

Scripture

I Kings 3:16-28

The book of Kings begins with the last days of King David, then describes the reign and fall of his son King Solomon—a flawed character but famous for his great wisdom.

“two women who were prostitutes came to the king and stood before him. **17** The one woman said, “Please, my lord, this woman and I live in the same house; and I gave birth while she was in the house. **18** Then on the third day after I gave birth, this woman also gave birth. We were together; there was no one else with us in the house, only the two of us were in the house. **19** Then this woman’s son died in the night, because she lay on him. **20** She got up in the middle of the night and took my son from beside me while your servant slept. She laid him at her breast, and laid her dead son at my breast. **21** When I rose in the morning to nurse my son, I saw that he was dead; but when I looked at him closely in the morning, clearly it was not the son I had borne.” **22** But the other woman said, “No, the living son is mine, and the dead son is yours.” The first said, “No, the dead son is yours, and the living son is mine.” So they argued before the king.

23 Then the king said, “The one says, ‘This is my son that is alive, and your son is dead’; while the other says, ‘Not so! Your son is dead, and my son is the living one.’” **24** So the king said, “Bring me a sword,” and they brought a sword before the king. **25** The king said, “Divide the living boy in two; then give half to the one, and half to the other.” **26** But the woman whose son was alive said to the king—because compassion for her son burned within her—“Please, my lord, give her the living boy; certainly do not kill him!” The other said, “It shall be neither mine nor yours; divide it.” **27** Then the king

responded: “Give the first woman the living boy; do not kill him. She is his mother.” **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

Message: Vey Iz Mir! Woe is me!

In 1905, at the age of 26, Albert Einstein published three groundbreaking papers that provided the blueprint for much of modern science. The first was on the motion of particles suspended in liquid. The second was on the photoelectric effect, the release of electrons from metal when light shines on it. Last and perhaps most famous, Einstein published his special theory of relativity, which led to the shocking conclusion that time is not constant, and neither is weight nor mass.

It is still hard to believe that Einstein’s work in that single year led to the discovery of, among other things, DNA, vacuum tubes, transistors and the mechanics of the information age.

1905. What a year! What a vast amount of knowledge!

Unfortunately, Einstein’s work at that time also laid the groundwork for the atomic bomb.

When the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Einstein’s immediate response was “Vey iz mir” ... “Woe is me.”

Einstein was one of the smartest humans in history, and yet he ended his career feeling that his creations had slipped beyond his control. The pro-bomb position that he took during the Second World War turned into pacifism by the end of his life. The mushroom cloud that validated so many brilliant theories brought no joy to this genius, but instead only woe.

E equals mc squared ,but knowledge does not equal wisdom.

“Vey iz mir.”” Woe is me”

Is precisely the response we often have when our wisdom turns out not to be so wise at all, when the trouble we’re in is of our own making, when the plans we’ve devised implode under the weight of their own foolishness, when we think we’re acting judiciously and prudently, but the outcome is just the opposite. Vey iz mir!

It is essential to have a discerning mind and to understand that human wisdom can lead both to good and to evil. Experiments on stem cells derived from human embryos can unlock cures for disease but may also undermine the dignity of embryonic life. Advances in computer technology create amazing tools for education and business but produce incredible amounts of toxic waste when outdated computers are thrown away. The clearing of land and the building of homes can provide wonderful quality of life for new generations, but these actions can also degrade the environment and reduce biodiversity.

How do we discern whether our actions are going to lead to good or to evil?

In the text for today, Solomon has just inherited the throne of his father David. At this momentous turning point, he must decide what his focus will be as the new king of Israel. He knows very well that royal power can be used both for good and for evil — something his father demonstrated throughout the roller-coaster ride of his 40-year reign — and so Solomon hopes his rule can be a kinder and more gentle administration.

Since there is not yet a temple in Jerusalem, Solomon goes to a high place called Gibeon to offer a sacrifice to the Lord. We're told that "Solomon used to offer a thousand burnt offerings on that altar," so it is clear that Solomon is no slacker in the sacrifice department, that he took God and worship seriously (3:4).

