

Title: Discerning the right isn't always easy

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, I am asking for these people gathered here and for myself to give us wise and discerning minds, like your servant Solomon; may we exercise this gift for the glory of your name and through Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we pray. Amen.

One of my favorite movies is called "Airplane!" The movie is a spoof of the "Airport" movies that preceded it. The premise of both movies is an airline disaster, the people who are the victims, and the people trying to save the day. Now "Airplane!" has some profane moments, but it is a funny, pun-filled movie, and you know how I like puns.

There is a scene in the movie where the press gets the latest update of the impending disaster in the air. The movie makers pick a scene from old movies of reporters rushing to phone booths. Only in "Airplane!" the series of phone booths all tip over from the rush of the reporters.

A global question being asked these days, "How aggressive should the press go to get a story?" The presenting event is the News Corporation tactics. I believe all of us know the head of News Corporation, Rupert Murdoch. It seems that one of Murdoch's papers, *News of the World*, invaded the privacy of soldiers killed in action, hacked the phone of a dead 13-year-old girl, and other less than wise tactics. When Murdoch heard of these abuses, he closed the paper, laying off most of its employees.

Now it seems that the famed law enforcement agency, Scotland Yard, whose yard is in London, not Scotland, aided and abetted News Corp employees in their aggressive means of getting stories. High level Scotland Yard cops have resigned. In England, it seems that almost every high-level politician has some kind of tie to News Corp, which has put the Prime Minister on the hot seat.

This aggressive kind of reporting was done for one reason and one reason only, profits. Novelist Raymond Chandler summarized Murdoch's motives in the words of fictional press magnate Harland Potter: "A newspaper is an

advertising vehicle predicated on its circulation. Nothing more, nothing less.”

In order for the press to be credible, the sources for stories need to be done wisely, with integrity. Murdoch closed *News of the World* because it lost its credibility, even though it was the most profitable paper in the world. When credibility is lost, a paper loses advertisers and subscribers. It is then no longer viable and that is what happened to the News.

Of course, those same principles are not just for newspapers. If any one of us loses our credibility, no one will believe what we have to say. It is the Chicken Little syndrome. We, as followers of Christ, have a responsibility. One of the qualities of a Christian is discerning right from wrong.

The pursuit of profits blinded the people at the News and they lost their sense of right and wrong. But you know, the world is not black and white – there are too many grey areas. It is in those grey areas that we have trouble knowing what is right and what is wrong. But continually discerning right from wrong is possible with God’s help.

Solomon was wise enough to know that the grey areas of the world were potential places where wrong decisions could be made. So, he asked for help.

When our reading takes place, Solomon is new on the throne of his father, David, sometime around 965 BCE. Solomon had older brothers and other potential rivals to the throne. Solomon made sure that they were eliminated. The executions being done, Solomon cements an alliance with Egypt by marrying an Egyptian princess. Solomon worshipped Canaanite gods and traveled to Gibeon, a major Canaanite site, to worship the local gods there.

What’s curious about this story is that while Solomon is at a worship site for foreign gods, the God of Israel appears to Solomon in a dream. Maybe this is to point out that the God of Israel is also God of the Canaanite gods, but that is not made explicit in the text.

In the dream, God offers a gift to Solomon. Solomon recognizes his youth and how little he knows compared to his father, David. He was about 20

years old when became king. Solomon asks for wisdom: to know the difference from right and wrong, from good and evil.

God was very pleased with Solomon's answer, which coincidentally was a wise choice. God notes that Solomon didn't ask for wealth (though as king, he was already very well to do) nor the death of his enemies (though Solomon has already taken them out).

We could ask, "What else was there to ask for?" So God grants his wish and Solomon will be wiser than anyone in history or anyone in the future.

The famous story of Solomon judging two women claiming the same boy as their son follows this story. It is an example of how Solomon made use of God's gift of wisdom. But we already have the seeds of Solomon's foolishness. He marries foreign women, who bring their own gods with them. He continues to worship the Canaanite gods. He undergoes a huge building program that includes a palace, a temple, and fortified buildings. To accomplish this, Solomon conscripts the people into forced labor. It was this policy that results in his kingdom splitting into two. He doesn't seem very smart.

So if Solomon's actions don't fit his reputation as being wise, why is that? There is no archeological evidence of Solomon. All we know is from the Bible. We do know that the books of Samuel and Kings refer to other books that the editor used to write what we now have in the Bible.

That editor or editors lived during the time of the Babylonian exile. The editors (I think it was a committee) and the people were forced from their homes and live in an alien culture with alien gods. This story of a young king provides an identity that was lost in the exile.

But the story isn't really about Solomon. It is about God. It is calling this people to be like David who, "walked before (Solomon) in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart" Solomon and Judah are seeking self-understanding in the face of an extraordinary circumstance.

We believe that this editing committee wrote what is called the Deuteronomic history. These are the books of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, the Samuels, and the Kings. There is a common theological thread through

all these books. That is, we failed to honor YHYH and we worshipped other gods and so God is punishing us for our iniquities by exiling us to Babylon. This story of a dream quest by a king is a reminder of who they are in opposition to their oppressors and what they are to become.

Solomon the wise became Solomon the foolish when he strayed from exclusive worship of YHWH. But having a listening heart and the ability to discern evil from good, will sustain the people through their exile and beyond.

I think it was some Mel Brook's movie when Brooks says, "It's good to be the king." I think Solomon probably thought or said the same thing. Solomon lost his way with God and Solomon lost his wisdom. Solomon isn't the only person who became foolish when jettisoned from God.

Here's the bottom line: continually discerning right from wrong is possible with God's help. In many of our prayers, we respond to a petition to God by saying something like, "I will with God's help." This is more than having the gift of discerning right from wrong. Just because we know something really doesn't count for much. What is necessary is that our actions reflect what our discernment is. If we know what is right, then we should act on that knowledge. Then, not only does God know that we are utilizing our gift for good, but others can see that we are wise. When people ask about our wisdom, we can say it is a gift from God.

There is much we can do, with God's help.

Text: **1 Kings 3:5–12** (NRSV)

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. ¹

¹ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (1 Ki 3:5–12). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.