

1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14

¹⁰ Then David rested with his ancestors and was buried in the City of David. ¹¹ He had reigned forty years over Israel—seven years in Hebron and thirty-three in Jerusalem. ¹² So Solomon sat on the throne of his father David, and his rule was firmly established.

³ Solomon showed his love for the LORD by walking according to the instructions given him by his father David, except that he offered sacrifices and burned incense on the high places.

⁴ The king went to Gibeon to offer sacrifices, for that was the most important high place, and Solomon offered a thousand burnt offerings on that altar. ⁵ At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon during the night in a dream, and God said, “Ask for whatever you want me to give you.”

⁶ Solomon answered, “You have shown great kindness to your servant, my father David, because he was faithful to you and righteous and upright in heart. You have continued this great kindness to him and have given him a son to sit on his throne this very day.

⁷ “Now, LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. ⁸ Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. ⁹ So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?”

¹⁰ The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. ¹¹ So God said to him, “Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, ¹² I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be. ¹³ Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for—both wealth and honor—so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings. ¹⁴ And if you walk in obedience to me and keep my decrees and commands as David your father did, I will give you a long life.”

Ephesians 5:15-20

¹⁵ Be very careful, then, how you live —not as unwise but as wise, ¹⁶ making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. ¹⁷ Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. ¹⁸ Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹ speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, ²⁰ always giving thanks to God our Parent for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

“Nourished by Wisdom”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

“There is an old samurai tale, told in the ancient Japanese wisdom traditions, that illustrates the raw essence of gratitude. A young Samurai was roaming the countryside in search of a famous Zen master. It was well known at the time that samurai would seek instruction from Zen masters to gain a better understanding of themselves and the workings of their mind. This would help them improve their fighting skills and live honorably.

After searching far and wide the samurai finally located the Zen master living deep in the woods. "Please teach me the ways of heaven and hell", the samurai requested of the Zen master.

The old master took one look at the samurai and burst out laughing, "Look at you!" he exclaimed. "You call yourself a samurai? Look at that belly of yours...you can't even control your own appetite, and you want to learn the ways of heaven and hell...hah, what a joke!"

The samurai was beside himself with embarrassment that quickly turned into anger and then into full blown rage. His face turned red and his hand reached for his sword.

Zen master or not, this man was going to pay for his insult, "I'm going to cut you down!", he announced while raising the sword above his head.

The Zen master turned to the samurai and said in a calm and measured voice, "That's hell." The samurai, instantly recognizing the error in his judgement and the wisdom and kindness in the Zen master's instruction, had a complete change of heart. He fell to his knees in gratitude and appreciation.

"And that's heaven", said the master."

(<https://www.evolutionarypathways.com/wisdom-stories.html>)

I think it is most often the case that we learn by doing, don't you? That was one of the hardest things about teaching a course in ethics to high school students when I was at Blair. It is all well and good to have kids learn that what we are talking about when we speak of ethics is to know what it means to have a good life. That is not the same as becoming good. So, in trying to open them up to the notion that *goodness* may look different to different individuals in an abstract way, but that there may be elements of living, of life, even of personhood that are somehow irrefutably good in a way about which we can all agree is hard to talk about and much easier to witness or to experience. And that takes time.

We would start with the notion of a "good song," as we practiced some philosophical vocabulary in unphilosophical ways. This was easier than diving straight into Aristotle. Eventually, though, and with the help of some good videos (Check out the wonderful Youtube Series called "Crash Course Philosophy" for just that!), we would begin to read both ancient and current philosophers with greater ease. While that does not ensure that my students will all grow to become good or wise adults, I pray they may aspire to such.

Aspiration is a piece of things, isn't it? But I'd like to quote Aristotle briefly now and hope we may learn a bit that may guide us. It's amazing, isn't it, to think that he wrote this in the 4th century? From his *Nicomachean Ethics*: "Virtue, then, is of two kinds, intellectual and moral. Intellectual virtue springs from and grows from teaching, and therefore needs experience and time. Moral virtues come from habit... These virtues we acquire by first exercising them, as in the case of the other arts. Whatever we learn to do, we learn by actually doing it: builders come to be builders, for instance, by building, and harp players, by playing the harp. In the same way, by doing just acts we come to be just; by doing self-controlled acts, we come to be self-controlled; and by doing brave acts, we become brave."

