

DEVOTIONAL

A LISTENING HEART

REFLECTIONS ON 1 KINGS 3:5–9

By Frances Lee Menlove

IN A REMARKABLE passage of scripture, we learn that soon after Solomon became king, God visited him in a dream in which God said to the young ruler, “Ask what I shall give thee.”

Before answering the question directly, Solomon replied that he had a lot on his plate; he was now king in the place of David, his father, and he felt “but a little child: I know not how to go out or come in.” Finally he answered God, saying, “Give your servant a listening heart.”¹ He asked for a listening heart that “I may discern between good and bad: for who is able to judge this thy so great a people?” We are then told that the Lord was pleased with Solomon’s request (1 Kings 3:5–9).

Solomon could have asked for riches, power, health, the death of enemies; but he asked for a listening heart. A listening heart.

Perhaps a prayer for a listening heart is a fitting prayer for us here at the Sunstone Symposium. Like Solomon, we have much to discern. We must make decisions and judgments. We must consider when to speak and when to keep silent. We must determine when to remain loyal to an established order and when to break free. We must decide when to listen to one voice and not to another. We must discern when is the time for contemplation and when for action—how to go out or come in.

These decisions accumulate. They affect others. They define who we are. They give form and direction to a life. If we are not careful, our lives get shaped by what we are against, rather than by what we are for, by what we hate rather than by what we love.

ISUSPECT most families have stories that shape their understandings—their notions of who they are. I have a story like this. When I was growing up, I heard this

story many times from my grandfather, Joseph E. Greaves, a professor of bacteriology at the Agricultural College of Utah, now Utah State University. The moral to the story shifted, depending on the lesson Granddad wanted to stress, but the story itself was always the same.

The event takes place in Logan, Utah, in the early 1900s. One Sunday, Granddad sat in church, toward the back. He watched the young deacons pass the cup of sacrament water down the row, each person taking a tiny sip and passing it on.

He knew Sister Brown sitting in front of him had tuberculosis. After the meeting, Granddad went to see the Bishop and explained how unsanitary it was to have people drink from the same cup. He gave the Bishop a mini (or perhaps not so mini) lecture on bacteria. Germs are spread. Diseases are transmitted.

“Brother Greaves,” the bishop huffed, “Do you really think that God would allow his sacred water, which has been blessed by the priesthood, to cause disease—to make people sick?”

“Bishop” Granddad replied, “Do you really think that God would have given us brains if he didn’t expect us to use them?”

Finally the Bishop admonished my grandfather to go home and repent. Granddad’s reply to that suggestion was a resounding, “Horse feathers.”

The story doesn’t end there. Granddad enlisted the aid of his friend and fellow scientist, Apostle John Widtsoe. The practice was changed. Individual cups replaced the common cup.

If my Granddad, who had a vocabulary at least as spicy as J. Golden Kimball’s, was disgruntled about something going on in his ward, he would tell this story and the moral

would be, “Men in authority are often jackasses.” On another occasion, in another mood, he might point out how good the Church is at eventually righting itself, with the help of heroes such as Apostle Widtsoe (and, not incidentally, my grandfather).

The most frequent moral of this story, however, was, “Never let obedience trump conscience.” In the final analysis, follow your conscience. Always. There is a need to have an informed conscience. Don’t just call any impulse your conscience and plow ahead. But finally, always, follow your conscience. To do anything less would be to deliberately take an action or accept a proposition which you believe to be wrong. Loyalty to a country or a church should never be uncritical loyalty. Sometimes in the interest of truth, criticism is not only justifiable but also morally required.

“Never let obedience trump conscience” is a maxim that has stayed with me. In its best moments, I believe this is also the position of the Church. I believe it is a part of wisdom.

SOLOMON was noted for his wisdom. The bible has a lot to say about wisdom. One scholar describes biblical wisdom as an “approach to reality.” “Because life is ever-changing, and because few circumstances repeat themselves exactly, the wise are the ones with the vigilance, flexibility and right thinking to meet life in all its contingencies with grace, compassion and understanding.”²

A pair of psychologists designed a test to see if they could measure wisdom—if they could differentiate between people who were singled out as “wise” by others who knew them.³

Here is one question they asked on their test: “A fifteen-year-old girl wants to get married right away. What should she do and consider?” That’s the question. How would you respond?

Here is an example of a low scoring response: “A fifteen-year-old girl wants to get married? No, no way. Marrying at age fifteen would be utterly wrong. One has to tell the girl that marriage is not possible. It would be irresponsible to support such an idea. No, this is just a crazy idea.”

Examples of responses that scored higher on wisdom are much more thoughtful and nuanced. Listen to this high-scoring answer: “Well, on the surface, this seems like an easy problem. On average, marriage for fifteen-year-old girls is not a good thing. I guess many girls might think about it when they fall in love for the first time. And then, there are situations where the average case does not fit.



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Perhaps in this instance, special life circumstances are involved, such that the girl has a terminal illness. Or this girl may not be from this country. Perhaps she lives in another culture and historical period. Before I offer a final evaluation, I would need more information.”

I need more information. This respondent listened to the problem, listened with her heart, and knew she didn't have enough information to make a judgment.

