



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

## Wisdom for Whom?

Proper 15B: 1 Kings 2.10-12; 3.3-14

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There are more ways than one to measure the success of a sermon illustration. Of course, a preacher hopes a well told story will help a few people make connections between the good news of Jesus and the ordinary circumstances of lives like theirs. But there are less lofty measures too.

By another, my most effective illustration may have been one I used a few months ago. It involved Hot Wheels tracks and toy cars, with which, as a boy, I imagined myself as a brilliant highway engineer, whose day job was world champion race car driver.

Since you've already forgotten that sermon, it probably didn't succeed by the first measure. But the morning after I used it, I got an email from George Cates, that said, "You recently alluded to a young dream of racing. I can open that door just a little bit. Let me know if you'd have an hour some sunny morning to take a fun drive up to Shelby Forest in a..."

I'm sorry. The make of the vehicle in question has been redacted to protect the innocent. The innocent being Bena Cates, who might have been a little bit embarrassed by the car. Sensible Bena, who was perfectly content to get around in her Chevrolet Cruze when a guy in Jonesboro made George a deal on his dream car one day that he couldn't quite refuse.

So, the surprising fruit of one sermon illustration was that a week later George pulled up in a car that would make the heart of any twelve-year-old boy beat fast, even if it was trapped in a 54-year-old body. The driver's seat was maybe 8" off the ground, but, even at 83, George unfolded himself from the car, nimble as a jack knife, and stood there smiling on the curb in a ball cap, worn khaki shorts, white socks, and a well-loved pair of top siders. In other words, he stood beside that glorious car looking like a grandpa at a tee ball game, straight from central casting. You know, the kind whose idea of an extravagant expenditure is buying snow-cones for the team. That was George.

Off we went to Shelby Forest and its roads laid out like spilled linguini. What I didn't know until that morning was that the real miracle of a vehicle like this one was not how fast it could go. But how, in the hands of a real driver, it could hug a hairpin curve at 40mph, without even a squeak of complaint from the tires, when the same maneuver would have pitched my Subaru over into the trees at 25. I've never felt so connected to the earth while moving across it so fast.

Which does actually bring me closer to the point of all this. If I had a car like George's, I'd want you to know about it. Actually, strike that. I'm your priest. I wouldn't want you in particular to know about it. But I'd want it to turn the head of somebody. Someone who would be stunned that I owned something so beautiful and so rare. But somehow, George's car wasn't something he seemed to need anybody else to see. Did I mention the tee ball grandpa uniform? As far as I could tell, the car wasn't a way to distinguish himself from others. It was a tool for making contact with the vibrant world around him. A means of intense connection, not just with the road, but with a world of gravity and motion and sunlight and everything that lights up so vividly when one human's attention gets trained on it as intensely as a serious driver's has got to be.

This might not sound like a story about wisdom. But I think it is. This might not sound like an ethical story, but I think, in a way, it's that too. And we might not think that wisdom and

ethics necessarily have anything to do with each other, but in the scriptures and traditions of Christians and Jews, wisdom and the moral life are intimately and inextricably related.

We may tend to confuse wisdom with shrewdness. In fact, the Hebrew word for the wisdom Solomon received from God can mean “skillful” or “shrewd” in other contexts. But the wisdom of Solomon is moral wisdom. It’s essential to discerning good from evil, which is what Solomon asks for, after all, rather than long life, or riches, or the life of his enemies. His request to know good from evil pleases God. And God gives him a wise and discerning mind.

Now, if knowing good from evil were just about knowing the rules God wants humans to live by, wisdom wouldn’t be necessary. You’d just need a basic kind of literacy with which to apprehend the moral law, whether it comes to us written on tablets or spoken by prophets. And then you’d just need the will to follow through and do the good thing instead of the evil thing.

The moral life would be infinitely simpler if that’s all there were to it. But it’s never been so. In Genesis 3 we get a story not so much about the breaking of a rule as about the nature of our world’s brokenness. It’s a story, interestingly enough, about a tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But the desire to eat from that tree is different from Solomon’s request in a significant way. If you remember, the temptation is for the humans to reach out and take for themselves something they do not have. The serpent says, “You could be like God. Wouldn’t you like to know what God knows?” And so, Adam and Eve reach beyond the gifted abundance of the garden to get a little something more for themselves.

