

“Be Sensible”
By Mary Anne Biggs

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Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

1 Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14 ~ John 6:51-58

I always feel a little sentimental at this time of year. You might think that it's because the calendar reminds me that I will soon be a year older, but that's not it. It's the realization that school is about to start. My mind wanders back to every school I ever attended, but this past week I have been mostly thinking about going off to college. The first thing I learned in college was that I was going to answer one question again and again ... what's your major? That's such a big decision for a young person to make! Do you go with your heart and major in Zen poetry or do you go with the money and major in education? Everyone knows that teachers make the big bucks. When I told my parents that I was going to major in philosophy they just looked askance and said, "Be sensible! What are you going to do with a degree in philosophy?" My parents were paying the bills, after all, and wondering whether they would ever get to stop paying the bills if I majored in philosophy. "Be sensible!" they warned, but how do you decide what your future is going to be if it's not where your passion lays? Luckily for them, and even more for me, by the next year I found my passion ... John Biggs, and switched from philosophy to a highly employable major ... Latin American Political Thought ... but you all know that story.

How do sensible people make decisions that set the direction of their whole lives? Which school they will attend? What will be their major? Who will their life partner be? What will they do for a living? And the decisions just get harder as you get older. How do you make decisions where everything relies on one roll of the dice?

We often find ourselves praying, "God, help me! Help me reach the destination I have chosen. Help me attain the goals I have set. Make my vision come to reality and all my dreams come true." Well, that's a good prayer. It's good to be full of hope and to dream big dreams. But that isn't the best prayer we can make. The best prayer we can make is "Lord, show me your way! Help me to follow your path. Show me what you would have me do. Help me make your dreams come true." Because this life isn't just about us, you know. The Bible says "*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom*" (Psalm 111:10). Every wise move begins with giving God the nod.

When he was just a boy Solomon became King over Israel. He was devout and sacrificed a thousand burnt offerings to God. God gave him one wish. There's a fine line between praying and wishing in this story, but then prayer can be a way of wishing. Prayer is the way we engage our imagination to discover the distance between what is and what might be. We lift our longings before God and see if they match what God longs for, too. We tell our wishes to God

and trust God to do right by us, saying to us "no, never, are you crazy?" or "maybe later," or "you need to do that yourself" ... whatever is best for us. Sometimes God even says, "Here you go. I was just waiting for you to ask."

"Tell me what you want," God asks Solomon. This is a fantastic story and something of a wisdom tale. Many cultures have stories of gods offering people wishes, and the wishes they make show the people for who they are. For instance, in the old French story a poor woodcutter complains to the gods that they have treated him unfairly. In all his life he has never had a single wish come true. Jupiter appears to him, and shows himself just by granting the man three wishes. The man tells his wife, who is overjoyed, but warns her husband that they must be careful and choose wisely. The man is so happy ... he builds a fire in their hearth and sits down to savor the moment. His wife brings him a big mug of grog. (Human foolishness often flows from big mugs of grog!) And he says, "What we need with this great fire and fine grog is a good sausage!" Immediately a huge sausage snakes from the fireplace. The woodcutter's wife is appalled, and shouts at her husband, "You stupid fool! You could have all the wealth in the world, gold, rubies, empires, and all you can wish for is sausage?" (Human foolishness also stems from our lack of imagination.) This makes the woodcutter angry (anger being another source of human foolishness), so he says, "A plague on you and the sausage, too! I wish it would stick to your nose!" So now here's his wife, with a huge sausage for a nose. He has one wish left, lots of options, but no other choice than to wish his wife back to normal, because he loves her, after all.

What is the moral of this story ... that mortals are too foolish to make wise wishes in the first place? That we squander our best opportunities on foolishness? Or be careful what you wish for because you might just get it? Or is the moral that you really couldn't wish for anything better than a warm fire and a mug of grog and someone who loves you enough to give up everything else? Whatever the meaning, there are hundreds of variations of this folk tale around the world ... over eighty variations in Europe alone. It reflects a universal longing ... if only we had the power to get what we wish! But that also raises a universal question ... would we even know how to wish for the right thing?

What would you ask for if you had one wish? If we put you on the spot like a beauty pageant contestant ... brought you up here and stuck the mic in your face and made you tell the world what your one wish would be ... would you smile into the cameras, bat your eyes, and wish for world peace? Or would you wish for wealth ... power ... health ... talent? Some change in the past? Some gift for the future? Would you wish for something for yourself ... something for your children ... something evil upon your enemies? What is your best and biggest dream? And what does your wish tell you about who you are?

God gives Solomon one wish. He is the son of the most popular King Israel ever had. His father David, though flawed, was larger than life ... a military hero, a political genius, a religious role model. Now Solomon, who is just a kid, must take his place. Can you imagine following in David's footsteps? In this new beginning Solomon has one wish. His prayer is this ... "Give your servant an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil." We might wish that our elected officials might pray the same prayer every day.

God is pleased with Solomon's wish.

Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you. I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor all your life; no other king shall compare with you. If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life.

