



Hearts with Skill to Listen  
 A Sermon Delivered by Bill J. Leonard  
 Myers Park Baptist Church on August 19, 2018  
 I Kings 2: 10-12; 3: 3-14

It's not easy being king or even trying to be one. Just ask Saul, David and Solomon. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Israel demanded a king, despite thunderous warnings from the prophet Samuel. Kings and prophets almost always collide. "There will come a day," Samuel told the Israelites, "when you will cry out against the king whom you have chosen; but the Lord will not answer you on that day. The people, however, refused to listen to Samuel. 'No,' they said, 'we must have a king over us; then we shall be like other nations. . .'" (1 Sam 8:18-19) Yahweh relented, the Hebrews got their kings, and it didn't go well for any of them in the end. Saul died on the battlefield, paranoid and alone. David, his iconic successor, had a good run until his ego kicked in and he manipulated the death of a soldier named Uriah after taking Uriah's wife Bathsheba for himself. And the prophet Nathan exposed David's attempted coverup with the now classic line: "Thou art the man." In today's text, Solomon, son of David and Bathsheba, appears on the monarchical throne, hoping for the best.

Solomon was in his 20's when King David "rested with his forefathers," and he recognized that he wasn't especially up for the job, perhaps an early sign of the wisdom for which he'd become famous. Real wisdom isn't just knowing things; it is knowing what to do with what we know. It involves "justice," "complete integrity," and "shrewdness." Those insights don't come easily; wisdom takes a while.

You can't teach wisdom, in five easy lessons or even in eight required semesters. Thomas Merton insisted that, "One cannot arrive at an understanding of any 'wisdom,' whether natural or supernatural, by arguing either for or against it. Wisdom is not penetrated by logical analysis."<sup>1</sup> Jesus captured the wisdom paradox, with: "Be wise as serpents, innocent as doves."

Solomon was wise, we believe—well, mostly. But his lifestyle was certainly opulent, if not downright vulgar. The Bible says that "Solomon's provision for ONE DAY was thirty kor of flour (a kor 1.6 gallons), and sixty kor of meal, ten fat oxen and twenty oxen from the pastures and a hundred sheep, as well as stags, gazelles, roebucks and fatted fowl." An Old Testament Golden Coral and then some. (I Kings 4:20) He erected an unbelievably beautiful Temple to Yahweh in Jerusalem that took seven years to construct, and a palace for himself that was THIRTEEN years in the making.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Merton Reader* (NY: Doubleday), 302.

Scripture also reports, in the words of I Kings 11, verse one: “King Solomon loved many foreign women; in addition to Pharaoh’s daughter there were Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women.” And, the text continues: “Solomon was devoted to them and loved them dearly. He had seven hundred wives, all princesses, and three hundred concubines, AND THEY INFLUENCED HIM.” (I Kings 11: 2-3) This is the word of the Lord. What is it about kings and women? I’ll hazard a guess that the list of concubines got longer every time Solomon retold the story.

In his better moments, however, Solomon is said to be exceedingly wise, erudite and enlightened. The Bible suggests that he “uttered three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He discoursed of trees, from the cedar of Lebanon down to the marjoram that grows out of the wall, of beasts and birds, of reptiles and fishes.” (I Kings 4: 32-34) Solomon was a renaissance man of the 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

Another reason for his reputation as a wise man, however, seems to have been his ability to listen. Early on in his reign as king of Israel, Solomon cut a deal with God—a covenant—based on grace and responsibility. He asked, not for gold, silver, prestige, or power, but for wisdom. The *Revised English Bible* translates the Hebrew beautifully, I think, as Solomon says: “Give thy servant, therefore A HEART WITH SKILL TO LISTEN, so that he may govern thy people justly and distinguish good from evil. For who is equal to the task of governing this great people of thine?” (I Kings 3:9) Solomon seeks wisdom through the strength to listen, not simply to hear words, but to discern the meaning behind them.

Last Sunday we discussed the call for Christians to be tender hearted in our response to others. Let’s continue that conversation by asking what it might mean to speak of “the heart,” not just as the organ that pumps our blood and keeps us alive in this world, but heart as a metaphor for who we are as human beings. Growing up, my Texas Baptist pastors often asked us sermonically and personally, “how’s your heart?” or “What’s on your heart?” They urged me to be “saved” by inviting Jesus “into my heart,” a worthy but sometimes tricky metaphor. Once, in the middle of a children’s sermon I broke the cardinal rule of such underage homilies—I asked them a QUESTION. “What do you think about Jesus?” To which a 6-year-old would be evangelist blurted out “Jesus lives in MY heart.” Then, linking flesh and spirit profoundly, he added: “and sometimes he lives in my tummy too.” The place erupted in laughter; I told the kids it was time to pray. No more questions in children’s sermons.

Right now, in American cultural and religious life, we’d all better prepare our hearts, taking care of them biologically, spiritually and communally as internal signs and guides for who we are, and what we believe; hearts with the courage of conscience to live and act in a world like the one that surrounds us right now. Bottom line, can OUR hearts, especially our consciences, count for anything at this moment in American life? If Christ’s gospel can’t sustain us now, it is mostly worthless. Is that strong enough for you this morning?