But Solomon doesn’t ask for wisdom as a private possession. He sees the people he must rule and says, “Dear God. I need a mind that can discern good and evil in the lives of all these strange and wonderful and complicated people. I don’t think I have that. Could you give me such a mind, not for my sake, but for theirs?”

Do you see the difference? What we know from the Fall of Adam and Eve is that when they grasped for something to possess, a knowledge that would set them further apart from the rest of creation, the result was a series of alienations. Humans from God. Man from woman. Alienation between human beings and the earth, from their labor, from their own bodies in childbirth. Within a few chapters, we have alienated brothers and the first murder. Then the people of the earth coming down from Babel, no longer speaking a common language, sharing a common culture. But confused, estranged, enemies.

What those stories also make clear, however, is that a world that’s broken apart in these ways can’t just be put back together with a few ethical principles. Its restoration may be more art than science. And Solomon realizes this as he looks out over the great people he’s to govern. He needs, not more knowledge, but this elusive, essential thing we call wisdom. He needs wisdom if he’s to help God’s people come back into the harmonious relationship with their world and with each other that we were all created for.

Back to that car ride. When the deep brokenness of our world is evidenced in all these estrangements, a real moral question is whether whatever we happen to have, or know, or do is something that distinguishes me or separates me from the world and the people around me, or a tool for engaging the world truthfully and intensely, and then for reconnecting what has broken apart.

I think this is why, from the day we lost George so unexpectedly a few weeks after our drive, I kept thinking about this strange and vibrant man who didn’t seem to know what a car like his was for. Rather than being something that set him apart, since almost nobody else has one, it was a tool for an intense, living connection to the world around him. The difference between

something that separates me from you and something that connects me to you or to the world that we share is everything. And it is in those shifts in our lives, small or large, from separation toward connection, where the work of living well has to happen. Which means we all need a wisdom like Solomon's if we're going to navigate this world in ways that leads to wholeness and healing and life.

It's astonishing that stories written down more than 25 centuries ago, stories about two humans and a tree in a garden or a king who realizes he'll need wisdom to rule well ... it's amazing that these stories speak so clearly and directly to life in a nuclear age of quarks and quantum computing and all the rest. What they ask is, "Do you have the wisdom, the moral discernment, to be entrusted with the knowledge or authority or power that you possess?" And too often, from that moment in the garden, to the U.N. climate report just last week, the answer has been a sobering, "No. No we don't." Too often we haven't possessed the wisdom, or even the humility to ask for that wisdom, to use our knowledge or power to bring our lives and our world back into the wholeness we long for. The wholeness something in us knows we were made for.

I was at the wheel when we headed back toward Memphis. But we didn't take the shortest route home. George wanted to drive through a few forgotten streets in Frayser where Neighborhood Preservation, Inc. was hoping to do some work. We crept along at about 5mph, because George's attention was no longer on the road. All I could see was blight and kudzu, but George saw possibility and a hundred reasons for hope. He saw people whose lives were full of dignity and potential waiting to be more fully realized if the places where they lived and worked and interacted could be shaped in ways that led to interconnectedness rather than alienation and despair. He saw the possibility of a wholeness that only wisdom can perceive and then set itself to the task of making real.

Such is the way of wisdom. And friends, wisdom is not something reserved for a few exceptional people. It's available to all of us. It's essential to all of us and to every human life. And Solomon's prayer for a wise and discerning mind can be our prayer. It must be our prayer, maybe now more than ever.

And if you can't pray it yet for yourself, could you pray it for Sully? Because we're about to baptize a little boy named Sullivan Graves into the community of Jesus, this branch of the human family that goes back to Solomon and on back to the common ancestors of us all. And when we do, we'll pray, "Give Sully an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works."

Which is to pray that God give Sully what King Solomon asked God for. A prayer for the sake of a broken apart world, a prayer that pleased the broken heart of God, because God loved those ungovernable people. And I believe such a prayer for wisdom still pleases God's heart. Because God still loves us Sullys and Georges and Solomons and the rest of ungovernable us as much as ever. And wants nothing more than a wisdom to live in us that restores this world one life, one block, one city at a time to the wholeness for which everything that is, was created.