

Grant Us Wisdom

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What would you do with three wishes?

I remember pondering that question a lot after seeing Aladdin, with the story of the genie who grants three wishes to whoever rubs the magic lantern.

And yes I know, someone is going to say: “wish for more wishes!” But that’s not allowed.

Money.

Fame.

The love of another.

World peace.

Power.

Those are some common answers.

One time, in a rather public setting, someone asked me, “if you could change one thing about the world, what would it be?”

I think it was intended as an interesting way to get to know someone. What they value. How they see the world.

I remember saying something about everyone feeling able to give and receive love freely, and how that might put an end to violence in a truly meaningful way.

But what I wish I had said.

And what I will say next time someone asks me “if you could change one thing about the world, what would it be?”

Is: "I'm glad I can't"

Because what I really believe is that there is a reason humans don't have power or responsibility to change things in the world just by wishing it.

I am plenty happy to leave that to God.

Our story this morning takes us into the bedroom of Solomon. Who awakes one night from a dream in which he heard God say:

"Ask. What should I give you?"

Tell me what you want.

"Ask. What should I give you?"

What would you ask for? What if God came to you by night and said:

“Ask.”

Maybe you know already. Perhaps there is a need so present. Or a pain so deep. Or a struggle so real. That it springs to your heart and to your lips at such an invitation.

Ask.

Ask God to awaken you to how God is already present in that moment. Ask God for healing. For hope. For the strength to persevere or the courage to forgive.

Ask.

And alongside the prayer that first springs into your heart, Solomon’s prayer offers us two other important lessons about how to pray.

First, even though God’s invitation is “ask!”

Solomon does not begin with his requests.

Solomon begins with praise.

“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.”

Solomon begins his prayer by giving God all the credit God deserves for the good and glorious things in his life.

Solomon thanks God. Praises God. Marvels in God’s power, goodness, and love.

Take this lesson to heart and it will transform your life of prayer.

Never pray without thanking God for something.

Even if all you can muster gratitude for in that moment is the simple gift of your next breath. Thank God for it.

Begin with gratitude.

Begin with praise.

And then Solomon moves to his request.

And this is what he asks for from God:

“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. 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. 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?”

And scripture says: “It pleased God that Solomon asked this.”

Solomon is invited to ask for anything. And he asks for this. An understanding mind. He asks for wisdom.

Not for anything immediate. Victory or power. Riches or fame. He does not ask for woe to befall his enemies, nor for everything in his life to go the way he wants it to.

He asks for wisdom.

And this is not just about Solomon being humble or self-effacing.

I really think that he asked for the best thing that any one of us could ask for.

For wisdom

Because the truth is that life will always throw things at us that are beyond our control and beyond our comprehension.

We could lose our center chasing after each one as if we needed to determine the right path, the correct solution, the best outcome, and then bring that to God in prayer.

Or, we could simply ask God. For wisdom.

For enough wisdom to see God in the midst of whatever is happening to us.

For enough wisdom to know the right word to speak, or whether it is best to simply stay quiet for a moment.

For enough wisdom to know whether this job that you have always wanted is really where God is calling you to be.

For enough wisdom to know if the compromise you are being asked to make is a good accommodation or a betrayal of your deepest commitments.

It is one of the reasons why prayer is so much better than a genie in a bottle. We do not have to take responsibility for figuring out exactly what should happen, exactly what the right request should be.

Rather by the habit of prayer, turning to God time and time again. With grateful hearts witnessing all that God has done. And minds yearning for ever deeper wisdom.

By that habit of prayer we will slowly be transformed. Our perspective will widen. Our capacity for love and hope will grow.

We will loosen our grip on the reins of our lives. Let go of a little control. And live in the freedom of God's mercy and grace.

Ask.

Ask of course for those things that leap to your heart and to your lips. Be honest and open with God about what you want, what you need, what you hope for.

But just add one more thing. Never leave your prayer without asking for wisdom. Asking for God to grant you not a wish, but a new way in the world.

Harry Emerson Fosdick was a prominent pastor in the 1930's.

This was during the early rise of Fundamentalist Christianity in the United States, which insisted on an especially dogmatic and rigid interpretation of the Christian way.

Fosdick was among the most articulate defenders of liberal Christianity. He was well known for appeals to a less dogmatic approach to Christian faith, a method for the interpretation of

scripture that did not rely on literalism, and he was well known for his commitment to a more progressive social ethic.

He was an outspoken opponent of racism and segregation.

And for all this, he was formally charged by the Presbyterian Church with heresy and apostasy.

His defense counsel in his church trial interestingly enough was John Foster Dulles who later served as Eisenhower's Secretary of State.

That's just a fun fact.

Fosdick avoided certain conviction by resigning from his post as a pastor.

But not before his preaching, and his strong witness, had deeply stirred the heart of one of his parishioners, John D. Rockefeller Jr. at the time the richest man in the United States.

Rockefeller was dismayed that Fosdick was without a church and so offered to build him one. A beautiful church. On Park Avenue.

Fosdick agreed, but on one condition. He was worried that if the church was on Park Avenue his Congregation would be too wealthy. So he agreed, but asked that the church be built in Harlem.

And so it came to be, that on October 5, 1930 the Riverside Church held its first worship service, on the Westside of Manhattan, at 122nd St and Claremont Ave.

The Summer before that first service, Fosdick was in Maine, and he wrote a hymn to be sung as the opening hymn at that very first service, called *God of Grace, and God of Glory*.

And with that hymn Fosdick asked God for all the things he believed the church should as for.

It begins:

God of grace and God of glory,
on your people pour your power;
crown your ancient church's story,
bring its bud to glorious flower.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
for the facing of this hour,

Each refrain begins.

Grant us wisdom, Grant us courage.

Grant us wisdom, Grant us courage.

Because who would have known, who could have known, all that
those people, and all that that church, and that city, and this nation
would face together in the years ahead.

Who could have known that another World War was only a decade away.

Who would have known that one day Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. would stand in the pulpit of that glorious sanctuary and proclaim for the first time his opposition to the war in Vietnam.

Who could have imagined the ways the world would change.

Who could have predicted that careless human greed would warm the planet.

Who could have known that one September morning that church would wide-eyed dust-covered office workers seeking sanctuary as the city itself was under attack.

They couldn't know.

But Fosdick knew this.

Whatever would come, they would need wisdom and courage.

We can't know what tomorrow will bring.

We can't possibly know how our lives will unfold, and what curves and forks lie in the road ahead.

We could never pray for everything we might need. Or cover every situation that might arise.

But we can awake each day. And turn toward God who bids us 'ask' was say.

Grant me wisdom.

Grant me courage.

For the facing of these days.