Jewish scholar Barbara Binder Kadden says that, “in Jewish tradition the heart is also the seat of all emotions.” She cites one midrash that references over 60 different emotions from the heart, with the idea that “the heart sees, hears, speaks, falls, stands, rejoices, weeps, comforts, sorrows...” (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:16)<sup>2</sup> Other students of Judaism suggest that the Hebrew word for heart, *LEV*, lies at the center of human thought and spiritual life.

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Binder Kadden, “Good Heart—Middah Lev, ReformJudaism.org/good-heart-middah-lev-tov.

Lois Tverberg writes that the Hebrews are “a concrete people,” whose language uses “physical things [that] express abstract concepts”<sup>3</sup> In Hebrew Scripture, the heart has three major functions for human character—“knowing, feeling, and willing;” thus “the heart sees and knows.” Wisdom comes when we learn LISTEN to and with our hearts on all those levels.

Christianity follows mother Judaism in preserving the metaphor of the heart. “Let not your hearts be troubled,” Jesus tells his disciples, neither let them be afraid.” (John 14:27) St. Paul writes to the Philippians: “And the peace of God, which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and mind through Christ Jesus.” (Phil 4:7) In his *Treatise on Religious Affections*, 1746, Jonathan Edwards wrote: “From what has been said, therefore, we come necessarily to this conclusion, concerning that wherein spiritual understanding consists; viz. that it consists in *a sense of the heart*, of the supreme beauty and sweetness of the holiness or moral perfection of divine things. . . .<sup>4</sup> Robert Jenson suggests that for Edwards, “the sense of the heart belongs to that ‘one thing’ that separates human beings from’ brute creatures.”<sup>5</sup> Four hundred years later, it seems the jury is still out on that distinction.

Indeed, the term “brute creatures” comes to mind in our individual and collective failure to LISTEN to women who have been abused, and, as we learned with a vengeance this week, the failure of Catholic hierarchy to listen to boys and girls across decades, cruelly abused by those who were supposedly called to care “for the little ones.” And the mandate for listening hearts came, not from the church, Catholic or Protestant, but from the “secular world” in the #Me-too movement; and a Pennsylvania Grand Jury that issued its 800-page report documenting over 300 abusive priests, multiple coverup bishops, and over 1000 abused boys and girls, who said again and again: “No one listened to us,” while their lives were being torn apart.

Protestants aren’t immune. Last week the entire staff and board of elders of the Willow Creek Church in Illinois, a flagship mega-congregation, evangelical to the core, resigned with apologies for their failure to listen to the women abused by their founding pastor. No wonder Americans are leaving religious communities in droves.

Rightly or wrongly, directly or indirectly, all churches in this country are affected if not tainted by these developments. We’ve all got to work hard to have listening hearts, open hearts, yes, tender hearts, a renewal that will take some time inside and outside the church. It is a blight upon the Body of Christ.

I wonder what would happen if the Roman Catholic Church, and other ecclesiastical offenders would go public and declare: “Our witness is so broken, so heinous that we can no longer claim to be the arbiters of Christian morality in the public square. As a sign of public repentance, we will tend our own hearts for at least 5-10 years before claiming moral authority in church and society. We cannot pontificate about immorality in others while we have spent decades perpetuating immorality and covering it up. We’ve already paid out over \$8B in settlements, but we’ll mortgage the Body of Christ to the hilt if need be.” Atonement takes time.”

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<sup>3</sup> Lois Tverberg, “Levav—Heart, Mind,” [www.egrc.net/articles/Rock/Hebrew Words/levav.html](http://www.egrc.net/articles/Rock/Hebrew%20Words/levav.html).

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections* The Works of Jonathan Edwards, vol. 2, ed. John E. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 272.

<sup>5</sup> Robert W. Jenson, *America’s Theologian: A Recommendation of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 66.

It's been a rough week in the country and in Christ's church, and on top of it all, Aretha Franklin died. Yet somehow, her death is a poignant, radical reminder of the power of the heart; better yet, the power of soul. A not untroubled life, the Queen of Soul left us this week, but Oh what she left us with. Let's just spell it out: R-E-S-P-E-C-T. Three years ago, Candyce and I watched Kennedy Center Honors when Aretha walked out on the stage to honor song writer Carole King, in the presence of Michelle and Barak Obama. He was president of the U.S. you may recall. Aretha took command of the stage and started singing King's lyrics, "Looking out on the morning rain; I used to feel so uninspired. And when I knew I had to face another day, Lord, it made me feel so tired." It's a love song, to be sure, but the way Aretha sang it, it might have been "Amazing Grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me." My friend Bill Rogers, who's here this morning, sent me this quote from *Ebony* magazine, 1964: "Of all the singers who have forsaken church choir stalls for smoky dens of jazz, few have managed to fuse more 'pure Gospel' into their blues preachments than . . . Aretha Franklin."

Today, let's go OUT THERE with hearts that listen, hearts that know, hearts not afraid to feel—carrying with us, as much "pure gospel," and amazing grace as we can muster. Sweet sounds, sweet sounds.