

Wise Rulings
I Kings 3: 16-28

**First Presbyterian Church
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Planning sermon texts several months in advance, I can't usually anticipate how the passage for the week will interact with current events. So it's very interesting to me that this week's Bible passage is about a crucial judicial decision made by the government. In God's providence, it just "happened" that way. Let's dig into the story first and then see how it relates to us today.

We remember that towards the beginning of Solomon's reign as king, the LORD spoke to him in a dream. God said to Solomon, "Ask what I shall give you." Solomon wisely asked for the gift of wisdom. The young king knew that to govern such a vast people, he would need an extra measure of understanding and insight. He would need a knowledge of God's Word, a knowledge of human nature, and the ability to see how the two connect in different situations. The LORD was pleased to grant this request.

Now part of a king's duties was to make decisions in cases that could not be resolved by lower officials. The king was in himself the Supreme Court. His word was the final declaration of justice in any particular issue. So this story is about a very interesting case. Two women, both described as prostitutes, appeared before Solomon. They asked for resolution in a child custody dispute. One of the women was particularly impassioned. "Oh, my king," she said, "This woman and I live in the same house, and I gave birth to a child while she was in the house. Then on the third day after I gave birth, this woman also gave birth. And we were alone. There was no else in the house...and this woman's son died in the night, because she lay on him. And she arose at midnight and took my son from beside me while I slept, and laid her dead son at my breast."

This is one dramatic scene. We are full of questions. What kind of house is it where these two pregnant women with no husbands lived together? How did they both come to be having children within days of each other? Our hearts are pierced with the news that a child died during the night. This was a mother's worst nightmare. A tragic loss. Followed by a desperate action. To swap children. To place the deceased baby next to a sleeping mother while taking her child as your own. This was an impulsive decision. Who in her right mind would ever think this

could work? Who would be willing to bereave another and live a lie for the rest of her life?

So the woman lodging the complaint continued, “When I rose in the morning to nurse my child, behold, he was dead. But when I looked at him closely, behold he was not the child that I had borne.” A mother knew her own child, and this child was not hers. She confronted her house mate. But the other woman persisted in running her scheme all the way down the line. “No,” she said, “This living child is mine, and the dead child is yours.” You can hear the scorn and outrage in her words. How dare you try to take my baby when you’ve lost yours! The passage emphasizes three times that there were no other witnesses. It was one woman’s word against the other’s.

How would Solomon decide between them? He applied some very crucial principles of Biblical wisdom. First, we note that *Solomon did not demonize* the women. He did not make a decision based on their station in life. He did not decline to take them seriously because they were compromised women. And indeed that could have been a temptation. I read comments on this passage from one scholar in the 18th century. He seemed to know quite a lot about this class of women. He said “that common prostitutes do not usually bear children, or, when they do, take no care of them, have no affection for them, and much less are fond of them, as these seem to be.”¹ That’s a very interesting perspective. According to this view, this kind of woman does not usually have children. Since children are a blessing from the LORD and this is a wicked person, they are not usually going to get children. But if they do, these people don’t usually care for their children or have any real affection for them. Can you believe people could think like that?

I do it all the time! My thoughts usually include a phrase such as “Those people.” Those people over in the Middle East are not really like us. I mean I know there are a lot of refugees and all, and they had to flee their homes when ISIS came through. But they don’t really have homes like we have. I mean, what really was for them to leave? They’re used to being poor, right?” Or, I might hear myself thinking, “These people in North Baton Rouge. They don’t really care about their children like we do. I mean they leave the television on all night so people can’t sleep. They buy the worst unhealthy food with food stamps. They let the kids come home to empty houses. And then they go out and protest. They can’t possibly think about their children the way I do mine.” Or, “These people that are deviants. I mean, let them do what they want to do, I don’t want to lock them up or anything, but you know they don’t really love each other like we do. I mean they

want to play dress up or act all affected in their speech and ask me to give them a medal for it. I mean, really.” I specialize in demonizing.

Solomon did not demonize. He did not make sweeping judgments based on easy categories. He knew that one of the women was a mother whose heart was breaking over the death of a child. There was a woman pleading desperately to keep the child she had brought into the world. No matter her compromised and immoral life, she had a mother’s heart like every other mother. She grieved over the death of one child and yearned for her child to be with her.

The other thing Solomon didn’t do was *to minimize*. He did not naively think that every person is good. He didn’t take the bait that every person, underneath the circumstances of life, wants the best for people. He knew that one of these women had done a despicable act of baby swapping, and persisted in trying to carry out a lie. Oh, she may have done it out of feelings of grief and despair with which we can all sympathize. But that didn’t make her action, nor her pretense right. No minimizing.

But we do a lot of minimizing too. “Well, you know, he couldn’t help it. His father was so harsh with him that he’s spent a lifetime trying to prove he’s worth something. I know he was badgering and bullying someone, but he’s just a lonely boy at heart.” Or, “How can you say that people’s religion leads them to do bad things? These people are all sincere. They don’t really want to hurt us. If we would just be nice to them they wouldn’t blow things up. You’re a racist jingoist if you think some kinds of people might want to do us harm.” Or, “There’s no projection of inner conflict going on when sexual advocacy groups destroy someone’s career for not affirming their agenda. If only we would be nice and accepting, they’d never, ever interfere with our religious beliefs or try to silence our free speech. Everybody is really nice.” Or, “No policeman is ever a racist. They never abuse their power. You should see the population they have to work with. If they weren’t threatened they would never bully.” Or, “If you didn’t profile people and assume they were going to commit crimes, they wouldn’t. No law enforcement officers would ever be threatened if only they acted justly. If you just redistributed the wealth, no one would have to rob. People are good.” Minimize. Assume everyone is good and nothing bad will happen if we just don’t provoke people.

