

October 28, 2018
A Parable of Justice
Annette Hill Briggs
I Kings 3:4-28

⁴ The king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, for that was the principal high place; Solomon used to offer a thousand burnt offerings on that altar. ⁵ At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, "Ask what I should give you."
⁶ 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. ⁷ 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. ⁸ 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. ⁹ Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?"

¹⁰ It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. ¹¹ God said to him, "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, ¹² 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. ¹³ I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor all your life; no other king shall compare with you. ¹⁴ If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life."

¹⁵ Then Solomon awoke; it had been a dream. He came to Jerusalem where he stood before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. He offered up burnt offerings and offerings of well-being, and provided a feast for all his servants.

[Solomon's Wisdom in Judgment]

¹⁶ Later, two women who were prostitutes came to the king and stood before him. ¹⁷ The one woman said, "Please, my lord, this woman and I live in the same house; and I gave birth while she was in the house. ¹⁸ Then on the third day after I gave birth, this woman also gave birth. We were together; there was no one else with us in the house, only the two of us were in the house. ¹⁹ Then this woman's son died in the night, because she lay on him. ²⁰ She got up in the middle of the night and took my son from beside me while your servant slept. She laid him at her breast, and laid her dead son at my breast. ²¹ When I rose in the morning to nurse my son, I saw that he was dead; but when I looked at him closely in the morning, clearly it was not the son I had borne." ²² But the other woman said, "No, the living son is mine, and the dead son is yours." The first said, "No, the dead son is yours, and the living son is mine." So they argued before the king.

²³ Then the king said, “The one says, ‘This is my son that is alive, and your son is dead’; while the other says, ‘Not so! Your son is dead, and my son is the living one.’” ²⁴ So the king said, “Bring me a sword,” and they brought a sword before the king. ²⁵ The king said, “Divide the living boy in two; then give half to the one, and half to the other.” ²⁶ But the woman whose son was alive said to the king—because compassion for her son burned within her—“Please, my lord, give her the living boy; certainly do not kill him!” The other said, “It shall be neither mine nor yours; divide it.” ²⁷ Then the king responded: “Give the first woman the living boy; do not kill him. She is his mother.” ²⁸ All Israel heard of the judgment that the king had rendered; and they stood in awe of the king, because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him, to execute justice.

Having promised certain of his enemies their blood feud would die with him, King David finally does die. But he dies a liar, because with his last breath he instructs his son Solomon to kill all those enemies. Thus, murder is King Solomon's first use of kingly power.

Solomon, you'll remember, was not natural heir to Israel's throne. Nathan the preacher and Bathsheba his mother colluded to coerce the dying David to skip over his oldest living son, Adonijah, in order to crown Solomon. So naturally, Solomon is also forced to kill Adonijah – along with others, including his father's fixer, Joab. It's ugly business, being king.

Then King Solomon lies down and dreams that he's wise and he'll be rich to boot. God says so, in his dream at least, and the church of my childhood more or less believed the same: that, based on Solomon, wisdom is the thing to ask for. Pray like you don't want wealth and power in order for God to give it to you. Those same preachers always smiled a little sideways at all of Solomon's wives and ladies. One thousand of them, the Bible says; the marriages, at least, forged for political and economic alliances, Egypt being the first. Egypt!

The Bible of my childhood was simpler. Solomon was wise and he built the temple. That's what we knew and loved about him, which only works so long as we skipped across of scripture. Our Thursday Bible Study students never skip those chapters. One summed Solomon up this way: “the whole thing is just so smarmy” (think of *The Godfather*). And therein is the problem – the problem of finding our way as God's people, using people as our guides; the problem of confusing God with people who put God's name on their own dreams; the problem with being more interested in the ways of kings and presidents than we are interested in the ways of God. We are inevitably forced to shave the parts off his character that don't feed the story we need, to have the life in God we dream of for ourselves.

