

“The Log in the Way of True Wisdom”

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Based upon 1 Kings 3:16-28; Luke 6:39-42

According to Jewish tradition, Solomon was only a teenager when he ascended the throne of his famous father David. He ruled for forty years by most accounts, and in the process grew the kingdom of Israel into a powerhouse beyond compare. During Solomon’s reign, the kingdom was its largest, wealthiest, and most influential, thanks to the many alliances Solomon made with foreign nations through marriage; and the Temple in Jerusalem, which Solomon, not his father, built, was truly spectacular. But today, the thing that Solomon is known for most among Christians is for his wisdom. The whole collected wisdom of *Proverbs* is attributed to him, and the lesson immediately before the one for today helps explain why. *1 Kings* 3:1-15 says that when Solomon was just starting out, after he made a huge sacrifice in Gibeon, God appeared to him in a dream and told him to ask for whatever he wanted. Solomon prayed, “Give your servant an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil.” (*1 Kings* 3:9). The text says that God was so pleased that Solomon did not ask for riches or fame, that God gave him wisdom, and then riches and fame too.

In today’s famous story, we see that wisdom in action. Solomon was presented with a difficult situation, two women fighting over a single child. Each claimed to be the mother of the child, but neither had any proof. It was a case of she-said/she-said, and Solomon was supposed to decide what to do. So, as we just heard, he decided to trick the ladies into revealing the truth by threatening to cut the baby in two. When one of the women cried out, “Stop! Give it to her. Don’t kill him,” and the other woman said, “Go ahead,” Solomon knew who the real mother was. The incident was so famous that it is even recorded in the non-biblical text *The Antiquities of the Jews* by historian Josephus.¹ He said that at first people laughed at the absurdity of Solomon’s response. But when his trick worked, they changed their tune and saw his strategy as evidence of divine wisdom.

When I was a child, I thought that Solomon was so clever with his split-the-baby strategy. Now that I am grown, both the lawyer and the mother in me have a harder time seeing his behavior as either particularly just or wise. To make a ruling based upon a hunch instead of hard evidence, and to endanger a child in the process! Yikes! It seems to me that he is very lucky the whole situation did not go terribly wrong. But Jewish Midrash from the 13th and 14th centuries insists that Solomon’s judgment was actually based upon far more than a hunch. It was based upon an astute understanding of both human nature and the Law.² According to several rabbinic commentaries, the two women were mother and daughter-in-law, both widowed before their

¹ See *The Works of Josephus Complete and Unabridged*, William Whiston trans. (Hendrickson Pub. Inc, 1987), 213 (*The Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 8, Chapter 2, section 2).

² See Cohen, Baruch C., “*The Brilliant Wisdom of King Solomon*”, *Jewish Law Commentary: Examining Halacha, Jewish Issues and Secular Law*, July 10, 1998, retrieved 8-15-17 from <http://www.jlaw.com/Commentary/solomon.html>. Mr. Cohen cites the writings of Rabbi Mordechai Kornfeld of Har Nof Jerusalem, who cited two 13th Century commentators: Rav. Yehoshua Ibn Shu’ib, in his Drasha for Parshas Mishpatim, and Rav. Menachem HaMeiri, in his commentary to Yevamos 17a; and a 14th Century commentary by Shemen Rokeach and Sha’arHachazokas.

babies were born. Their circumstances created a crisis. You see, according to the Jewish custom of Levirate marriage (*Yibbum*), if a man dies childless, his widow must be married off to the man's brother. The only exception to this would be if the deceased had a grandchild. Then his widow would not have to marry a family member because the grandchild would carry on the family name and estate.

So in the scenario in this story, the mother was OK regardless of whether the living child was her own or her grandson. But the daughter-in-law was faced with a difficult situation. If her mother-in-law's baby was her deceased husband's only brother, then she would have to put her life on hold to be betrothed to an infant! In order to avoid either scenario, the daughter-in-law would either need to claim the child as her own, or have her mother-in-law's child be killed. The commentaries says that Solomon knew the Law so well that he immediately guessed that more was at stake behind the dispute than maternal attachment to a child. He guessed the daughter-in-law's motives and knew she would want the child killed. So he offered that solution, never intending to use it, to make her reveal her hand.