IN the spring of 1998, I spent two months in London with Gene England in his London Theatre Study Abroad Program for BYU students. We attended classes and discussions and saw almost twenty plays. One Friday evening, we went to see Sebastian Barry's play, *Our Lady of Sligo*, at the National Theatre. The stage was a room in a Catholic Hospital in Ireland. Mai O'Hara lay dying. The conversations she had with visitors and with the nuns, who were her nurses, gradually illuminated her past and anguished present. In one scene, her condition had worsened and she could no longer leave the bed to bathe or use the bathroom. A nun began slowly and gently to give her a sponge bath, all the time listening to Mai carry on, her voice growing more and more labored. The nun washed one arm then another, then carefully drew Mai's gown aside and washed her neck and breast and stomach. It was a deeply moving scene, a stunning portrayal of both compassion and suffering. I blinked back tears.

The next day, we gathered for discussion. One student immediately brought up the subject of nudity on stage. “You know,” she said, “before I saw that play, I would have said there was never any excuse, any reason to depict nudity. But, that was so deeply moving. A well-known and aging actress, gradually dying, allows her saggy breasts to be washed on stage. I feel like I know a little more about the dependency of the old, a little more about dying, and I hope I have a little more compassion.”

I thought about the test of wisdom, about the wise person needing a little more information to make a judgment. I hear echoes of the wisdom of Solomon. Echoes of a listening heart.

I WAS part of the Sixties' idealism that generated *Dialogue* and SUNSTONE. Striving for an “open forum” of ideas, Sunstone symposiums foster open, honest discourse. I treasure the open forum of Sunstone and the profound faith that allows questioning of the most deeply held areas of certitude. Throwing light into corners serves us all. It is, after all, secrecy that compounds

the crisis today in the Catholic Church over the abuse of children by the clergy. I am grateful to our own light-throwers. I am grateful to those scholars who protect us against the disappearance of the past by delving deep and presenting alternative narratives to those that have the sharp edges rounded off, the humanity of the participants submerged.

Since the Sixties, however, I have learned that not only the body changes with age. Also changing is our relationship with God and

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what we mean by spiritual life. As I listen to my life, I find God is less easily spoken about—more audible in the silence, or between the lines, than in theological formulations. I no longer demand, expect, or even want clarity. I relish the mystery. Saint Augustine said that if we understand, then what we have understood is not God. For me, letting God be a mystery is a necessary humility. For me, a God who is not a mystery is a God who is too small.

GOD said to Solomon, “Ask what I shall give thee.” Solomon asked for a listening heart. He was wise already. He knew there was much he didn't know. He knew that the heart is at the center, open to the joys and pains of others. Perhaps he knew that a listening heart might comprehend and celebrate not what divides us, but what we share as people of God. A listening heart is not quick to judgment. A listening heart does not cherish certainty over truth.

For instance, I believe that homosexual orientation is beyond choice. In the spirit of my grandfather's admonitions, I disclaim the Church's position that puts our lesbian and gay sisters and brothers on the margins of the faith with a stigmatized identity. I believe that women and men are equal in the eyes of God. I disclaim the males-only priesthood policy and look forward to the time when a more in-

clusive priesthood finds room for women. I cannot allow my conscience to avert its gaze.

But I worry. I worry about how constantly we divide ourselves from one another by our opinions and convictions. I worry about the many ways we find to divide ourselves between the “us” and the “them.” Jesus said, “I've come that you might have life and have it abundantly.” He didn't say, “I've come that you might believe the right things.” He didn't say, “I've come that you might be orthodox.” He called people into the fullness of loving and being. Jesus did not call his disciples to a life of being afraid of religious difference. He never said that discipleship is about defending right belief.

A listening heart may save you and me from that terrible and dangerous arrogance of believing that we alone are right, that we alone can see the truth and that others cannot be right if they disagree.

OURS is not an absolutist faith. We are not in sole possession of the truth, and ours is not the one and only pathway to God. We humbly appreciate that whatever we grasp, it is only a tiny bit of all there is to know of God. We know we must leave room for what we might know next.

Like Solomon, we can pray for a “listening heart.” A listening heart is a humble heart, one that doesn't presume to know all the truth, all the time. We may find that our shared humanity outweighs our differences. You and I may be able to listen to the truth in each other—to see in each other a beloved person of God. Then, we may be able to do the same with others.

As I close, let me ask you to observe one minute of shared silence. A silent time to think our own thoughts, pray our own prayers. After the silence, I will conclude with a quote from the ancient poet Rumi.

RUMI said: “Out beyond ideas of right-doing and wrong-doing there is a field. I'll meet you there.”⁴ 🕌

NOTES

1. The King James Version translates this last phrase as an “understanding heart.” I am indebted to Charles Busch for this rendering and also to David Steindl-Rast in his book, *A Listening Heart* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1983).

2. Kathleen M. O'Connor, *The Wisdom Literature* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1988), 34.

3. Paul B. Baltes and Ursula M. Staudinger, “The Search for a Psychology of Wisdom,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* (1993):75–80.

4. Coleman Barks, trans., *The Illuminated Rumi* (New York: Broadway Books, 1997), 98.