

We Should All be So Wise By Holly Aastuen  
August 16, 2009 | Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14

An angel appears at a faculty meeting and tells the dean that in return for his unselfish and exemplary behavior, God is going to reward him with his choice of infinite wealth, wisdom or beauty. Without hesitating, the dean selects infinite wisdom.

“Done!” says the angel, and disappears in a cloud of smoke and a bolt of lightning. Now, all heads turn toward the dean, who sits surrounded by a faint halo of light. At length, one of his colleagues whispers, “Say something.”

The dean looks intently at his colleagues gathered around him and says, “I should have taken the money.”

When I first heard that story I laughed out loud, because I can see myself doing the same thing. Wisdom is fine, but money is where the rubber hits the road. Though it may be admirable to ask for the wisdom, when given the choice of money, beauty or wisdom, most of us have chosen the money.

Money makes the world go around and many of us pursue the dream of making enough money to live comfortably. People (including me) admire those who have money because of what it says about what they have accomplished and because of what money enables people to do. Money seems to open a lot of doors.

I have known several people who have wished to retire early, though that desire seems to have died down in this difficult economic environment. What I hear most often from them is the desire to enjoy those things that they don't feel they have time for now, and in order to do that, they need enough money in retirement to enjoy life.

In the reading from the Bible this morning, we hear a story from a man who made an unusual choice. When asked by God what he wanted most from God, King Solomon chose wisdom over money. When you read that request in context it seems to make a lot of sense.

The lectionary reading assigned to this day has us jump from 1 Kings 2:12 to chapter 3 verse three. What happens, in between Solomon taking the throne and his dream where he asks for wisdom, is a lot of activity designed to establish Solomon as the undisputed king.

Solomon, a young man in his early 20s, is faced with many difficult life and death decisions that affect the entire kingdom.

First, his older brother, Adonijah, asks to marry one of David's wives, presumably to establish himself as the rightful heir to the throne. King Solomon has him put to death because of his request.

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Solomon took away the credentials of a priest and killed a leader of the army who had betrayed King David before his death. He also killed a man who was not entirely loyal to King David.

In an additional move to strengthen his kingdom, Solomon married one of Pharaoh's daughters.

That's all the between story between our two assigned bible passages.

In many ways the wisdom of Solomon seemed to already be well in place because he was following through on promises he made to King David, his father, as well as making strategic moves to strengthen his kingdom.

Some would even say the request for wisdom from God was in itself a wise choice.

But the request for wisdom was a good choice for Solomon because he needed to do so much more as king and though wise for his years, he still needed to undertake some major initiatives on God's behalf, the chief one being the building of a temple to hold the Ark of the Covenant.

His wisdom is legendary and though he was young and feeling overwhelmed by his sudden power and difficult responsibilities, he didn't let his sudden power go to his head.

We could use a dose of such wisdom in our lives and in the lives of our churches. We should all be so wise.

At lectionary study on Tuesday, Kent Johnson, pastor from Excelsior Church, talked about some learning he had gained from a conference he had recently attended.

He got out of his chair and walked to one end of the room where we were meeting and said 'Every church is somewhere on the continuum from [and he pointed to the ground] mission driven.' [then he walked to the other end of the room] 'to preference driven.' Those churches that are operating in a preference driven mode are often experiencing conflict ("I want red carpet and you want blue carpet." Or "I prefer to sing the old hymns and you prefer to sing songs that have a beat.") Whenever a congregation is in a preference driven mode, decisions are often made based on who has the greatest votes or influence to get their way.

But the more a congregation is mission driven, the more they talk about what their church is there for and what the mission of the church is—not red carpet or blue carpet, but what carpet would be most welcoming to the people we want to attract or do we even need new carpet when we really could use the money to reach out to the poor? Mission driven churches ask 'what is it that the people in

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this community are asking for, are missing that we could provide?' 'What does God want us to do in this day in this place?

These are more difficult questions than questions about carpet, but they are a lot more important ones.

Wisdom is about relationship and ethics. It is much more akin to what we now call emotional intelligence. Wisdom is what we need when we think about our future as a congregation and what we can do to bless the world.

I read an article recently by Cindy Gregorson, a wise woman who works as Director of Congregational Development in the United Methodist headquarters in Minneapolis.

She wrote an article a couple of weeks ago, which reads, in part:

*I have decided it is time to give up evangelism. Everybody I talk to has some sort of baggage around the word and practice. Being raised in a good Norwegian household, I understand that. We don't talk about important, personal, emotionally laden things in our family... let alone strangers. Evangelism feels pushy. And in the world we live in, when we try to do evangelism, it meets resistance...Because of that we somehow know intuitively that evangelism is not going to be fun or easy...*

*What really converted me to the idea of quitting evangelism was reading Reggie McNeal's book Missional Renaissance. He says he tells congregations to quit evangelizing. His reasons: we have turned evangelism into some kind of program that we train people to do instead of being a natural by-product of our relationship with God. When evangelism is a program, it often involves questionable methods in order to get people to connect to a church...there is something better we can do, he says. We can bless people.*

*McNeal challenges congregations to develop blessing strategies. When working with church groups, he asks them to bless three people this week, and make sure one of them doesn't deserve it...That concept of blessing is carried throughout the scriptures. That is who we are called to be: a people who are blessed in order to be a blessing...In doing so, we demonstrate God's love for the world—whether the world deserves it or not.*

*...I can get excited about blessing people. It is something I can do in my everyday life. And I believe it is something that people long to receive. I have seen that over and over in my ministry when I have...prayed for them, or offered them a kind word, or simply sat and listened, or lent a helping hand. It was as if a dry and thirsty soul had become refreshed..."*

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A major part of what we are about as Christians is seeking the wisdom of God, not so we can become wealthy enough to retire or so we can boost the numbers of people attending worship, but so that we have a relationship with God that is nurturing and so that because of that relationship, we are acting in ways that God would have us act.

Blessing others with no thought of return is a start. Being mission driven rather than preference driven, namely thinking more of what God wants than what I want is another.

Staying in touch with God is a great way to begin any of this. If you haven't talked with your God in the last week, this is the week to start. If you're already in an active and healthy relationship with God, ask God this week what new thing you can accomplish together.

This is the beginning of wisdom.