

## THE NINTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | JULY 30, 2023

1 KINGS 3:5-12 | PSALM 129:129-136 | ROMANS 8:26-39 | MATTHEW 13:31-33, 44-52

A few years ago, James Holzhauer became a household name for a seemingly improbable run on Jeopardy! Much of the coverage of his run focused on his unorthodox strategy and aggressive betting. But having a good strategy doesn't do you any good if you don't know any of the answers. So to build up that knowledge, Holzhauer prepared by going to the local library and stocking up on children's books. His theory was that children's books would give you a huge amount of information—facts and figures, dates and places—without all the extraneous details. All that knowledge added up to thirty-three games and 2.5 million dollars.

This strategy works on a trivia show. Because a trivia show is just a series of what you can call “technical problems.” There is one right answer. All you need to do is look it up. And we have lots of technical problems in our lives. How often you should get your oil changed is a technical problem. So is how often you should apply sunscreen or how much a stamp costs. There is an answer. You can look it up. Maybe even in a kids book.

But most of our lives aren't made up of technical problems. They're made up of what we often call “adaptive problems.” They're not questions with one right answer, and you can't solve them just by getting more information. Those might be questions like *How you balance career and family responsibilities? What's a proper tradeoff between medical care and quality of life? How do we structure our church's resources to live out our mission most faithfully?* You can't find the answer to these questions in a kids book or any book, for that matter. They require something more of us.

There's an example of that something more in today's Hebrew Bible reading from 1 Kings. This is a story about King Solomon. Solomon is a relatively new king at this point. After the death of his father David, Solomon consolidated his power and, as this story begins, he's just taken the throne. At this critical juncture, God shows up in a dream and says, “Ask what I should give you.” In other words, “What do you want?”

Imagine all the possibilities here. He could go for the easy stuff. Money. Palaces. Military victories. Fame. The deaths of my enemies. Or maybe Solomon could be more strategic. Give me more knowledge, more intelligence. Or maybe he could get arrogant. I'm the king. I don't need anything from you.

But Solomon understands that leading the people is not a technical problem. There's no one answer he can look up in a book. He can't just do what Moses or Joshua or David did. It's an adaptive problem. It's a new context, a new time, a new reality for God's people to enter into.

So what does Solomon ask for? Here's how he replies. “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.” Essentially, he's acknowledging his need for guidance here. And here's the ask. “Give your servant, therefore, an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil, for who can govern this great people of yours?”

An understanding mind. If you translate the Hebrew literally, it's a “listening heart.” In either case, the idea is the same. Solomon isn't asking for more skill or more money or more information. He's asking to stay open to the needs of the people and to stay attuned to God's guidance in this new context. Instead of asking for a tool so he can make a go of it on his own, Solomon asks for

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help discerning where God is in a given situation. The word we use for understanding mind or listening heart is wisdom.

The scholars and scribes can tell you where God was in the past. They read the books. They accumulated the knowledge. They can tell you what Moses and Joshua and David did. But only the discerning can point out the grace of God in our midst today. Only those with an open heart can teach us how to live.

And God, who apparently thought Solomon might say money or horses or something, is impressed. “I now do according to your word,” God replies, “Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind.” A heart that’s open to God’s calling in every situation. A mind that’s not just smart but wise. So as Solomon begins this new chapter, he can trust God is present with him. And he can make his reverent best guess at how to lead God’s people no matter what situations arise.

You notice that same theme in the parables that Jesus told today. We heard five parables, and the first four of those have a theme drawing them together. The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, leavened bread, treasure in a field, and the pearl of great price. What’s the connection? They are all about small, easily overlooked things that transform everything around them. What does a mustard seed in the dirt look like? What does yeast in dough look like? What does a buried treasure in the field look like? Well, not much. A bunch of dirt. A field. A ball of dough.

But with the gift of wisdom, the gift of discernment, of looking closely at what’s in front of us, we begin to see them as much more. As a site of growth. As a process of change. As a valuable treasure. The kingdom of heaven, Matthew’s Jesus tells us, is not something that is present with big, flashing lights announcing its presence. It’s present in places and people and interactions that are easy to miss. So encountering the kingdom of heaven requires an understanding mind and an open heart. In other words, wisdom.

Jesus gives us that same gift of wisdom whenever we gather around his presence in the sacraments. Places where he promises to be present with us in water, bread, and wine. Things that are easily overlooked, written off, or not really thought about. And yet, because of his word of promise, these ordinary objects are transformed into something much more significant. And we, ourselves, are transformed by our participation in them. We are given Christ’s gift of wisdom to live and serve in the world. After all, if God is present and at work in these ordinary, pedestrian objects, we can trust that God is also present and at work within and around us in the world.

So whenever we are sent forth from this place out into the world, a world that’s full of those adaptive questions that we just call life—we trust that God is present with us along the way. And so, like Solomon, we can make our reverent best guess at how to live as God’s people.

Jesus doesn’t promise us easy answers or simple questions. He gives us something much better. Understanding minds, open hearts, and lives transformed by his wisdom.

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