

A PASSION FOR THE PARTIAL

Text: 1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14

I hope for you that this summer has moments beautiful and set apart enough from the ordinary run of days to sting you. If you have a favorite summer get-away and you got away for a time, or will, I hope that last night under the stars, that last look across the lake is incomparable, fulfilling . . . but with a sting in it too. I know, we can't all get away from town or, for that matter, from children. Still, summer passes swiftly; these precious days hang like ripe peaches from the tree of life. I hope you have tasted the juice of a sudden shower, or the sound of your child's shoeless glee, or the moon's kiss in evening air your skin so welcomes it fairly shouts for joy to be alive in it. And I hope there comes sometimes from these things a sting. Awareness brings the sting, *This does not last. Where are all things going? What is my life?* I hope you have space to feel questions like those.

Oftentimes, ordinary religion does not help us to live in sharp, passionate awareness, and with feeling—*con affetto*. I want to invite you today to experience your intuition that Christian faith is not ideas and theories, or even certain values, but deep water springing up to real life—passionate and compassionate, bold, hopeful, honest. If brambles are choking the way to this well, well, we're going to have it out with ordinary religion.

Consider Solomon. This summer, most "mainline" churches are skipping through 1 Kings "following the lectionary," as they say. You know what that is—a cycle of readings designed to give broad exposure to the whole Bible, provided you come to church every Sunday for three years. However, lectionary listeners hear only two stories about Solomon: one, how in a dream, the newly crowned king prays not for power or wealth, but for wisdom; and two, an eloquent prayer by which he dedicates the temple he built.

Here are two hero stories told of the king under whose rule wealth and power flowed to that little land. Her armies forced her enemies to bend their borders and pay tribute. Great sovereigns made state visits. A great temple to YHWH was erected. Solomon was Israel's summer. But if you only knew these two stories of Solomon, that would be summer without the sting of seriousness. It's not the whole story. The Bible remembers many stories about Solomon, and many tell of sorrow, not summer: how he made slaves of the resident aliens—the undocumented workers—to build his temple for God on the cheap; how he hoarded a harem of wives from every land—seven hundred, they say—and built shrines to every idol his women worshiped; how he mistreated his commanders, thus sowing the seeds of a coup that would destroy the kingdom in the day he died.

The Bible is peculiar. More than any national lore of which I am aware, the Bible sings exuberantly of its heroes, but tells their tragic tales, too, as if to warn against adoration. Imagine an America whose main story about Washington and Jefferson included impassioned judgment of their heartlessness in using women and men as slaves. That *would* sound like the Bible, but we would be a completely different kind of people if we could think and feel that way together. By contrast, when you hear happy hero stories only, what happens? What happens when the church reads its Bible so sparingly that only the summer of Solomon is told, or when a nation tucks the bloody rags of its history under its handsome hat so we come to know only Solomon the wise, Solomon the prayerful, only Thomas the Incomparable, or George the Liberator?

I would say this. From a false past comes a false hope for a false future, a dream of a land or a day which is summertime all the time, "morning in America," "a new day dawning." or Jesus! Jesus! come to destroy the unbelievers and rule for us forever in bliss. We hear these slogans. They promise life at no cost, no sting, no awareness, no growth. Many of our people are caught in fantasies like these, but

this is not the word of God. This is not the gospel. This is what religion in human hands sounds like, cruel and frantic to save itself—religion which you may feel ashamed to be associated with under the name Christian; religion for which you may feel tongue-tied, unable to speak.

Ordinary religion—every religion has a version of it—cuts the essence of its wisdom in half and teaches only the half the ego wants to hear. It tells of the soul saved, or damned—as if no continuing process of growth unfolds; it tells of absolute truths and condemns entire religions and nations with one word, “evil.” This binary worldview is based on proud obedience to “the Law.” If Jesus saw the city of moral majoritarians who thus set themselves apart from humanity, he would weep as he once did for Jerusalem. “Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace!” (Luke 19.42)

But ordinary religion is not really a religious problem. It is an expression of an ego-problem, an obsessive need to control the future. America as a whole—perhaps every powerful nation—has this disease, which theologian Paul Tillich called “forwardism.” Forwardism is the belief that the! great! accomplishment is just over there, just within reach after I . . . do . . . this! It leads men like Solomon to overreach in women or in war. In the spirit of forwardism, we let the former president pipe us into tragically endless war dreamed up in utopian hopes of salvation from evildoers. But it is also forwardism to believe that science will ultimately solve every need, provided we can get rid of the superstitious. It is forwardism to trust that laws, old or new—or the right leader—can bring the day of righteousness and prosperity, provided we can just overcome the other party. It is forwardism to suppose that free markets will save us through innovation, provided government regulation can be shackled. Perhaps the best way to understand America’s emotional resistance to extending health care for all as a basic right, like fire and police protection, is to see how our people are driven by forwardism’s basic fear, fear that I am losing control what is mine, mine, mine. We could mine this vein all morning. But let us get some air.