Solomon knew better. He did not demonize. He did not minimize. He believed that a mother’s heart for her child is a fierce love shared by women across every descriptive category. He also knew there are some bad mothers, people who

give in to jealousy, panic, rage and envy. People who would rather see you fail with them than let you succeed. Solomon knew that human beings are sinful. He knew that human beings are capable of great love. He just needed to cut beneath the rhetoric so the hearts could be revealed. He needed a deeper comprehension than simplistic answers from the right or the left.

King Solomon called for a sword. He prepared to act according to an ancient judicial tradition. When property is disputed and there is no factual proof over who is right, you just divide the property in half. So he declared, “Cut the living in two, and give half to one mother and half to the other.” Shocking! Revolting! Risky. But effective.

The two women both had immediate and revealing actions. The first woman was moved with compassion for the child. Literally, she burned in her inmost being, and pleaded with the king, “Oh, my lord, give her the living child. Just don’t kill him!” Meanwhile, perhaps at the same time, the second woman saw Solomon’s decision as a victory, “Divide him. He shall be neither mine nor yours.” The hearts were revealed. One woman wanted to win at all costs. She would see a child die before she gave in to her rival. Neither of us will have a baby. I choose misery for both of us. The other woman, a common prostitute, showed her heart of love. “Let her have the baby! Only let the baby live.”

Isn’t it interesting the way the book of Hebrews describes the effect of God’s Word on us. “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (Heb. 4: 12-13). God’s Word reveals what’s really inside us. That’s why it scares us to read it sometimes: God is not squeamish about putting his divine finger right on our sin. Looka here the Word says. This is what is in you.

King Solomon wielded the sword of God’s wisdom as he threatened to use a literal sword to make a decision. He dug beneath both demonizing and minimizing. He let two politically insignificant people come before him and occupy his time and his mind. He knew every human heart has sin at its core. We are bent toward evil. That’s not mean to say. It’s realistic. And it’s freeing. As long as we try to minimize our sin, it controls us and works through us, and even makes us prone to demonizing others so we can take attention off the sin we won’t admit. Solomon also looked at each person as an individual not as a stereotype. He knew that sinful human beings are yet beloved of God. We are yet capable of great

love and heroism. That's not sugar-coating. That's seeing with God's eyes his beautiful image that yet resides in us. It gives us hope. The wisdom we require is to avoid both minimizing and demonizing. We require knowing God's will through his Word, knowing people as God knows them, and then the taking of time to weigh the options in prayer and Biblical consideration.

Finally, let's go one more place that connects this passage to the gospel. The true mother in this story was willing to give up her son to an unworthy, lying woman in order to preserve his life. She would give up her own son to a bad mother in order to save him. Our heavenly Father went beyond that. He was willing to give up his own Son to us. He offered his Son to a sinful and unworthy people. But not for the sake of his Son. For the sake of us sinful and unworthy people. He let us have his Son and do what we would do to him. Because he wanted to save us. Our Father did not minimize our plight: he knew we are desperately wicked, lost and far from home. But neither did he demonize us: he always saw in us beloved creatures he wanted to save and make sons. So he came into our messy, broken, violent world and poured out his life for us.

Jesus came to enact the words of the Father in the parable of the prodigal son: This my son was lost, but is found. He was dead, but is alive again. He did that by offering his son who was alive, who is life itself, to we who are dead in sins and trespasses. He urges us to see the situation with true Biblical wisdom. No minimizing: we are more sinful than we ever realized. But no demonizing: we are more loved, each of us, than we can ever imagine. God's Word pierces us to the heart. It exposes who we really are. But, if we will allow it, that same Word will fill our hearts with salvation, love, and grace. And then he sends out to the world to live in that same wisdom.

¹ John Gill's *Exposition of the Whole Bible* (published in nine volumes from 1748 to 1763).

The Gloria in Excelsis (11 O Clock Cantata Text)

Dates to the 4th Century. Used in morning prayer throughout the world, as well as in weekly communion (Anglican, Orthodox and Catholic traditions)

Angel song: Glory to God in the highest
And peace to his people on earth. (Luke 2:14)

Adoration of the Father:

Lord God, heavenly King (Psalm 24:10)
Almighty God and Father. (Gen. 35: 11, Matthew 6:9)

We worship you, we give you thanks, (I Sam. 12: 10, Rev. 11:17)
we praise you for your glory (I Chronicles 29:13)

Adoration of the Son:

Lord Jesus Christ, (Phil. 1:2)
only Son of the Father (John 1: 18, 3:16)
Lord God (Titus 2:13)
Lamb of God (Rev. 5:6)
You take away the sin of the world (John 1: 29).

Have mercy on us. (Psalm 51: 1)

You are seated at the right hand of the Father (Mark 16:19, I Peter 3:22)

Receive our prayer. (Hosea 14:2)

For you alone are the Holy One, (Revelation 15:4)
You alone are the Lord. (I Timothy 6: 14-15)
You alone are the Most High. (I Timothy 6: 15-16)

Trinitarian

Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit,
In the glory of God the Father. (2 Corinthians 13: 14)