

Pentecost 6, July 24, 2011

Wise Children

I Kings 3:5-12; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

“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 the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. Give *your servant* therefore a *listening heart* to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil. . . .”

Seemingly out of nowhere the LORD appears to the new King Solomon in a dream with an offer that sounds as good as that of a genie just out of its bottle.

The LORD doesn't say to Solomon, “I'll grant you three wishes,” but he does say, “Ask what I should give you.”

“Ask what I should give you.”

But Solomon doesn't, at least not right away.

Now, if I were Solomon, in a similar situation (“Ask what I shall give you”), I'm sure I'd have plenty of wishes for myself and those I love—things like a long life, a nice acreage, some contentment, good health, a successful career, a happy spouse and kids, reduced tuition payments, zero debt or, for some you, a winning lotto ticket.

Maybe you'd even ask for more wishes.

“At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, ‘Ask what I should give you.’”

The LORD clearly takes the initiative with Solomon.

Solomon doesn't ask for this midnight visitation from the LORD.

He doesn't ask to be given whatever wishes.

In fact, up to this point in the story, Solomon has not asked for anything from the LORD.

But now, instead of answering God by saying, “Well, for one, I’d like a long life. . . and then two, I’d like great wealth. . . and then three, I’d like to kick all my enemies”; instead of all this, Solomon begins *with God* by saying, “*You. . . you have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David. . . you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne today.*”

It seems that the most *valuable treasure* for Solomon is the *great and steadfast love* that God has shown to his father David, that same *great and steadfast love* about which Paul speaks so compellingly in Romans, “convinced

that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

This is the beginning of Solomon’s worship.

And when Solomon does get around to speaking about himself, three times he says that he is but “God’s servant,” and he calls himself “only a little child” who lacks knowledge, maybe even the commonsense “to go out or come in.”

Like Jeremiah and the psalmists, Solomon knows that God pays attention to those who confess that “I am only a youth,” or “I am only a little child,” or “Here am I, your servant.”

God raises up those who are bowed down.

Finally, Solomon replies to the LORD's initiative, "Give your servant therefore *a listening heart* (not just an "understanding mind" but a *listening heart*) to govern *your* people, able to discern between good and evil. . . ."

Note that Solomon, even though he is king, does not say "to govern *my* people," but "to govern *your* people."

And we hear that Solomon's prayer pleases God.

". . . God said to him, 'Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself *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 you.”

“Indeed I give you *a wise and discerning heart*. . . .”

Centuries later Jesus would caution us, “Don’t store up for yourselves *treasures* on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves *treasures* in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your *treasure* is, there your heart will be also.”

Later, Jesus told a story about this farmer who, while plowing a field one day, strikes a hidden *treasure* buried in that field. And, on *seeing* the treasure, the man leaves his farming, runs to the bankers, and “in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.”

The story reminds you of Jesus’s parable of the talents

in which “the [servant] who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground, and hid his master’s money.”

Jesus also told a story about a businessman who, while shopping for fine pearls, saw one that was worth a whole lot of money. And, when he saw that pearl, he recognized how valuable it was and he, too, “sold all that he had and bought it.”

A “treasure” and a “pearl” are so valuable that a “farmer” and a “businessman” have sold all that they have in order to possess them.

Just as Solomon’s prayer followed the divine appearance, so the human response comes after the surprises of the “buried treasure” and the “priceless pearl.”

It is the “great and steadfast love” of God that precedes Solomon’s prayer for a “listening heart.”

It is the “buried treasure” and the “priceless pearl” that precede the joyful reactions of the farmer and businessman.

Pearls.

Treasures.

In Hebrew lore, *pearls and treasures signify wisdom*, the “listening heart” for which Solomon had prayed long, long ago.

Matthew soon will tell us about a young man who, having kept all the commandments, asked Jesus what he must do to have eternal life.

“If you wish to be perfect,” Jesus said, “go, sell your

possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have *treasure* in heaven; then come, follow me.”

“Allow the steadfast love of God to be the *treasure* of your heart,” Jesus seems to imply.

“The rule of heaven, he said, “is like a tiny mustard seed, yeast mixed in flour, treasure buried in a field, a pearl of great value, a net full of fish.”

“God's rule is like a tiny mustard seed, the smallest of all the seeds on the earth (well, not really). Yet when that seed is planted,” Jesus says, “it'll germinate, grow, and grow until it becomes a *weed* about two feet high. Call it a shrub if you like, but it's still only about two feet high.”

“Great oaks from little acorns grow,” we say in the Midwest.

“The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step,” they say in the Far East.

Great things come from small beginnings: the single word or touch that blossoms into a fragrant romance; the small lie that burgeons into a life of deception; a chance meeting of like-minded people that launches a new business venture.

“Yes,” continued Jesus, “a plant so marvelous that small birds can come and perch in its branches,” even though the prophet Ezekiel had claimed that it would be “a noble cedar,” not a mustard weed, and “under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind.”

And then there is “yeast that a woman took and mixed

in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

In the ancient world, yeast does not come in nicely sealed little bags. Leaven is made by taking a piece of old bread and storing it in a damp, dark place until mold forms on it. The bread rots and decays in order to make the yeast.

So, leaven is a form corruption.

“Jesus said to them, ‘Watch out, and beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.’”

Here’s another not-so-flattering image of the rule of God, except that the woman uses “three measures” of wheat, enough to make bread to feed more than a hundred people.

And just as the world looked at Jesus and was mostly

unimpressed, so the world looks at the church and is mostly unimpressed.

We are more impressed with the world on the giant screen where tragedy strikes every few minutes; where human powers hold the day; where the young and beautiful shape our faces; and the rich determine what is of any value.

King Solomon praying for a “listening heart”; King Jesus speaking of “treasure in heaven”; St. Paul writing about “power made perfect in weakness”—well, none of these would fare very well on the living room giant screen.

I think it was the great theologian Charlie Brown who said, “The trouble with being a good sport is you have to lose to prove it.”

In the real world, hidden most of the time, parents are caring for children with remarkable tenderness; nurses are tending patients with gracious gentleness; UPS carriers are delivering packages fairly on time; and at least one man who owns a small business is taking off work early to coach his daughter's soccer team.

These are the mustard seeds from which healing bushes sometimes grow where every kind of bird shall nest.

This is the leaven hidden in the rising loaf of bread that eventually will feed more than a hundred people.

These are the treasures and pearls of wisdom that may cause a person to give up everything for Jesus' sake.

Of course, this is not the world of televised news, but it is the world where God rules.

And the Bible is full of stories about how God “makes low the high tree and makes high the low tree,” how God “dries up the green tree and makes the dry tree flourish,” how God rules through human smallness, ineptitude, clumsiness, hiddenness, brokenness.

Moses doesn't speak well.

Ruth is just a foreigner.

David is too handsome for his own good.

An ordinary fisherman becomes “the rock.”

A dishonest tax collector is a trusted friend.

The unclean are restored to fellowship.

The hopelessly ill are made well again.

The Word became flesh.

The church became his body.

And the rule of God is like a mustard seed, yeast, buried treasure, a valuable pearl, a net full of fish.

The church “. . . is a gift of God which we cannot claim [as our own creation] . . . ,” someone has written, “What may appear weak and trifling to us may be great and glorious to God.”

“But we have this treasure in clay jars,” Paul writes to the Corinthians, “so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. . . So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what

cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but

what cannot be seen is eternal.”