong only Christ, only Christ, will never let us lose our way. He is our salvation. Amen.