Whether you believe all of that or not, tradition has always held that Solomon was blessed with the divine gift of wisdom when it came to discerning the truth in other people's hearts. But what makes his story really interesting to me now, and ultimately more relevant to all of us today, I think, is that Jewish tradition has also always held that Solomon was tremendously unwise when it came to seeing into his own heart. As a result, instead of being an astute and faithful king, he ended up being a tyrannical and idolatrous one, who set the kingdom of Israel up for division, disaster, and ultimately exile. As Chapter 11 says with great understatement, "He was not true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of his father David."

Do you remember the hit movie, *The Sixth Sense*, about the little boy who saw dead people? That movie was beautifully made because there were clues scattered throughout the film—red door knobs, cold air, a single place setting at the table—that pointed to the shocking truth which was revealed at the end, that the main character played by Bruce Willis was actually dead. These clues were easy to miss the first time you saw the movie, but very obvious upon a second viewing. Well *I Kings* is the same way. Even while it glorifies Solomon in the first ten chapters, it also throws in multiple clues about his moral and spiritual failings, like the first verse in Chapter 3 which says, "He made a marriage alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt." Pharaoh, in Jewish history, stood for the ultimate evil oppressor of the Jews. The fact that Solomon's first move was to make an alliance with a Pharaoh, therefore, would have been very chilling to the Jews of his day. It was like he made a pact with the Devil.

I Kings also describes Solomon's successes in a very particular order. Chapter 10:26-29 says he had fourteen hundred chariots and twelve thousand horses, and made silver as common as stones and cedars as common as sycamores. Then Chapter 11 says he loved many foreign women—seven hundred princesses and three hundred concubines. These are not incidental facts about him. They are evidence that notwithstanding his God-given wisdom, Solomon still lived in breach of his covenant promises to God. In *Deuteronomy*, God tells the people they can have a human king, but "he must not acquire many horses, return the people to Egypt, acquire many

wives for himself, or silver and gold in great quantity.” (Deut. 17:15-17). Thus the author of *I Kings* reveals, even while praising Solomon, that in some ways he was like a poster-boy example of what not to do.

So where does that leave us? It leaves us with a much more realistic depiction of one of the kings of Israel—a man with great strengths and great failings, a man able to see into the hearts of others, yet unable or unwilling to examine his own. It also leaves us with a powerful theological lesson about the critical spiritual practice of self-examination, which should make us think, especially given the events of this past week. I know I said last week that I wasn’t going to preach on Charlottesville. But in light of everything that has happened this week, and this text, the Spirit won’t let me avoid the subject.

This week, among the many shocking and disturbing things that happened, was when one of the white supremacists who participated in last Saturday’s horror became an Internet sensation by denying that he was a racist. The man, whose name was Peter Cvjetanovic, was photographed screaming racist messages of hate in the crowd of white men carrying torches. So not surprisingly, people began to circulate his image everywhere as an image of Neo-Nazi hate. But when he was interviewed by a reporter about it, he said, “I am not the angry racist they see in that photo.”³ Again, not surprisingly, no one that I know agreed with him. The man was surrounded by white supremacists and Neo-Nazis, chanting racist and anti-Semitic chants, appeared angry and threatening in the photo, and by his own admission, wants the white way to win. So the overwhelming social media response to him was, “Yes, actually, you are racist, Peter, whether you think you are or not. You know how the saying goes, ‘If it looks like a duck and walks like a duck and quacks like a duck....’”