While he is in Gibeon, the Lord appears to Solomon in a dream, and God says, "Ask what I should give you" (v. 5).

Sounds like one of those "three wishes from the magic genie in the lamp" stories.

Tough question. Makes you wonder what you and I might ask if God were to put a carte blanche offer on the table. Solomon could ask for long life, or riches, or victory over his enemies. He could express a desire for personal popularity, or political power, or romantic success.

But Solomon asks for none of these. Instead, he says to God, "Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil" (v. 9). More than anything else, Solomon wants wisdom, which will enable him to discern what is right and wrong. He asks for a gift which will be worthwhile to him personally, BUT only if it used for the good of

others! This is not a selfish request. This comes from his desire to lead and protect his people, from his responsibility as a king.

It pleases the Lord that Solomon asks this. In fact, God is so delighted that he gives the new king a wise and discerning mind, and on top of this gives him several additional benefits that he hasn't even requested: riches and honor and long life (vv. 13-14). It turns out that an understanding mind is at the very top of God's desires for us.

So how can we exercise this kind of wisdom?

We need to begin by grasping that true understanding involves the heart as well as the head. This is no knock against the accumulation of knowledge, against the pursuit of knowledge, against the discipline necessary to acquire it.

But knowledge acquired is not necessarily wisdom dispensed.

Wisdom is no mere intellectual exercise — which is what Einstein discovered when his greatest insights started a chain reaction which led to the cry of despair, “Vey iz mir” ... “Woe is me.” Unless intellectual lucidity includes a heartfelt understanding of people and concern for their welfare, it can lead to woe upon woe upon woe upon woe.

Solomon demonstrates very quickly that his wisdom is both heartfelt and heart-shaped. Soon after his dream at Gibeon, two prostitutes come and stand before him. You know the story. They live in the same house, and both have babies, but in the middle of the night one of them rolls over and crushes her son to death. They argue about which one of them is the true mother of the remaining child, asking Solomon to award the live baby to one of them.

Solomon's solution is to ask for a sword. He says, "Divide the living boy in two; then give half to the one, and half to the other."

The woman whose son is alive says to the king, "Please, my lord, give her the living boy; certainly do not kill him!" But the other woman says, "It shall be neither mine nor yours; divide it."

Then Solomon, in his heart-shaped wisdom, pronounces, "Give the first woman the living boy; do not kill him." He knows that only a true mother would be willing to part with her son in order to spare his life (vv. 22-27).

Solomon was motivated by a desire to do right to others, he was blessed by God for having that viewpoint. Now here in this famous story we have two mothers. One expresses her need her desire towards the baby, and a willingness to see the second baby die rather than not have custody.

The other is more concerned with the baby than herself. Witnessing that mother's love for her baby, her willingness to carry the grief and pain of loss so that the child may live. Their attitudes, one of selfishness, one of loving sacrifice allows Solomon to know which one is lying, which one is the true loving mother.

Wisdom is described as a woman in Proverbs, a book traditionally attributed to Solomon. Perhaps the true mother's love was his inspiration.

Wisdom involves obedience. A wise person walks in God's ways and keeps the commandments. Wisdom walks in the light of the revealed word. Follow God and there is no need to agonize over issues of honesty, integrity, faithfulness, love, trust, greed, envy, slander,

gossip and the like.

Wisdom always wears the cloak of charity. The greatest wisdom is to love God and neighbor. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind,” and “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-39).

Wisdom may flow from knowledge, but must also be informed by our emotions (heart), enacted by the volition or will and affirmed in our souls.

There is nothing anti-intellectual in the teachings of Jesus. What Jesus is saying is that we should keep love of God and love of neighbor in front of us as we move into the future together. If our discoveries don't help us to act in a truly loving way, then we need to find another path to travel.

Great minds have always sensed this, whether they were kings of Israel or winners of the Nobel Prize. In fact, Albert Einstein himself said, “It has become appallingly obvious that our technology has exceeded our humanity.” Wisdom requires not only a good mind but a loving heart, and a willingness to walk in God's ways.

Any other path leads to a world of woe.