

Sermon for 8th Sunday after Pentecost (26 July 2020)

Readings: [1 Kings 3:5-12; Psalm 119:129-36; Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-49a]

I have seen the sun break through
to illuminate a small field
for a while, and gone my way
and forgotten it. But that was the pearl
of great price, the one field that had
treasure in it. I realize now
that I must give all that I have
to possess it. Life is not hurrying

on to a receding future, nor hankering after
an imagined past. It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.ⁱ

R.S. Thomas captures in *The Bright Field* that passion for finding and holding on to the one thing that matters, the only thing that connects us with the very fount and endless source of life, life so rich and full that it creates and shelters an abundance of life beyond our imagining.

Incarnation and eternity exist within the mundane, hide in a measure of flour, get lost in the field, are too often pushed aside and forgotten. Many of us would not even see the shimmering bush that bursts into flame, would miss the seed that's too small to notice, would not see the eyes of Christ waiting to encounter us in the persons we are too busy or afraid to notice. So we miss the great light, the shining love that God offers us as Christ has promised to make his home within us. And our lives, our world are poorer for this; we live without awareness of the calling God intends for us. We are too busy to take a moment to glance aside, to find the bright shining just beyond.

We all know there is a better way to live. It is found in silent prayer, in generosity, in supportive community, in being true to the spark of God within us. We have the assurance that nothing can separate us from this love of God in Christ: 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. It's there, this promise, this truth, waiting, but we lose sight of it, we lose the feel of it, especially in these times in which we live.

So it is important to live mindfully, to claim our identity, as God's children. Frederick Buechner writes: "We must be careful with our lives, for Christ's sake, because it would seem that they are the only lives we are going to have in this puzzling and perilous world, and so they are very precious and what we do with them matters enormously." And so, in our readings for this week, I was particularly drawn to the story of Solomon.

I have spent my life working for non-profit organizations, partly as a way of being careful with my life. It has been frequently side by side with volunteers. I've observed their diligence and skill, learned from them, admired their forbearance. So it was puzzling to hear the frequent disclaimer, "Well, I'm just (or only) a volunteer." The reality was that the organization they supported could not have flourished without their vision and their support. Sometimes it could have been simply that they didn't want to take on something more complex or something less interesting than they had signed on for, sometimes it was about an appreciation of appropriate boundaries (happy to speak, knowing they could not be ones who set policy). But sometimes it seemed a reluctance, an inability to one's rightful place.

I don't believe I have heard this at St. Andrew's. And I am aching, even as a relative newcomer, for all those whose gifts have not been able to be fully used and celebrated since COVID-19 hit and to realize how impoverished we are by lack of contact with all who make up this beloved community. How can we worship fully without the choir, or the altar guild, or the ushers; how do we teach our children in the absence of church school; how do we manifest the hospitality that is St. Andrew's calling without being able to welcome people in, to share the same table at meal or at the Eucharist. We have given this up in solidarity with our community, because of what we feel is Jesus's calling to love our neighbors. We have tried to live into the question "What does love require?" and found that it involves a relinquishing of what's comfortable and familiar. And perhaps we are learning in a deeper way what it is to be Christians.

In a dream, God asks King Solomon what he would like. Solomon acknowledges the Lord's great and steadfast love to his father and his father's faithfulness, righteousness, and uprightness of heart. Solomon acknowledges his gratitude to God, recognizes his vocation and responsibility as a leader, and requests an understanding mind (or listening heart) to govern his people. But Solomon makes himself artificially small: "I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in." In one sense, this is a classic statement of a man with a big problem -- the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote: "A philosophical problem has the form: I don't know my way about."

At times, I have caught myself at this false humility that seems to draw attention to ourselves -- maybe this is exactly why I spot it so readily in Solomon. And yet, some of us wonder how it is we come to have such great responsibilities -- as parents, as heads of corporations, as counselors and trusted advisors to others, as healers, as teachers and mentors. We may vacillate between knowing our unique strengths and understanding our selves as competent and feeling insecure when we measure ourselves against those who have gone before us, as perhaps Solomon did with his father David, comparing ourselves with colleagues and those of younger generations who are coming up quickly to supplant us. We feel wanting when we measure our own expectations of ourselves against our actual flawed performance.

Clearly, Solomon could not have been feeling in control and completely secure if he had to resort to having his enemies killed. At times, we feel small, we feel afraid, we wonder how we will ever function in the capacity in which others know us, and in the vocations to which God had called us. As Solomon has used hyperbole to describe his "smallness," so has he used hyperbole to describe his people -- "so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted." This story, I understand, has similarities to other ancient Near Eastern narratives with a dream providing divine legitimacy for rulers and in a ruler being given the privilege of a special petition to the deity.

God tells Solomon that he is unique – “no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arrive after you” – and that God will grant his request for “a wise and discerning mind.” (In the verse immediately following our passage, you may remember that God tells Solomon: “I give you also what you have not asked, both riches **and** honor all your life.”)

God has given Solomon gifts beyond his deserving and in spite of his failings and God has given him a particular vocation that perhaps only he can fulfill. This does not mean that he will be perfect, that he will not fail. Yet his vocation is about God’s purpose in the world, just as our true vocations are. And the Spirit has given Solomon the ability to discern the one thing necessary, the only thing that can truly provide for his people, the one thing that we are ourselves as individuals and as a country yearning for – not power, not wealth, but wisdom.

The one thing for which Solomon asks that will uniquely honor God’s particular call on his life is translated as an *understanding mind* to govern, able to discern between good and evil. In fact, the Hebrew words are actually closer to a *listening heart*. And in this request, in a sense Solomon is being given an opportunity to right the wrong of Adam and Eve, who were unable to chose between good and evil.

Suzanne Guthrie draws parallels between Solomon and the characters in L. Frank Baum’s *The Wizard of Oz*, which I hadn’t thought of myself. As they journey to find the one quality they feel they need to be whole, what they actually treasure is “the very gift they already possessed. Each ennobled that gift with profound humility. But somehow, the Scarecrow, Tin Man, and Lion still needed to dig up and find and hold in their hands that treasure hidden in the depths of their being.” She continues: “To have survived the intrigues of his father’s house, Solomon already proved his wisdom, his prudence, his extraordinary understanding. That Solomon treasured the most precious gift within him pleased the LORD.”

Whether the Spirit gives us the ability to discern what we most need or whether the Spirit gives us the ability to discern clearly what God has already given us, let us seek to be mindful of the unique life that God offers to us, that blazes as offering, as light and life, and to claim it as something that will contribute to God’s glory and the world’s healing. Let us never miss or throw away the pearl of great price. Let us be willing to give up all for the greatest treasure, which is God and God within us, the gift that also enables us to discern, to be fully there for others, and to experience at least a glimpse of eternal life.

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ⁱ R.S. Thomas, *The Bright Field, Laboratories of the Spirit*, 1975.