Now if someone who was so obviously racist still could not see himself as a racist, then imagine how much harder it is for us, who strive to be good, faithful, loving people, to see when we still harbor biases in our own. We are not Tiki torch-racists. But one of the reasons the scourge of white supremacy still exists today is that the systems of our nation are biased in favor of white people. In both implicit and explicit ways, racism is both tolerated and justified. That means that while we may find it easy to see radical racist thinking or behavior in others, we may not fully appreciate how we have been influenced by, or participate in systemic racism ourselves. A recent experiment out of Harvard called “The Implicit Association Test” demonstrated this to be the case.⁴

The test links together words and images in a sort of game designed to reveal implicit bias on any number of issues, race, gender, sexual orientation, etc. On the race test, people are shown a series of African American and Caucasian faces and then asked to associate those faces with words such as “joy” and “failure.” When people are given lots of time to do this, most people want to be egalitarian and strive to make unprejudiced associations. That’s the good news. But

³ See e.g. Garcia, Catherine, “College student photographed screaming at white nationalist rally says he’s not an ‘angry racist,’” THE WEEK, Aug. 14, 2017, retrieved 8/16/17 from <http://theweek.com/speedreads/718164/college-student-photographed-screaming-white-nationalist-rally-says-hes-not-angry-racist>

⁴ See <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>

when the test asks people to make associations as fast as they can while the words change rapidly, the results change too. Then people tend to default to their biases. Specifically, 87.9% of white respondents had implicit biases against Blacks, and 68% of non-Arab, non-Muslim respondents had biases against Arab Muslims.⁵ Huge biases were also revealed in the tests that focused on gender and sexual orientation. When the test administrators shared their results, most of the people who had taken the test were deeply embarrassed and upset by their results because they did not consciously believe that held any biases against people.

If 87.9% of participants revealed a bias they were not even aware of, then the odds are good that we too are biased in ways that we do not fully appreciate. That means that it is not enough for us to challenge the blatant racists of our society waving Confederate and Nazi flags. Clearly we need to do that. But we also need to look inside our own hearts with a level of scrutiny and brutal honesty that is neither popular nor practiced by many people today. We need to do this because we are all so stressed by the changes in our country of late, so filled with fear that it is inevitably that we are defaulting to our biases more than ever. Everyone is. We are losing our ability to see each other as children of God, fellow human beings. Nothing good will come of that; nothing has.

Jesus asked, “Why do you focus on the speck in your neighbor’s eye when you have a log in your own?” I think that this week we have seen more than specs in certain people’s eyes. But the point is that if we want our world to get better, all of us, even those of us we strive to be good, must look into our own hearts, not just the hearts of others because there are whole logs that we are missing—logs born of white privilege, and logs born of fear. Therefore we must daily invite the Holy Spirit to help us discern not just the good from the bad in others, but also the good and the bad in ourselves. This is how Christians have historically stayed close to God and God’s way, by reflecting, repenting, and confessing. But we haven’t done it enough when it comes to issues of race. We haven’t done it enough when it comes to considering power and privilege, and as it shows.

To change this, in response to Charlottesville, our denomination has kicked off the process by issuing a statement which reads in part:

White supremacy and racism stand in stark, irreconcilable contradiction to God’s intention for humanity. They reject part of the human family and are utterly contrary to God’s Word made incarnate in Jesus. They are idolatries that elevate human-created hierarchies over God’s freely given grace and love. They are lies about the human family, for they seek to say that some people are less than other people. They are lies about God because they falsely claim that God favors some people over the entirety of creation.

But as we give thanks, we acknowledge the church’s complicity in the creation of white supremacy and racism. We confess the church’s failure in challenging and disrupting white supremacy and racism. Too often we have accepted the status quo. Too often we have stood silent in the face of injustice and oppression.

⁵ *Ibid.*

By God's grace may we remember the events in Charlottesville; repent of our acquiescence and failures; and renew our commitment to proclaim and live the good news of Jesus Christ. May that commitment lead us to stand against, speak against and work against racism and white supremacy, this day and every day.⁶

It is a wise statement, grounded in the Gospel and reality. It is a necessary confession and a challenging charge.

Solomon had great wisdom in some respects, but not in others. We are no different from him in that regard. So as we move forward seeking love and justice, peace and reconciliation for our nation, let us strive to learn from his example how to be people of self-reflection as well as action. Let us pray for understanding and discernment so that we can see what needs to change in ourselves as well as others. Only then will we be able to build a world which glorifies God by blessing *all* of God's children on earth. Amen.

⁶ "PC(USA) leaders condemn white supremacy, racism," Aug. 14, 2017, retrieved from <https://www.pcusa.org/news/2017/8/14/pcusa-leaders-condemn-white-supremacy-racism/>