

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
305 EAST MAIN STREET
DURHAM, NC 27701
PHONE: (919) 682-5511



“Wise Wishing”

A sermon by Katie Owen Aumann

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)

August 16, 2015

1 Kings 2:10–12, 3:3–14

Dear Tom,

Your unexpected letter arrived twenty-four hours ago. It made my day, reminding me as it did of your visit two summers ago. It’s still hard to imagine you already a full-fledged freshman, but it’s easy to picture your professors: bent, as you say, on disproving your favorite facts.

That’s what professors do—some with a little too much relish. But don’t be anxious about your newfound doubts. Doubts move you forward not backward, just as long as you doubt out of love of the truth, not out of some pathological need to doubt. As Emily Dickinson wrote, “The unknown is the mind’s greatest need, and for it no one thinks to thank God...”

Love, Bill¹

William Sloan Coffin, esteemed preacher and former Yale chaplain, opens his book *Letters to a Young Doubter* with this correspondence. His text mirrors German poet Rainer Maria Rilke’s writings in *Letters to a Young Poet* and offers his imaginary correspondence with an inquisitive college freshmen entering a new world with unexpected challenges, doubts, and questions. The letters open the door to relationship with one who is young and open, seeking wisdom but not wanting to receive it from his parents or the usual sources of authority.

I can picture young King Solomon as the partner in correspondence in these letters. Just as college bears a sort of coming-of-age voyage into independence,

¹ William Sloan Coffin. *Letters to a Young Doubter*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005). 1-2.

discernment, newfound autonomy and perhaps some accompanying power, so does Solomon's rise to the throne. As parents pull away from campus, the college freshman can go from feeling like "king of the world" to one who is alone and afraid in a sea of new faces and unfamiliar surroundings in the blink of an eye—and so too does our young king in today's story.

We meet him in today's text after he has been propelled onto the throne through some backroom political maneuverings and yet his place on the throne was well established from the beginning. He deserved to be there—not only had his father King David named him as king, but scripture tells us that "Solomon loved the Lord and walked in the statutes of his father David" (1 Kings 3:3). We know that Solomon is renowned in scripture as the wise king—the wisest of all, in fact—and was a fitting successor to King David. He will be called to build the temple and will become an executor of faithful and wise rulings. But when we meet him in today's story, at the beginning of this journey, he is still yet a young king seeking his way, with a healthy dose of fear and doubt to be sure.

And it is perhaps important to note that this wise and discerning king is also human and prone to falter, for we meet Solomon on the high places, making sacrifices and burnt offerings to Gibeon and foreign gods. This young lad, called to lead God's chosen people, was by no means without his collegiate fraternity adventures into idolatry and sin. And yet it is there, in the midst of his worship of idols, that the living God, the Holy One of Israel shows up.

What transpires in this scene sounds to me a bit like a "genie in a bottle" dream sequence. For God appears to Solomon in a dream and says, "Ask what I should give you," as if to say, "I'll grant you any wish you want, so make it good." You've seen children watch as the candles on the cake melt down into the frosting, contemplating seriously the implications of their wish, before they summon their breath to blow out that birthday candle. We feel that sort of pregnant pause in the text as Solomon contemplates his next move. In that moment, he could've asked for anything—riches, fame, power, victory over his enemies, a new chariot, a beautiful wife, more wishes.

But what unfolds is something more akin to prayer—a glimpse into a relationship

with the Holy, an honest conversation with God. Teresa of Avila writes, “For prayer is nothing else than being on terms of friendship with God.” And what we hear in Solomon’s voice is that of one who understands the character of the Lord and who faithfully seeks relationship with God. After all, he does not jump immediately to a response to God’s question; this is not a transactional relationship that can be handled quickly at the checkout counter.

Solomon is speaking to a God whose relationship is one of covenant and promise. From the time of Moses (Deuteronomy 28), the Lord has declared, “if you walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments... then I will lengthen your life” (1 Kings 3:14). This is a conversation that matters.

I wonder sometimes if we really approach prayer in that way—as a conversation that matters. If I’m being honest, sometimes I find myself exhausted at the end of the night, trying desperately to keep track of all of the people I have promised to pray for, hoping that I can rattle off the names and circumstances before I drift off into sleep. Lord, I pray for Rachael, and Tommy, and Vicki, and Matt, and Kurt, and... oh, and Nana, I forgot Nana. While I trust that God hears those prayers and the Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words, I would be lying if I didn’t suggest those efforts were a bit, well, lackluster. There are times that my prayer life feels closer to rubbing the lamp of a wish-granting genie than a genuine seeking of relationship with God. By contrast, I have felt most alive and most in tune with God during early morning runs, when I unplug the music on my iPhone and instead allow each step to be part of my prayers lifted up to God, with enough space to listen as well, and with enough mindfulness that my ability to care for those for whom I pray might be an extension of the prayer itself. Easier said than done, I know. It actually requires going on that run. But if we all slowed down long enough to really enter into relationship with God, I wonder how our prayer life would change. Would we be ready to receive wisdom as a gift from God? Would we know best what to ask for? Would our dealings with our neighbors change?