Then the scripture offers up a story of two mothers and their baby sons, a possible side door into the hall of justice, where God-blessed kings judge prostitutes.

Let's pray. *Some days and places, more than others, O God, bear no resemblance to grace. Where hurt and hate and constant pain thrive like weeds, choking every kindness trying to take root. "How to live in hope and faith, O God?" we come asking once again. Amen.*

If the story were thirty-one books later, we'd call it a parable. A parable of justice, maybe. Two women – working mothers; business partners, it appears; and housemates, along with their kids. We don't usually get this much detail about such lowly characters. Each has a newborn son. One baby died. Both claim the living son is her own.

Their dispute lands before the king himself. Are these the moments for which he dreamed of being wise? Settling such small-time cases? Is his outrageous solution some indication of his small regard for everyone involved? *"We'll slice the child in two,"* he says, *"and give each mother half."* My brain and belly hate this story, because I've read chapter 2. King Solomon's not playing here. He'll do it! This is the kind of king he is.

But if I try to think in parables, I can keep listening. Maybe wisdom's aim isn't fairness, but to cleave open the truth. In which case, it does. My childhood church said, essentially, *all's well that ends well.* Except, it isn't and it doesn't – does it? My brain feels better, but my gut still hurts. Is my gut *less* God-given than my brain?

At least one mama is always without her baby, and all is not well in the world. Especially if the people of God have agreed to admire a king who proposes to cleave a child in two. Who is the one who taught us in parables? And how did he teach us to hear them? What does he teach us here? When we sit long enough with this story as parable, we will realize who the hero is . . . and he is not Solomon. She is the second mother. The one who will sacrifice her own motherhood before she'll agree to cleave a child.

Solomon may dream that this is wisdom – and all of history with him. But she'll have no part of it. She doesn't change her story, but neither will she bend to evil. Life isn't "either/or" to her. So justice can't be either. And yet, amazingly, we give all the credit to the king. It's he who saved the day, according to his fans. Finally, for a parable to work, it can't be about the characters, but about the listeners. About us, about seeing the light it trips in us, seeing ourselves in that light . . . and how we need to change.

I know the second mama is the teacher, the one showing Jesus to me, reminding me:

- that to follow Christ is never to be surprised at how broken this world is;
- how badly the best of humanity is prone to act, especially from places of great power;
- that the fact that kings and presidents know what is right is no guarantee they'll do it;
- that if we are surprised to see them protect themselves at the cost of human decency, we are the foolish ones;
- that this lowly woman before a king – she is how God is in parables. God never pushes front and center, never speaks in the loudest voice. God waits on the porch and watches for us to come around;

- that the fact that Solomon was “smarmy” did not make him of no use to God – thank God, or we are all useless too.

And of his dream I will say this: he knew what a king was supposed to do. *Give me, O God, an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern so many people?* (my paraphrase)

But knowing right from wrong is not wisdom and neither is it justice, if there is a difference. This woman the Bible makes sure we know was a prostitute is the hero of the story. We can't unknow it once we do. We know we ought to be like her, should we ever face her choices. Justice consists of the choices we make in the midst of the terror and tragedy of this world. But justice in the daylight is hard. We're more like the other mother than we can readily admit. Fair matters to us.

If we've been broken, taken from, or offended, we are as likely as her to deny others what we don't have, rather than let mercy and goodness thrive. The difference between the two women is what Richard Rohr calls moral conversion, the difference between fairness and God's justice. Fairness means no one gets more or better than Mama Number One. Justice allows the mother of the living child to act against her own self-interest for the good of all people. That is moral conversion. Moral conversion is critical to life in Christ. Nothing suggests it's easy. But neither does such faith ask us to pretend that evil isn't evil or that broken things aren't broken. We can hate how hard and hurtful this world is – and choose to live by love, trusting God is always there: above; below; behind; ahead – like we pray at the end of every Sunday. Let's pray now.