

“Decisions, Decisions”

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First Presbyterian Church
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New Testament Lesson: Matthew 10:37-39

Old Testament Lesson: 1 Kings 3:16-28

“All Israel heard of the judgment that the king had rendered; and they stood in awe of the king, because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him, to execute justice.” King Solomon went down in history as the wisest of the wise among Israel’s rulers. Using his God-given wisdom, which came to be known as the Wisdom of Solomon, the king made flawless decisions – or so the story goes.

But is there a limit to human wisdom, even wisdom given to us by God? Is it possible to misuse our power to make decisions, even when we’re certain our best thinking comes directly from God?

Gen. Peter Schoomaker served for four years as Chief of Staff of the United States Army, during which time he sought to recruit and train a new kind of problem-solving, combat-ready “warrior diplomat.”¹ With the world in constant crisis and conflict, Shoomaker saw a need for what he called “creative solutions in ambiguous circumstances.”

Well, that seems to be what Solomon did in deciding who was the real mother of the baby in question – offer a creative solution to an ambiguous situation. While in hindsight, Solomon’s choice of who is the real mother seems like child’s play, in reality, it truly is an ambiguous, confusing and uncertain situation.

Here’s what we know. Two women have a dispute that can only be decided on their word and their word alone. They agree that they “were together; saying to the king there was no one else with us in the house, only the two of us were in the house.” No other witnesses; just the two women. And then the narrator goes and tells us that they are prostitutes; that their word isn’t worth much, based on the immoral way they go about making money. So what’s a king to do?

One says, “The living son is mine, and the dead son is yours.” And the other says to that one, “No, the dead son is yours, and the living son is mine.” And the argument goes on with no end in sight. “So the king says, ‘Bring me a sword’, and they brought a sword before the king.

¹ Eli Cohen and Noel Tichy, "Operation: Leadership," Fast Company, September 1999, 278-288.

The king said, 'Divide the living boy in two; then give half to one, and half to the other.'" And of course, based on their response, the king determines which woman is the real mother. But let's pause here and examine the king's reasoning.

He's counting on the real mother to spare the baby's life even at the expense of giving up her son. That's how he decides the case. And we just assume that the woman who says, "Please, my lord, give her the living boy; certainly do not kill him!!" – we assume that this one is the real mother, the one who brought the case before Solomon in the first place. But the original Hebrew text is not as clear as most Bibles make it out to be. What we read as "the second woman" and "the other woman" is actually the Hebrew word for "this one" (*taz zo'th*), which the king uses equally to refer to both of the women, saying "this one" says one thing and "this one" says another.

So really, we don't know which is which. And as it turns out, "Most translators are uncomfortable with the ambiguity of the king's words," says Choon-Leong Seow, professor of Old Testament Language and Literature at Princeton Theological Seminary. "And so they substitute 'the first woman' (that is, the one bringing the complaint)" where it actually only says "this one" is the real mother, and so we don't know which one that is – the woman bringing the complaint or the woman who denies it. Even when the king says, "Give (her) the boy who is alive; do not kill him. She is his mother," we can't tell which woman gets the baby based on the original Hebrew manuscripts.

Using all our powers of deduction and human wisdom, we just don't know. But at least we are certain the king made the right decision, or are we? What if the woman who seems to be telling the truth is merely saying what the king would expect to hear from the real mother? Maybe she's not the real mother at all. Maybe she's just the trickier and more deceitful of the two. What would the king have done if both women had said the "motherly thing?" Has the king really proved who the real mother is through his shocking threat to split the child in two? "No," says Prof. Seow. "... The judgment of the ... king is questionable." He never interrogates the two women. He doesn't even notice that the first woman claimed to have been so soundly asleep that she did not know her baby had been taken from her, and yet she is able to report on all that was happening that night.

Solomon never points out this inconsistency of her statement. Instead, he threatens the life of an innocent child. He lays it all on his certainty – his hope – that this horrendous threat will bring the responses he would expect to get from his own stereotypes of "the good mother" and "the deceptive woman." The wisdom of Solomon. Turns out it may, in fact, have been limited after all, which of course is true of all human wisdom. Even our God-given wisdom can only take us so far.

So, what can take us the rest of the way? Earlier in this sermon, I questioned the limits of human wisdom, pointing out our power to misuse the gift of wisdom, either on purpose or by mistake. If that's true – that we are prone to place too much emphasis on wisdom, even wisdom we are certain comes to us directly from God – if it can still be misused, then what in this world can we count on. How can we be sure to make the best decisions possible?

Well, let's look at another character in the story of Solomon's great wisdom. Let's look at the real mother, as presented in most biblical translations. "The real mother," says Prof. Seow, "is willing to surrender her right to be with her son in order that he might live. If that is true, "the story makes an ironic point: that because the mother is willing to give up her son, she receives him back." Giving up your beloved son and in that getting him back – does that remind you of anything? How about the story of Abraham and Isaac? How about God and Jesus?

How about what we heard read from the New Testament today, where Jesus says, "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

The mother of the boy is prepared to give up her son. She places a higher value on mercy and love and true life than on justice and envy and having things her way. In fact, she places the highest value on, not Solomon's wisdom, but what might best be described as Christlike wisdom.

Christlike wisdom is not like human wisdom, with all its rational thought, give and take, fair for you and fair for me. No, Christlike wisdom is about giving ourselves for the sake of others, for the sake of Jesus Christ. When we are acting in the spirit and the manner of Jesus Christ, we don't rely on our best judgment to get through life. We rely on God, because in the end, our intellect and our decision making – even though it is given to us by God – it is no substitute for the grace and mercy of God given to us in Jesus Christ. In Christ, it is the other's life – not our own – that is most important. Our personal interests take a back seat, whenever possible, if we can help someone else.

If you think you know who's right and who's wrong in this world, among your family members, here in the church, out in your neighborhood or school or workplace, think again.

It's not about what we see as right and wrong. Being a Christian is about what Jesus shows us to be gracious and merciful actions and decisions. Being gracious and merciful in all our interactions – now that's Christian; that's spiritual wisdom. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

As the world rushes by, O God, we want to slow down and find meaning in you. In the age of information, may we stop and listen and empty ourselves to find the simple and true message about your love for every human being.

Create in us a place that is not touched by the world that calls us to rush, hurry, consume, and satisfy all our wants.

Simplify our desires so that they become one with your desire for us. And when we are weary, give us the strength to find the quiet place that renews us for the days ahead.

We offer our prayers in the spirit of your goodness, and we lift our voices in prayer, as you taught us:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive
our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**