For Solomon, this prayerful relationship meant not jumping straight to answer God’s question: “Ask what I should give you,” but recounting God’s character in the relationship first. The character of God with his father before him was one full of great and steadfast love toward David who walked before [God]... in uprightness

of heart. And the character of God remained one full of great and steadfast love in ascending Solomon to the throne. That love has unfolded in signs of mercy, especially toward Solomon who was caught red-handed in the act of sacrificing to idols. That love has unfolded in overwhelming generosity, giving freely despite any criterion for deserving God's blessing.

And this relationship with God doesn't end with a description of God's character, but includes Solomon's own self-reflection as well. In the presence of this loving, merciful God, Solomon dares to declare his own fears and human vulnerabilities—being king is no small thing, especially to God's people who are as numerous as the stars, just as God has promised. Power is easy to get drunk on, but power is also a wee bit scary.

So while he could ask for more power or the security of riches or the protection of armies, Solomon is aware that the relationship matters more than power, covenant is stronger than stuff, and God is not simply a wish-granting genie. And Solomon finally responds to God's question: "Give your servant, therefore, an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil, for who can govern this your great people?" (1 Kings 3:9).

This prayer for wisdom—an understanding mind, or perhaps better translated, an understanding heart—comes to define Solomon's kingship. "In the biblical wisdom literature, wisdom is... understood as a gift from God."² As Old Testament scholar Kathryn Schifferdecker writes, "It is given... not just to kings, but to all who faithfully seek it (Proverbs 2:1-6; 8:1-17). As in this story, wisdom will reward those who acquire it (Proverbs 3:16), but it is not to be sought simply for personal gain. It is integrally tied to one's life in community (Job 29:7-25) and to one's life with God."³

To ask God for wisdom, for an understanding heart, is to engage in a life of prayer where there is space to listen to God at the center. Cynthia Bourgeault writes about centering prayer that this kind of space and listening is like finding "a magnetic

² Kathryn Schifferdecker. "Commentary on 1 Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14." Working Preacher. (August 2009). http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=363. Accessed 16 August 2015.

³ Kathryn Schifferdecker. "Commentary on 1 Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14." Working Preacher. (August 2009). http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=363. Accessed 16 August 2015.

center... or a point of inner alignment.... You might think of magnetic center as another sort of GPS—a ‘God positioning system.’ It keeps the outer part of you aligned with that deeper center: your yearning for God and God’s yearning for you.”⁴ This kind of prayer, this seeking of wisdom, places the relationship between this loving and merciful God and each of us at the heart.

But, the wisdom that emerges from this relationship with God cannot be kept to ourselves. Feeling alive and in tune with God is the first step—one that takes patience and practice, and in my case, actually going on that run. But receiving the gift of wisdom draws us out from ourselves, from our doubts and our insecurities into positions of power where God can transform others through us. For Solomon that meant being king, but since most of us will never be king, it requires us to evaluate our spheres of influence, the communities in which that life with God can be shared.

For Gregory Boyle, Father G as he was called in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of LA, the gang capital of the world, this kind of relationship with God led him into relationship with the most unlikely crowd imaginable. His call to be a Jesuit priest brought him deep into relationship with God, a God who gifted him with wisdom, grace, and boundless compassion for those neighbors who no one else dared befriend. Father G was not a king like Solomon, he wasn’t granted material riches or propelled to a position of great authority, but he was given the gift of wisdom and an understanding heart as he navigated a neighborhood fraught with violence. His “kingdom” didn’t come equipped with a throne but was filled with dilapidated projects full of God’s people. For Father G, prayers for wisdom were a matter of life and death—saying the wrong thing to one of the gang members could get him killed. But drawn up into a relationship with God, Father G was also called outward to follow Jesus into relationship with those cast aside by the world—a life as Paul writes that is “foolishness to those who are perishing but to those who believe it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18). What Father G wanted more than anything was for the gang members he called his parishioners to know the heart of God and to be drawn into that heart in a way that helps them know who and whose they are.

⁴ Cynthia Bourgeault. “Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening.” (Lanham: Cowley Publications, 2004).

