

**Pentecost 13, Year B**  
**August 19, 2018**  
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When God's people Israel settled in the Promised Land, they were tempted to worship the gods of the local people. So God raised up judges who rescued the people when they fell into the hands of their enemies and restored peace. This cycle of the people behaving badly, God allowing the people to be plundered by their enemies, followed by God providing a judge to rescue them and restore them to peace, repeated several times. When Samuel was old and made his sons judges over Israel, the people demanded a king like the neighboring nations. The problem is that **God** was their King. By insisting on a human king the people were rejecting the relationship to which God called them. God warned them that there were inherent problems with having a king. The people refused to listen, saying: **"No! but we are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations...."**

The problem with human kings is that they are—human. Even when chosen by God and blessed with the power and presence of God, every leader has flaws and foibles. Israel's first king was Saul, and that did not go well. Their second king was David, chosen by God and granted a covenant: **"Your house and your kingdom shall be made**

**sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.”**

David was in many ways a great king, yet he abused his power by having an inappropriate relationship with Bathsheba and then having her husband killed to cover it up. When David lay dying he named his son Solomon his successor, bypassing the expected heir Adonijah. On his deathbed David gave Solomon some king-to-king instructions:

**I am about to go the way of all the earth. Be strong, be courageous, and keep the charge of the LORD your God, walking in his ways and keeping his statutes, his commandments, his ordinances, and his testimonies, as it is written in the law of Moses, so that you may prosper in all that you do and wherever you turn.**

These words are beautiful, appropriate, and suitable for framing.

Then David told Solomon to go smite all David’s enemies, which is exactly what Solomon did, as well as killing his own brother Adonijah and all his supporters. That is what the text means when it says in ever so understated language, “**...his kingdom was firmly established.**” So when we listen to the story of Solomon becoming king, we need to understand the context. Even when we hear the affirmation that Solomon loved the LORD and kept his statutes, the Bible also tells us subtly, “**...only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places.**” That means that while he loved God, Solomon also worshiped at the pagan shrines God had commanded the people of Israel to destroy. And why might he do that?

Solomon had married Pharaoh's daughter, which consolidated his power. In fact, he married a number of foreign women, which was forbidden by God because it could lead to the worship of their gods. And it did. But being a politically astute king, Solomon attempted to cover all his bases.

Yet at the principal high place, right there at the pagan shrine where Solomon sacrificed to other gods, the LORD came to Solomon in a dream and asked what gift he wanted. Like the stories when someone finds a magic lamp with a genie inside, Solomon could have asked for anything.

His response is legendary:

**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 ... 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?**

Solomon's humility, his willingness to place the good of the people first, and the fact that he did not ask for riches, honor, or a long life, led to God's gracious response of all these gifts.

Perhaps Solomon's humble request sprung from his awareness that he was trying to balance on the knife edge of being both a faithful king of Israel, one who walks in the ways of the LORD, and a practical political king who faced innumerable challenges, both from within his kingdom and from enemies around it. As the Dean of Berkeley Divinity

School at Yale once remarked to a group of us preparing to graduate and serve as leaders of our faith communities, **“It is important to know how much you do not know.”** Humility, which at its root means *humus* or earth, means to be grounded. It is to know, as Solomon may have, that like his father he was called to serve even with all his flaws and foibles. So are we.

We, though we may not think of ourselves as being at all like David or Solomon, have to remember that God called David from being the youngest of a whole passel of sons, the one designated to keep the sheep. He was not regarded as being of any importance. But God does not see as we see. God came to Solomon while he was at one of the pagan shrines—it’s not like God didn’t know why Solomon was there or what he was doing. God approached Solomon and offered him the opportunity to start with where he was, and grow to be more than he was. And Solomon had the humility and wisdom to accept that gift, not only for his own benefit, but to enhance all whose lives he touched.

Because of Solomon’s humbleness and openness, God gave him wisdom and discernment unlike anyone who has come after him. God didn’t make Solomon perfect. God didn’t make Solomon less himself. Instead, God gave Solomon the gift of being the best possible version of

himself for the good of God's people. Imagine how God could use *you*, with all your quirks and challenges, to benefit the world. God calls us, as we are, to engage in a process of transformation as God's people. Today I encourage you to humbly open your heart and say yes.

Amen