

“Wisdom and Love”

Psalm 111; I Kings 3:5-6, 9-10, 16-28 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – August 15, 2021

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our souls might be restored to wisdom by the power of your steadfast love. In Jesus' name, Amen.

One of the things I appreciate the most about our tradition, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is that pretty much every tradition we have, we hold lightly. Certain practices that are central to our identity, like communion and baptism by immersion, are mostly non-negotiable, but even there we have a remarkable amount of flexibility. Traditions that are less central are often commonly practiced, but not expected and never required. One of those is the practice of preaching from the lectionary.

The lectionary – for those who aren't familiar – is a three-year cycle of scripture readings, four each week, suggested for use in worship. It is used widely in mainline Protestant churches in the United States and Canada.¹ The fact that it's broadly used in Disciples churches is reflected in the fact that each Sunday's scriptures are listed in our denominational planning calendar. But that doesn't mean we have to use it. After all, as I've told you before, one of our unofficial denominational slogans is “You're not the boss of me!” I'm glad for this permissiveness, today especially, because while the lectionary was a jumping-off point for us, it kind of missed the

¹ Follow this link to learn more about the lectionary: <https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/faq2.php>

mark. Psalm 111 is all well and good, but the verses the lectionary offered from I Kings 3 included only the long, flowery conversation Solomon had with God in his dream, in which he asked for wisdom, and not the following story that illustrates how he used the wisdom that God bestowed upon him.

I think you need to know this story about Solomon and the two mothers. It's one of the more famous stories from the Hebrew scriptures, something that people well outside church circles may reference. Why on earth the lectionary avoids it, I have no idea. It's important for us, as Christians, to be familiar with our scriptures, especially the parts that have lasting cultural impact. So instead of focusing just on the dialogue from Solomon's dream, I jumped ahead a little and scheduled verses 16-28 as well. Nobody said I can't do that, after all; we're Disciples!

Part of the reason this story has had such staying power in our cultural psyche is its inherent drama. Two mothers, one baby that has survived, no DNA testing available. The tension is high. What will King Solomon do? And then the dramatic finish as Solomon unveils his clever, if high-stakes test and discovers the real mother by her reaction. All of Israel "stood in awe" at how wise their ruler was.

And if the story was just about Solomon, then that might be it. A good illustration with powerful emotional impact, but nothing to slow us down too much. But what if the story isn't just about Solomon? What if it's about us? There's a lot to notice about this story if we pause long enough to consider that we might be in it. And I'm pretty sure we are.

We have the opportunity, every day, to be one or the other of these mothers. Their responses to Solomon's suggestion to slice the baby in half show us two different ways to approach the world. We can choose to be grounded in love and willing to make personal sacrifices for the wellbeing of others. Or we can get stuck in bitterness and refuse to let anyone else have something we can't have. Every day, in so many different ways, we are asked to respond one way or the other.

What do I do when the thing that I want – indeed, that I'm convinced I cannot live without – cannot be mine without depriving someone else of what is rightfully theirs? It's amazing what we can talk ourselves into believing we deserve when bad things have happened to us. It's often even more astonishing what we can feel entitled to when we've always just gotten what we wanted. We will lie and steal and cheat, because we've convinced ourselves we're just setting things right. And people are often hurt in the process.

Have you ever been the other mother, the real mother? Have you ever wanted something so badly, but overcome your need for it because you knew that it would be better for the common good, or perhaps for another specific individual, for you to give up your claim to it? Maybe someone at work needed a promotion more than you did. Maybe a fellow student needed that named scholarship more than you. Maybe you wanted to be in the building for church, but you logged in online instead so you wouldn't share any germs you might be carrying with others. Maybe your glasses fogged up, but you wore your mask in the grocery store anyway, out of concern for

your immunocompromised neighbors and young children. Every day we have the chance to ground our lives in sacrificial love instead of selfishness. And sometimes, we're rewarded immediately, like the real mother was, but more often the sacrifice we're offering is indeed required, in order for love to prevail.

Nobody said this was easy. I want to go back, for a moment, and look at the story a little more closely. Lest we think that grounding our lives in sacrificial love is okay for normal, stable times but a bit too much to ask during a global pandemic, let's look at what those mothers were going through before this drama began. They were prostitutes, according to the story. So right from the beginning, we know their lives were hard. It's highly unlikely they chose that life out of bunch of great options. Secondly, they were pregnant prostitutes, and not to be crass, but that probably means there wasn't a lot of money coming in. So they were probably undernourished and a bit desperate. And then we learn that the two of them – two expectant mothers with very little economic support – were living together, just the two of them, in this one house. There was no one else there to help them. No one to help prepare food. No one to help change diapers. No one to attend them or even run for help if they started hemorrhaging or something.

These are the very desperate circumstances in which this tragedy unfolded. Mother #2 – let's call her Leah – wakes in the night and discovers her newborn baby is dead. Did she roll on him, as her housemate describes, or was he a victim of sudden infant death syndrome or some other mysterious malady? It doesn't really

matter. She is stricken in the night with a grief that makes her do terrible things. Did she really think Mother #1 – we’ll call her Rachel – wouldn’t notice that she’d switched the babies? That’s preposterous. But we all know that things can make sense in the middle of the night that are obviously absurd in the light of day. Especially when the darkness of night is made heavier with grief.

The point here is not to justify Leah’s acquiescence to Solomon’s suggestion to slice the baby in half. The point is that her nihilistic bitterness didn’t just come out of nowhere. It is right for us to be horrified by her behavior. But that doesn’t mean we can’t understand it. Because we may have felt those same impulses within our own grieving hearts. Life can be hard. We do stupid, selfish things. And when we get caught, we often double-down, insisting that the thing that obviously isn’t true is true, to shelter ourselves from the reality we were trying to avoid in the first place.

Every day we have the choice to be one of these mothers, and especially right now, when things are hard, and we’re worn down from months of deprivation and anxiety and isolation and uncertainty, we have to choose carefully. Jesus calls us to ground ourselves, every day, in the sacrificial love that looks to the interests of others before our own. Jesus calls us to trust that, even in our grief, we are not alone. Jesus calls us to resist the selfishness and bitterness that compel us to say that if we can’t have what we want, nobody can. Only through love that is deep enough to offer itself up for others can life flourish and grow. Otherwise, we are left desperately scrabbling over the crumbs.

Honestly, the saddest part of this story is the disappearance of the dead baby. By denying her grief and trying to displace it onto another, Leah lost the opportunity to mourn her baby. That baby was precious. That baby was God's. That baby deserved to be keened and wailed over. And I'm guessing Rachel would have joined Leah in her weeping, if only she could have opened up to it to begin with. This, too, can offer us a lesson for these strange times in which we're living. We cannot deny the grief that surrounds us. So much loss, we will be tabulating it for years to come. We cannot displace it and pretend everything is fine, by reaching for the closest replacement comfort.

We may not be as wise as Solomon, but we can still endeavor to choose the path of sacrificial love. We can loosen our grip on our needs and look to the common good with tender hearts and humble souls. Even in our grief, we can turn to one another, instead of against one another, if we can keep Jesus by our sides. We don't need a king to turn to, to discern what is right and wrong for us. We have the Christ, living in our midst, who reminds us in every moment that God's will for us, for all of us, is flourishing and abundance. We have Christ, who showed us that the path of sacrificial love is how God's will is accomplished. May it be so, in our lives and in our world. Hallelujah and Amen.