In his memoir, *Tattoos on the Heart*, Father G describes a scene of this foolish wisdom at work (*paraphrased & summarized below*):

On one particular night, as he was locking up the doors to Homeboy Ministries ready to head home, a young boy named Willy, hungry and looking for a free handout, was standing by his car. Tired and finding it easier to give in, Father G said, “Get in. Let’s see if I can trick any funds outta the ATM.” He stopped at the Food4Less, turned off the car and walked in to the ATM, leaving Willy in the vehicle. Willy begged for the keys—to listen to the radio, he mimed—and Father G “wagged his finger... held both hands together and enunciated exaggeratedly, ‘Pray.’ Willy sighed, assumed the praying hands pose and looked heavenward.” When Father G returned to the car, twenty dollars in hand, he writes, “Something... happened here. Willy [was] quiet, reflective, and there [was] a palpable sense of peace in the vehicle. [He] looked at Willy said, ‘you prayed, didn’t you?’” Quietly, Willy responded, “Yeah, I did.”

“Well, what did God say to you,” [G] asked him.

“Well, first He said, ‘*Shut up and listen.*’”

“So what’d you do?”

“Come on, G,” [Willy] said, “What am I sposed ta do? I shut up and listened.”

Father G continued driving him home to the barrio. He writes, “I’ve never seen Willy like this. He’s quiet and humble—no need to convince me of anything or talk me out of something else.”

Breaking the silence Father G said, “So, son, tell me something...How do you see God?”

“God?” Willy says, “That’s my dog right there—a dog is the one upon whom you can rely, the one who has your back.”

“And God?” Father G asks, “How does God see you?”

Willy [didn’t] answer at first. He stare[d] at the ceiling of the car. A tear falls down his cheek. Heart full, eyes overflowing. “God... thinks... I’m... *firme.*” To the boys in the neighborhood, *firme* means “could not be one bit

better.”⁵

Like Solomon, Father G undoubtedly prayed for an understanding heart to guide God’s people. Sometimes the wisdom we receive looks like foolishness to the outside world. And sometimes that wisdom is shared not through grand speeches full of wise words but simply by helping God’s people enter into a relationship with God themselves, a relationship where they too can discover God’s great and steadfast love, God’s boundless mercy, and God’s overwhelming generosity. Sometimes that wisdom comes in the form of a well-pondered prayer, or an invitation to pray in a car outside a Food4Less, or a letter to a young doubter. Whatever the setting, the gift of wisdom is *received* when we find ways to make space to be drawn up into the heart of God, to know who we are and whose we are. And the gift of wisdom is *shared* when we realize that each of us has a sphere of influence— a kin-dom of people who God invites us to serve.

William Sloan Coffin’s ongoing correspondence with the inquisitive college freshmen allows both of them to embark upon a journey much like Solomon’s journey with God. It is a journey that seeks true wisdom, a wisdom that can be found only with ample time, faithful listening, fervent discernment, and a humility before the Other in loving relationship. It is a journey that is blessed with the gift of wisdom, but wisdom that must be shared. And so Coffin’s correspondence continues as he writes:

Dear Tom,

Thanks for the second letter and for the proposal of a continuing correspondence. For me it is a rejuvenating idea, so let’s try it, but let’s also be clear about the ground rules: I won’t treat you as if eighteen were too young, and you won’t treat me as if eighty were too old. Actually, my part of the bargain may be easier. St. Benedict said, “God often shows what is better to the younger.” You on the other hand may think wisdom comes with age. Believe me, Tom, age often comes alone.

You are right to insist that doubts are quite different in kind. The ones I had in mind in my last letter didn’t so much concern knowledge, which is

⁵ Gregory Boyle *Tattoos on the Heart*. (New York: Free Press, 2010). 23-24 paraphrased.

primarily a cerebral affair; they concerned wisdom—a matter of heart, mind, and soul all pulling together.

Allow me to change your doubts into “questions.”... So, dear Tom, my question for you today is “Who tells you who you are?” Love the question, as German poet Rilke would say, and live into the answer. You have a lifetime.

But start now.

Love, Bill⁶

The Reverend Katie Owen Aumann is the Presbyterian Campus Minister at Duke University. Katie graduated from Duke in 2006 as a Public Policy major and Religion minor. As an undergrad, she was a Presbyterian Campus Ministry “regular” under the leadership of FPC’s own *Cherrie Henry*, and found a spiritual home to talk about her faith, her questions and her convictions. Katie was born and raised in Topeka, KS, but her journey has taken her to all sorts of unexpected places. Katie has served as a youth leader, a non-profit counselor, a hospital chaplain, a preacher, and a teacher. She is married to Wait Aumann, a pediatric oncologist at Duke Hospital.

© KATIE OWEN AUMANN 2015
FOR PERSONAL AND EDUCATIONAL USE ONLY.

⁶ William Sloan Coffin. *Letters to a Young Doubter*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005). 4-5.