If we read wisely, hero stories need not feed our appetite for control. They can nourish our mind and heart. For example, I have no idea whether Solomon actually had a dream in which he humbly confessed to his God that he had no idea how to “govern this your great people.” (Would you be surprised if Obama had had such a dream lately?) But whether Solomon was so minded or not, *telling* that story for three thousand years has surely moved the hearts and minds of the people of God. Here you see it: the depth of religious tradition holding high for all to see that a person in power ought ask not for more power or for wealth, but for wisdom to discern good from evil. Why, just last Thursday we heard an up-to-date version of this theme when America’s newest Supreme Court justice publicly asked that “all Americans . . . wish me divine guidance and wisdom in administering my new office.” Go with God, Sonia Solomon Sotomayor. We can indeed read our stories for wisdom’s sake, without making false hopes from false heroes.

But what is a hero, really? How do you recognize a hero? Isn’t it this— some bright, sharp value already shining in your heart and mind falls like a ray of light upon the hero and you feel excited and passionate, because what you have cared about in your depths is showing up real, in human form? In other words, you can only see a hero because you yourself have hero-light inside you. Hero stories from history and legend work like a mirror. You are recognizing a part of yourself—the royal one, the wise one, the strong one. These are essential parts of you. Two centuries ago, the great mind of Goethe caught the spirit of this affirmation, leading from our eye to I AM.

*Were the eye not of the sun
How could we behold the light?
If God’s sight and ours were not as one,
How could His work enchant our sight?*¹

Now, this is half the hero's tale, when we tell it right. The other half awaits us, too, when we read well, for we see that their feet are like ours, after all. As they reveal within us our passion and our capacity, so also their weakness and failure shows. Solomon's sorrow, Solomon's error is there to read, like yours and mine. Forget the lectionary! Such a peculiar whole is here! You—and they—are exalted, precious, crowned in the eye of God, yes!—*and*—you are a mist, dust to dust, crushed with doubts and grievous memories, bent by every wind, and like the summer, soon gone. You are the rose and the thorn, run down and righteous—and if not both, then neither.

Who can live like this? It is enough to turn us in awe to pray, "O God, who can govern this your great people—this, your great person! Give therefore an understanding mind able to discern between good and evil." Right here is where you can feel and exercise the essential practice of Christian faith. Hear its distinctive voice calling your name. For you are called, like a hero, to govern. To govern yourself, first, in the light of Christ. To lead others who are given to you to lead, in the light of Christ. And to lead by learning from all, open to all. What is this light of Christ?

You see it in Jesus—the opposite of forwardism's grasping fear. It is passionate acceptance of what is, the rose and its thorn, our summer and its end. We might call it a passion for the partial. In Jesus, you see no desperate striving to finish, no concern to know the right people, no anxiety to orchestrate the right politics, no climb up any ladder but the cross. He did not finish best in show. Not best philosopher, not best orator, not best doctor. So far as the world knew, not best man, but a common criminal. As the Apostle Paul put it, "he counted equality with God not a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, and taking the form of a slave . . . he became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." Yet in his eye, he saw always a holy world where ". . . not just humans but all creatures live by participating in the life of God, by partaking of God's Spirit and breathing God's breath."² If Jesus—the essentially human one—is your hero, blessed are you! This bright, sharp love for what is least and lowest and lost is already shining fearlessly in your heart and mind. For "were your eye not of the Son, how could you behold the light?"

The Christian passion for the partial, not the final, can fire and inspire fierce dedication to correct oppression, like that you heard in Katie Kelleher's story today, for in a passion for the partial, you can be moved to act, untroubled whether you will succeed. We heard Katie say that she did *not* succeed at first; doors and ears stayed closed to her appeals on behalf of New York State's poorest children, but she pressed on until Mr. Soros heard with his heart. After the angry burn out, love is still patient and present. Moreover, the Christian passion for the partial funds edgeless compassion, for yourself and for all, as you run this human race, not so much forward as inward, finding yourself deeper in the grace of God, ever more willing to give what is needed, and to receive what is given, careless of earthly ends, not anxious to win, nor afraid to let go at the right time of what you hold. You are just, like your master, the last hero, who comes not to win, but to win you to this way of peace, aware of summer and its sting through your passion for the partial.

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1. Goethe *Theory of Color* (1818)
2. Wendell Berry *The Way of Ignorance* (2006) p. 136