

"THE GIFT OF UNDERSTANDING"©

Sermon Notes for the Rev. Joyce Kelly, Supply Minister of Worship & Pastoral Care
Bloor Street United Church
First Sunday after Epiphany – Sunday, January 10, 2010

Readings: Kings 3 and Matthew 2

Boxing Day sales, Boxing week/month sales. Retail's biggest season is over for another year. Did you get what you wanted? Did you know? When someone asked, what did you say? A new shirt? A new putter?

Or did you say, "Oh, nothing, dear. There's not a thing that I need. Just you." Sweet, but not all that helpful!

What if God was asking you the same question – asking not what you want, but what you need? Want and need are so easily mixed up.

So beyond 'things', even good times with family and friends, go deeper – past what would be nice, past what your heart desires – all the way into what your soul needs. Again, you may say, "There's not a thing I need."

But this is God you're talking to – who already knows the needs of your soul and is wondering if you do. God is urging you, just as God urged Solomon. "What can I give you? Just ask." Jesus says, "Ask and it will be given."

I

Solomon blustered out his own version of "There's not a thing I need – only you, my Lord." He said, "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant, my father David, and have given him a son to sit on his throne today."

Solomon's father, David, highly esteemed first king of Israel, built the kingdom and expanded the territory, mixed bag that he was: strong, weak, faithful to God, unfaithful to wives, humble shepherd boy, mighty warrior – through it all, loved by God.

Now it's for the next generation (as it always is) to be a wise and humble steward of all that has been passed to them.

Newly-crowned wise Solomon goes to a holy place – to pray it through, to figure it out. And there, God says to him in a dream, "Ask for what you want me to give to you." Now Solomon is not new to talking with God, so he does not hesitate.

First, he praises God – and humbles himself. "I am just a child; I do not know how to go out or come in." Actually, he's about 20. Or, is this Jesus-speak, "Unless you become as a little child, you will not enter the Realm of God"? He continues: For who can govern these great people that you have given me?" – words echoed by many wise leaders down the ages. Then Solomon says, "Give me, I pray, an understanding heart."

This is not to say that, thereafter, Solomon was always humble. Humility didn't build the marble walls of Solomon's Temple, or the even greater palaces – where slaves fell beneath giant boulders every day of construction. And it wasn't humility that greeted heads of state in absolute decadence, kept a dalliance with the beautiful Queen of Sheba for years, and 700 wives and concubines.

No, Solomon is not perfect either, but God loves him anyway – and can work with a willing heart!

II

"Give me, I pray, an understanding heart."

I suspect this would not be our first prayer. Not having the heart of St. Francis, most of us would say, "O Spirit, grant someone in my world to understand me."

Being understood is essential for survival.

“A man marooned on a desert isle, or confined in a solitary cell may survive,” says Reality Therapist William Glasser, “if he knows that someone he cares for cares about him and his condition” – the strength of Amnesty International!

Who here has not borne the agony of being misunderstood? A teenager slams her door; nobody understands. At work, at home, again and again we explain – nobody hears us; we justify what we’ve done or not done, or give up, and just stay silent; nobody understands anyway.

“If I were you ... I know just how you feel ... when I went through that” ... do not help. No two people ever face the exact same circumstances.

A man in Hugh MacLennan’s novel, *Two Solitudes*, refusing to pass judgment on a woman, says, “I can’t unwind her 74 years of act and thought.” Jesus says, “Let the one without sin cast the first stone.”

There is no one here this day, or any day, who can unwind the life of another, yet parts of our society are misunderstood every day: those who are poor, whose skin is a different colour, whose faith is beyond us, whose nationality or dress or age slots them into a category before we even look into their eyes and see what they bring to our day.

You can’t unwind even ten minutes of the life of the one to your left, to your right, let alone truly understand. You may weigh me, know the colour of my hair, my academics, family history, how much money I make and where I spend it. You may know these things about me - but you do not know me. You see the way I dress but miss the resonance of my soul. You hear my words but not the passion of my heart. You catch my anger – but not my fear that fuels it, my lie – but not my insecurity that propels it.

III

“Lord, give me an understanding heart.” The world aches for understanding hearts, yes, every one of us, but also everyone we think we already understand – across the table, across the street, across the sea.

Understanding looks into our eyes and sees us as we really are, hurts in our hurt, bends with our burden, and stands under it with us, understands, literally 'a heart that listens'.

Whoever wrote the 139th Psalm knew this Spirit of Understanding. Such knowledge is beyond my understanding. Where can I go to escape your Spirit?

Not east to the sunrise, or west across the sea. No dark night hides me from your understanding; it presses in on me, close, past names and categories and limits people lay on me, even past names I give myself in the wrestling night.

People in other religious families hear this warm and forever good news in many ways, but, for us, it comes through the Bethlehem child, the Christ-heart of God come walking on earth, to the place where we stand, and is standing right here with us, understanding – standing under humanity's trials.

"Lord," Solomon says, "give me an understanding heart able to discern between good and evil."

Wise Chief Black Elk tells his grandson that the battle between good and evil is within all people – like two wolves fighting for territory. One is evil: jealousy, regret, fear, greed, arrogance, self-centeredness, lies.

One is Good: love, serenity, humility, truth, generosity, compassion, faith. His grandson thinks for a minute, and then asks, "Which wolf wins the battle?" "The one you feed."

Solomon asks for understanding – discernment, wisdom – to know God's Truth in the ongoing inner struggle that does continue – in every one of us, and in our world - until Good prevails and evil is vanquished.

So you prepare as Solomon did, in prayer – the only place you can learn discernment, the only place you can claim God's gifts.

Prayer is where we learn to recognize the good wolf who hides behind words and actions, who lives in the soul of those who trust you and hope in you, and expect the best of you.

Prayer is where we can also learn to recognize the bad wolf, even those in sheep's clothing.

When you meet the bad wolf, send it off, quickly, turn away from it; do not feed it or even think about it. Give it no energy or time; vanquish it as firmly as Jesus casts out demons and sends them away.

IV

An understanding heart able to discern between good and evil! God is pleased with Solomon's choice, and grants him not only what he asks, but more. God says, "I give you abundance ... No one like you has been before, and no one like you shall arise after. I give you also what you have not asked ... I will lengthen your life."

Never underestimate the generosity of God.

Our generous God pours out an abundance of gifts of every kind – upon all of God's creation, and us in it. Says William Countryman, "'gift' is the principle on which the Creator bases human existence." Even if we notice not, it is the most pervasive reality of our lives.

Look into the eyes of a newborn baby – and you look into heaven's Mystery. Feel the cycle of the seasons, and, even on snowy cold days, you'll feel the certainty that spring is coming.

Generosity surrounds us, enables our lives – think of understanding teachers you have had, the support of friends through tough times, smiles from strangers on the street. Our whole life is a bundle of abundance. And no one like you has ever been before, or will ever be again. This is your time. Embrace it!

Generous-hearted giving (expecting/needing nothing in return) is our response to the Great gift-giver, and has been through the history of humanity. 2000 years ago, mysterious travelers from the East followed a light for months – or was it years? magicians? astrologers? who were they? how many? We don't know – just that there were three gifts. All we know – is that they followed where God led, and gave the best they had. Wise Men!

Like Solomon before them, they kneel humbly before that which is holy, the Christ Child – God’s Understanding cradled in a lowly place.

And, able to discern good from evil, and warned in that same dreamland where God spoke to Solomon, they do not return to evil-wolf Herod. No, they turn their backs, and go home by a good way.

Wise men (and women and children and youth) know what to do with God’s abundance. We give back the best that we have, the most that we can.

And to God be the glory! Amen