The moral of this story is clear ... the best wish is to wish for the best ... for what God wishes. The best prayer is to pray for whatever God wants. "*Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done.*" As Jesus put it, "*Strive first for the rule of God and God's righteousness, and all these (other) things will be given to you as well*" (Matthew 6:33). The first decision in any decision is to discern what God wants ... and to do it, and everything else will fall into place. The only sensible major for any of us, if the Bible is right, is to major on God ... to connect with God at the center of our lives and then integrate everything else around that center. As Ephesians advises us ... "*Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is*" (5:15-17). Wisdom begins with God. Wisdom is knowledge, but it is also discernment. Wisdom is sound thought, but it is also right behavior.

But how do we discover the will of God so that we can do it? In the Old Testament, the Hebrew priests had sacred stones they would use to discern God's will. They would pray, toss the stones in the air, and read God's will from the way they landed. That's like flipping a coin or letting your Bible fall open and sticking your finger on the page to see what God tells you. I tried that once. It said, "Judas went out and hanged himself!" So I wouldn't recommend this method.

One branch of the biblical wisdom tradition ... Ecclesiastes and Job, for instance ... wants to say that the mind of God is so far beyond our mortal understanding that we can never hope to know what God wants. We are neither bright enough nor good enough to discern the right and do it. They suggest a simple, humble approach to life following the few simple guidelines God has given us for living together in prosperity and peace. Be grateful for what you have. Treat your neighbors fairly. Be generous and give justice to the poor. Leave the rest to God, because who are you to say you know what God wants? This branch of wisdom would say that humanity is not all that important in God's scheme of things, and we shouldn't worry more about our ability to know God's mind. Like all of nature, they would say, we do God's will by breathing and by being ourselves. And at one level that makes sense. I wish those folks who always want to tell us what God's will is for the rest of us would read this wisdom tradition and get over themselves.

The other side of the biblical tradition goes to the opposite extreme. Proverbs and some of the Psalms for instance, suggest that God's wisdom is a matter of common sense, self-evident, and imminently reasonable. God has given you the law. Obey it. God has given you a head. Use it. Don't be a fool by saying there is no God, or making yourself the god-center of your life. This, too is good advice, because in addition to those who deny the existence of God outright, too many believers have a faith almost entirely about themselves and what God can do for them.

Common sense is always about what we all hold in common. But all their wishes ... all their prayers ... are what they want from God. It just never seems to occur to them to ask what *they* might do for God ... or that God might have other children all around the world whose needs are far greater than their own.

I think both of these wisdom traditions are true. Sometimes God's will is quite clear, and our problem is that we don't want to do it because all our friends are doing something else. "But God, Susie's God lets her do it." That excuse never worked with my parents, and it doesn't work for our children, so don't count on it working with God, my friends. We spend too much time worrying about what God's will is for a few select issues, and not enough time doing what we all already know God wants us to do ... like loving our neighbors, and loving our enemies, and taking care of widows and orphans, and feeding the hungry, and visiting the sick and imprisoned, and establishing justice for the poor.

But how do you decide those big decisions of direction? In spiritual circles these days an old word has made a new resurgence: "discernment." Wisdom is discerning and doing the will of God. Discernment includes common sense and native intelligence, but it is not entirely a matter of human reason. Discernment is also gut instinct and energizing passion. Discernment is quiet listening and disciplined waiting for God. Discernment is taking a step of faith and seeing which doors open, which doors close. Discernment is doing everything you already know to do ... being the kind of person in the world God wants you to be. Discernment includes a passionate commitment to follow God ... an attitude of indifference toward all other drives and desires ... and a deep sensitivity to the ways and being of God. While there is no certain way to know that we have discerned God's will correctly, we can test our decisions against scripture and tradition and our own community of faith as well as the inner authority of God's presence.

Some people think that what they want must be what God wants, so they do as they please. Others think that God's will must always be the opposite of what they want. Does that make sense? Does God want us always to do whatever makes us unhappy or does God want us to follow our bliss? It all depends. Too often we think of the will of God as a blueprint or a roadmap. One wrong turn and you'll wind up in Albuquerque instead of Miami Beach. I think we do receive guidance from God on occasion for specific decisions. But God is redemptive, and can get us back on track if we make the wrong choice. Sometimes the path forks, and we don't know which way to turn, and God says, "It's your choice. Either way is okay. Either way is fine, because I will be with you." In those cases, discerning God's will is less a matter of which direction we travel ... as how we travel and who we bring along.

We do the best we can. We make decisions and move forward in our journey. Some things are clear and we must do them, even if it takes some discipline. Other things are our own choice and either way will please God. Still other decisions, important ones, are not clear and fraught with consequences. And always, we make some wrong turns ... we stumble along in the dark ... we fail to do what we should. What can we do in that case but trust the grace of God ... decide carefully ... but keep listening for the soft voice and looking for the gentle pull of God's Spirit to correct us as we go? We may not always know God's will. We may not always do the right thing. But we will always be in the right hands if we trust in God. What could be more sensible than that?

May we pray?

God give us a heart of wisdom that we might seek your way first of all ... and do your will most of all ... and always trust your grace through it all. Amen.