What is our wisdom, if it is not moral virtue? And what makes us wise? We learn by doing it. The kind of ironic thing about our reading from First Kings today is that Solomon was said to be wise, indeed *is known* as the wise king, but there is a lot about the moments just preceding and following this passage that reveal him to be less than an entirely *good* man. That said, by the time of his own passing, as was true of his father David, Solomon has lived and experienced enough to learn that it was his compassion rather than his military prowess that made him great.

If you are anything like me, and I imagine at least some of you are in this way, there are times that I have had to rely not on my native *intelligence* than on what we might call more *intuitive goodness* to make decisions. And that intuition isn't necessarily native. What we call our "gut instincts," that truly visceral response to what happens around us is not only something we are born with. As a woman in my new book group recalled in the words of Oscar and Hammerstein, "You've got to be carefully taught." For those of us who want to cultivate what we may call Godly wisdom and even goodness, we can be grateful—maybe even fall on our knees grateful—that we have some pretty clear instructions for how we can practice our good wisdom.

We have been reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians during the past several weeks. Among Paul's letters, it is very much about how Christians should behave and less about what they believe. Today's passage is well paired with the passage about Solomon, with the idea of foolish versus wise living. Wise living is based on doing what is right with God, and while not the object, "good living" does follow. Do you feel like it is a worthy cliffhanger if I share that Paul will get to some pretty good specifics in next week's lesson from Ephesians. For today, though, as we move from our worship to the living of our days, we may also let ourselves be guided by the book of James, as well. Listen to these verses from Chapter 3. ¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. ¹⁵ Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

¹⁷ But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸ Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness."

Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and God's righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you. It sounds as though Solomon had that right when he first was offered a gift from God, doesn't it? We can do the same. We can pray for humility, for strength, and courage, and wisdom, and we can practice being, well, *good*. I was grateful for this kind of practice only this week, ironically on the heels of preaching about anger only last Sunday. Anger is a typical response to a lot of other emotions, including fear, anxiety, confusion, frustration and disappointment. I think that list pretty well describes everything I felt earlier this weekend while learning that my shadow, my dog Shelby, had been inadvertently poisoned by marijuana this week.

She is coming home today, still healing from pancreatitis but no longer stoned, critically dehydrated and frighteningly lethargic. While my daughter was away at work, her youthful friends poorly hid brownies that were the cause of Shelby's illness. These kids are now miserable with their sense of guilt and shame. And I wanted for a time to lash out. That was my gut, and I know quite well the times I have given into that baser instinct. When my heart was racing and my mind swirling with finally learning what caused Shelby's incapacitation, I literally practiced what I preached—only last week. When the girls got back to the house in Camden, I knew I shouldn't talk in the thick of my fury—and fear, and disappointment. Shame doesn't do anyone any good, but maybe, I thought, a lesson in love might. So, I practiced the conversation in my head through the night, and we called their mother together in the morning after I had practiced some more, aloud, to the girls themselves.

I am not always good at this, not by a long shot; you can ask my older daughter about how bad I was at this when she was a sassy pre-teen. Even now, I would ask you to remind me to watch my tongue if you see me in a situation where fiery temper might prevail. I will do the same for you if you ask me. That can be what a community of faith can be—faith in goodness or kindness winning out over evil and sadness, in wisdom rising above foolishness, with practice. The more often we make choices for good, the easier it becomes, and the more it becomes *the* fabric of our character. And the more we seek to follow Christ's way—Jesus, who embodied compassionate wisdom—the more likely we are to embody wisdom and compassion ourselves. We have in scripture the rules we can apply and the stories that can inspire us to wise living. May it be so for us, so that the world may know peace.