

Sermon: Infinite Choices for Finite Creatures

Year B, Proper 15

[1 Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14; Psalm 111; Proverbs 9:1-6; Psalm 34:9-14; Ephesians 5:15-20; John 6:51-58](#)

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Rev. Catherine A. Merrill

In the churches I grew up in, and maybe in this one too, there was a Stewardship Sunday, where the minister would get up on his hind legs (I never had a church with a minister who was a woman) and he'd preach about how we all had to fill our pledge cards. He'd talk about the lights and the oil. I don't remember him talking about his salary, although I can remember hearing about it, so some member of the church had to get up on his hind legs and say something about it. The Scripture readings on those days were usually something with actual coins in them. And there would be a quote from 2 Corinthians 9:7 about God loving a cheerful giver. Apparently, I grew up in a tradition that said stewardship was the thing you did to keep the financial operation of the church going. And you did it once a year.

Like many young people, I drifted away from the churches I grew up in when I went to college, until I graduated with degrees in computer science and economics. That's when I began exploring whether I should become a minister. And I discovered that you had to wait until God called you to be a minister. There wasn't anything you could do to make that happen. Which made me crazy, but I accepted after the fourth or fifth minister I asked spelled it out for me. They were very sweet and reassured me that God would need me wherever I was in life, so I should just get on with life with my other talents. And I did. Including getting an MBA from Dartmouth. Which took me even further into the for profit business world. And you know how often we worked on keeping the financial operation of the business going? Every blessed day. Multiple times a day. It wasn't called "stewardship." It was called not being fired.

So when Sanjay and the Stewardship crew challenged me to spend more time on stewardship throughout the year, I was really relieved. Because it was closer to something I was used to. And because it took a ton of pressure off that one sermon a year. Talk about high risk. When I read today's passage from 1 Kings, I couldn't believe how right it was for stewardship. And I didn't remember hearing anyone ever use it to support stewardship. I went out onto the internet and I found that I am apparently an outlier, because no one else sees this as a stewardship scripture. So let me make my argument and you can tell me what you think.

We see Solomon, David's son, taking over the throne of Israel. He prays to God, basically saying, "You have given me this amazing opportunity. Please help me not mess this up." How is that not stewardship? Because let me tell you, this little Brookline Community Church, our little church has the Holy Spirit busting through this place in ways I have not experienced in churches which were much larger, much more endowed. The music, the food, the willingness to argue with each other faithfully, the willingness to work together on the building itself, on the activities of the Outreach team. I have to tell you. It's not normal. It's very special. And I think we all sense it. And I think we all want to work together to feed the flame of the Holy Spirit higher and higher. We want to share it with others and we're building our skills in both telling the story of what we're finding here and how we share what we're learning. We certainly need cash to do it, but we need wisdom too. I think we know how to ask for money. I'm not so sure we know how to ask for wisdom, so let's look at what Solomon does when he has been given a

great gift, when he has been given something incredibly special, when he is only too aware of how easy it would be for the community he is a part of to degrade into something ordinary.

Let's look at what Solomon does. He begins with prayer. Deep prayer. He submits to God and isn't asking for something for himself. He doesn't come to God and say that he wants God to sign off on the following 12-point plan for the use of power Solomon now finds he has.¹ Solomon is coming without ready made answers. He's honestly waiting for God.

Solomon doesn't begin with his list of requests. He begins by remembering, remembering where Solomon is in history.² *And Solomon said, "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you; and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne today. And now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. (1 Kings 3:6-7). Solomon acknowledges he is David's son, that he stands on his father's shoulders. But more than David's son, Solomon remembers that he is part of an ancient lineage. And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. (1 Kings 3:8)*

Solomon's prayer is not for himself, but for his ability to rule. Solomon is not just asking because it would be a good idea for the king to be wise, but because Solomon understands that God has called him to rule over Israel. David had many sons, but only Solomon will rule after David. Solomon is praying for help in fulfilling his call from God.³

Finally Solomon's prayer takes place in a dream. Prayers have the ability to take us beyond the present reality⁴ to new configurations, new opportunities, new kingdoms. Solomon is ready. He is a child of the dream. He is ready to embrace the new way of being king.⁵

Now I can argue that there is a great deal of stewardship going on in Solomon's prayer. And then I can point to that wonderful response from God *I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor all your life (1 Kings 3:13). Do this thing right and it comes up 3 cherries and quarters come shooting out of the till.*

But that is not the real world and we know it. Ephesians says to be wise, *making the most of the time, because the days are evil (Ephesians 5:16). Ephesians knows there is wine we can get drunk on and reminds us that that is debauchery (Ephesians 5:17). Did you notice that the reading from 1 Kings went from the beginning of chapter 2 to the beginning of chapter 3? It skipped over 34 verses where Solomon plotted and killed his way onto the throne, eliminating David's other son who was older than Solomon and had a better claim to the throne as well as the powerful people who supported the other son.*

So this beautiful prayer that Solomon offers, is lifted up to God in the context of some brutal political battles. This dream at Gibeon is the last step in a blood stained process that brought Solomon to the throne.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *1 Kings*, in *Knox Preaching Guides*, ed. John H. Hayes, (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982), 11.

² Brueggemann, 12.

³ Brueggemann, 12.

⁴ Brueggemann, 13.

⁵ Brueggemann, 14.

We can pray a heartfelt prayer to God who has given us something precious here at the church. And we can pray that we don't mess it up. But we have to be honest enough to know that all stewardship is being done in the face of a world where power matters, where power shows up in the form of time and treasure. However much we want to protect whatever it is we are finding precious in our church family, it is part of the world around it. When Ephesians says *as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts* (Ephesians 5:19) I don't think they're talking about insultating the infant church from the power of the Roman Empire that surrounds it. I think all that singing and music making is to help the young church at Ephesus survive the encounter with power. Of all the things that the Bible understands, it understands the depth and breadth of the challenge of surviving in the face of power.⁶

Solomon prays, in essence, to be a great king. Shortly before Jesus was put to death, Pilate asked him 'So you are a king?' *Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.'* (John 18:37).⁷ Isn't that what stewardship is? Testifying to the truth of God in the face of the power of this world? We pray for God to lead us, without having an answer we're already expecting. We remember our history, what has brought us to this point, long before we begin making requests. We pray that we are humbly able to fulfill the call God has given us. We dream that we might enter into a new reality, a new creation. We pray that we may dream big enough to merit the gifts we have been given. We do all that knowing that there are infinite things we could do in the face of the power of the world, and we know that we are finite creatures who have to make a decision and select only a few actions we could take. And we do that singing together, so that we can keep ahold of the truth that God is leading us forward. Surely that's stewardship.

⁶ Brueggemann, 7.

⁷ Ralph W. Sockman, "The First and Second Books of Samuel: Exposition," vol. 3 in *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1954), 42.