



“When You Get It Right”

Text: 1 Kings 3:4-28

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

Sunday, October 28, 2018

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

It has begun. If your mailbox is anything like ours, the catalogues are beginning to arrive. They are designed, of course, to whet our appetites and inspire our thinking about giving and receiving gifts for Christmas. Some are incredibly practical. Others are extremely extravagant. One member of our household, in particular, reads the catalogues with great interest and adds desirable items to her ever-expanding lists of potential holiday wishes.

If it has not already begun in your house, it will soon begin. “What do you want for Christmas?” is the question that is on the horizon. The operative word is “want.” It is never asked as “need.” Frankly, if the question were asked, “What do you need for Christmas?” the answer might just be “to be left alone.”

In my avocational work in November and December, I am somewhat required by tradition to ask the question, “What do you want for Christmas this year?” One young fellow answered that question by saying, “A Nintendo, an Xbox, and a Playstation.” Being in a less than jolly mood that day, I said, “You just named three things that do exactly the same thing. Pick one.” His parents rejoiced.

In my absolute favorite stop of the year, I travel to Princeton and spend the evening with intellectually impaired adults at GCARC. Most of them live in group homes. If they have family, many are not in close contact. What they have is each other. When I ask the question, the answer is usually socks, underwear, a new dress, new pants, new shoes. One fellow, one year, asked for his own 2-Liter bottle of Mountain Dew. There are times it brings a tear to old Santa’s eye.

As I read and considered the story for the morning, those were the first thoughts that ran through my mind. God appeared to Solomon in a dream and asked him what he wanted God to give him. Solomon had just become king. A whole new level of responsibility was on his shoulders. God asks Solomon, "What do you need from me?"

That's where this sermon is heading.

We're given a little background information on Solomon.

Solomon's story begins with some palace intrigue. There was a dispute over the line of succession following David. David's son, Adonijah, makes his play to succeed David, but he is not supported by Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet. Adonijah begins acting as if he were the king and Bathesheba goes to the king, reminding him of his promise that Solomon would become king. Then, as the song goes, "Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet anointed Solomon king." The transition does not go well. Solomon purges the court, has his half-brother Adonijah killed, Solomon consolidates his power, and begins his reign as king.

Then comes our story for the day. We need to remember that there is no Temple. Solomon will begin construction of the Temple in the fourth year of his reign. Worship was offered at "high places," sacred places, usually on elevated land, where worship was often offered to lesser gods. Since there is no Temple, God does not seem to be offended that Solomon offers worship in this way.

We are told that he goes to Gibeon, the principle high place, and there he offers a thousand burnt offerings. In the context of worshiping and recognizing God, Solomon is extravagantly generous in his giving. It is not one offering, or two, or three, but a thousand. Considering his position as king, Solomon is giving in proportion to what he possesses. Solomon, for whatever else you might want to say about him, was a deeply religious man.

In response to Solomon's worship and sacrifice, we are offered a glimpse into the dream that comes to him in his sleep. God comes to Solomon and says, "Ask what I should give you." Couch it more colloquially: "What do you want from me?" Solomon has offered to God. Now God is offering to Solomon.

Solomon responds to God by saying, "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David...you have kept for him this great and steadfast love...you have given him a son to sit on his throne today." Grounded in God's steadfast love for David - despite his host of imperfections - Solomon stands before God in the confidence that the same steadfast love will be there for him as was there for his father. Solomon says, "Lord, I am in way over my head. I am like a little child. I don't even know how to enter or leave a room. Give me an understanding mind to govern - more accurately judge - your people, to be able to discern between good and evil."

Notice, please, that Solomon doesn't ask for wisdom. When we hear wisdom, we think of Einstein. Solomon isn't asking to be brilliant. Solomon is asking for something far closer to common sense - the ability to tell the difference between right and wrong - good and bad - falsehood and truth. He wants to be a good leader. He wants to do what is best for his people.

And that answer apparently pleased God. God not only gives Solomon a wise and discerning mind, God also gives Solomon riches and power and honor and all the kingly trappings he did not request. There is a proviso: "If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life."

Then, as if to illustrate the giving and receiving of the gift of sound judgment, we are given the famous story of the two women and the baby. Solomon listens carefully, discerns what is going on, and finds a way to determine who is lying and who is telling the truth. Solomon's request has been answered and we all can see that for ourselves.

But Solomon's story doesn't end there. Like many of the Bible's central characters, Solomon has his stellar moments and his shadowed moments. We know that Solomon has received his gift of wisdom and that he has judged others wisely.

But, when it comes to his own life, Solomon is not as able to judge, or govern, his own life. His desires run away with him. He has appetites that are ruinous. He brings in other gods to his court and permits their worship. He spends everything in the treasury and drives his country into crippling debt. He fails to meet the challenge of raising his sons and developing a succession plan, so that at his death, the country is torn in two.

It could be argued that the stewardship of Solomon's gift of wisdom was suspect and insufficient. God had given him so much and he used some of the gift for God's glory, but not all of the gift. His faulty stewardship of the gifts of God was his undoing.

So, what's the lesson for us?

Perhaps the first question that needs to be asked is, "how is our stewardship?" What are we doing with what God has given us? How are we using the gifts of God for the glory of God? How are we using God's gifts for the betterment of our neighbors and our world?

Solomon's story reminds us that when we use the gifts of God for the reason God gave them to us, life seems to work out pretty well. When we fail to use the gifts of God for the reason God gave them to us, life gets a little unstable and unsteady. There's nothing mystical about that. As one old preacher told me, "You can't rub your hand against the grain of the universe and not expect a few splinters."

God's gifts are not given to us for our self-aggrandizement or to give us a reason to brag and boast. God entrusts gifts to us to be used for God's purposes and for the well-being of all. Through us, God seeks to be at work in the world's trials and troubles.

We may have the gift of wisdom, like Solomon, to make good decisions in our interactions with others. But we may also have the gift of teaching, or hospitality, or compassion, or mercy. God may have placed within our lives the gift of helping, the gift of praying for others, the gift of strong faith, the gift of encouragement, or any of the other gifts that God so freely gives to God's people.

And when we use those gifts wisely and generously and - dare I say it - liberally, we get it right. When we use the gifts that God has given for the reason God gives them, we live the life we were meant to live. When we are faithful in our stewardship of all God's gifts, we get it right.

And when we don't, there is grace and forgiveness and acceptance. It's Reformation Sunday, the day when we, in the Protestant tradition, mark that time so long ago when our ancestors heard God's voice to move forward in a new way.

Central to that entire effort in the church was the concept of grace. God's undeserved and unmerited love and favor is greater than our sins, our faults, and our failures. God forgives and restores us to be the people God intended and created us to be. No matter how often we fail, no matter what we do, no matter what we leave undone, God's love is there to forgive and offer a new beginning.

When we get it wrong, God is there to forgive and restore.

When we get it right, God celebrates and the world is a better place.

Whatever your gift - whatever God has given you - is to be used for something far beyond yourself. Whatever gift God has given you has been entrusted to you for a reason and a purpose. When we use God's gifts for good - for blessing - for the sake of something beyond ourselves - we finally get it right.

For now and evermore. Amen.



609 South East Second Street
Evansville, IN 47713
(812) 423-6297
www.firstpresevansville.com

First Presbyterian Church
is a partner congregation with
the Covenant Network
of Presbyterians.

