

“One Thing”

1 Kings 3:5-12; Matthew 13:31-32; Romans 8:35-39

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1 Kings 3:5-12

At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, “Ask what I should give you.”

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.

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. 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. 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?” It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this.

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, 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.

Matthew 13:31-32

He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

Romans 8:35-39

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors

through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Sermon

Can you imagine it? Can you imagine God speaking to you and inquiring: **“What would you like me to give you?”**

Our imaginations run wild, don’t they? How might we answer this question if God said to each of us: **“What would you like me to give you?”**

As we read in 1 Kings, this is what happened to Solomon.

Solomon was young – maybe 20 years old – and he was the new King of Israel. He had big, yet imperfect, shoes to fill as he succeeded his father, King David.

Solomon had heard what God expected from rulers, and it was a tall order. In the law (Torah) in the book of Deuteronomy 17:18-20 we read: “When he (the king) has taken the throne of his kingdom, he shall have a copy of this law written for him in the presence of the Levitical priests. It shall remain with him and he shall read in it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, diligently observing all the words of this law and these statutes, neither exalting himself above other members of the community nor turning aside from the commandment, either to the right or to the left, so that he and his descendants may reign longer over his kingdom in Israel.”

Kings were to be fully devoted to God and God’s word. They were to live God’s word. They were to be humble, not exalting themselves over others. They were to be able to discern God’s will.

Faced with this daunting responsibility, Solomon had a dream in which God asked an open-ended question: “What shall I give you?” It was like being offered a blank check.

In his dream, Solomon answered God in a surprising way. First, he paused to remember God’s love, faithfulness, and commitment to him, his family, and his people. Solomon expressed **gratitude** to God and acknowledged God’s consistent faithfulness.

Solomon, again being offered a blank check from God, stopped to humbly say to God “I don’t know what I’m doing. I’m young, I don’t have leadership experience, and I don’t have military experience.”

Able to ask for anything from God, Solomon asked for “an understanding mind to govern and the ability to discern between good and

evil.” In short, Solomon asked for wisdom that he knew he didn’t possess apart from God.

How unusual and notable, indeed: gratitude and humility, which led someone in power to a heartfelt prayer for wisdom. Able to ask for anything he wanted, Solomon asked for **wisdom** to be a godly leader . . . **just one thing**.

We all need wisdom. We all need the wisdom to discern between good and evil. We all also need wisdom to know how best to live our lives and fulfill what God calls each of us to do and be.

In the book *The Three Questions* based on a story by Leo Tolstoy, a boy named Nikolai also sought wisdom because he “sometimes felt uncertain about the right way to act.” He posed three questions to his animal friends: **“When is the best time to do things?” “Who is the most important one?”** and **“What is the right thing to do?”** The crane, the monkey, and the dog gave their answers, but they didn’t seem quite right to Nikolai.

So, he went to visit Leo, the Turtle. When Nikolai arrived at the home of Leo, the elderly turtle was digging a garden. Nikolai shared his three questions with Leo.

The Turtle did what we often forget to do. He listened first. He continued digging his garden. Nikolai realized that Leo was very old and that digging was hard, so he asked to do the digging for him. Nikolai completed the job of digging a garden for Leo.

Then a storm arose and Nikolai heard a cry for help. He discovered a panda who had been hurt by a fallen tree. The boy carried the Panda to safety and put a splint on the poor Panda’s injured leg. The Panda then asked: “Where is my child?” With that, Nikolai hurried back to the forest and found the baby panda. He returned the baby to his mother.

When the storm stopped and a new day dawned, Nikolai once again sought wisdom from Leo the Turtle. He sought answers to his three questions. **When is the best time to do things? Who is the most important one? What is the right thing to do?**

The wise Turtle, Leo, said this: “Yesterday, if you had not stayed to help me dig my garden, you wouldn’t have heard the panda’s cries for help in the storm. Therefore, the most important time was the time you spent digging the garden. The most important one at that moment was me, and the most important thing to do was to help me with my garden.”

“Later, when you found the injured panda, the most important time was the time you spent mending her leg and saving her child. The most important ones were the panda and her baby. And the most important thing to do was to take care of them and make them safe. Remember then that

there is only one important time, and that time is now. The most important one is always the one you are with. And the most important thing is to do good for the one standing at your side. For these, my dear boy, are the answers to what is most important in this world. This is why we are here.” (*The Three Questions* based on a story by Leo Tolstoy, written and illustrated by Jon J. Muth)

In the adaptation of Tolstoy’s story, servanthood is the embodiment of wisdom. We know the right thing to do by being present, by listening, and by helping those in need. Wisdom is portrayed as loving and serving others. **One thing**, really: **“Love your neighbor as you love yourself.”**

When we consider our New Testament lessons for today, we remember Jesus’ **parable of the mustard seed** – one SMALL thing. “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

God’s kingdom – the Kingdom of Heaven – planted in the world and in our hearts, can begin with something very small. When we are seeking God’s wisdom on how to be faithful planters of the Kingdom of Heaven, I believe Jesus reminds us in this parable, that “small things done with great love” make a difference in the lives of people and for the Kingdom of Heaven being grown on earth. Sometimes in our lives and sometimes in the church, we grow to believe that bigger is always better. We compare our church to others and feel small in comparison. We forget that planting faith and love in others can begin with something as small as a mustard seed – a seed as small as a pin head.

I read the novel *Theo of Golden* by Allen Levi. I recommend it to you. Theo is a man in his 80s who moves to a town called Golden, Georgia. He comes to town, quietly builds relationships with people, and does beautiful acts of kindness for them. He gives the gift of his time to listen to people as they sit on a bench in the center of town. He quietly and often anonymously meets people’s needs and connects the people he meets to others, creating a beautiful community. He hangs out with people others shun and misunderstand. He hangs out with people who just need a listening ear and an attentive heart. He sees people and understands them. He loves them. He encourages them. He gives gifts to them.

In some cases, the seeds of kindness and love are very small. But oh how they grow in the individuals he befriends and oh how the community of Golden changes . . . one person at a time, one act of kindness at a time, one friendship at a time. In the novel, there are frequent references to

Theo's Christian faith. It is from the wisdom of Jesus that Theo is motivated to love and serve the people of Golden. I recommend this beautiful novel to you.

In our lesson from Romans 8, Paul invites us to consider the **one thing** that will get us through the tough times of this life. It is not one thing, but one person, Jesus the crucified and risen Lord. The Apostle Paul writes acknowledging that suffering and opposition are real. Amid suffering he imparts asks a question and provides a compelling answer: "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor power, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

In this passage, we learn that God gave us the One thing – the One person we needed most of all. We didn't even know how to ask for Jesus, but God knew, God saw, God listened, and God gave us his only son because of his lavish and immeasurable love for us and all of humankind.

This passage from Romans is so very important to me. It has been at various times in my life that this One Thing has held me together. Amid pain and hardship, failure and despair, uncertainty and inadequacy, I remember this one thing: "Nothing in all of creation can ever separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord." "Nothing can ever separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord." **One thing.** We are loved by God and nothing can ever change that.

Had God come to me in a dream and asked, "What would you like me to give you?", I would not have even known to answer that the one thing I needed and wanted was God's love. But God knew what I needed. God knew what we needed. God knew we needed his love in the person of Jesus who died and rose again for us. God knew we needed a love that would not let us go, a love that is unconditional and unwavering, a love from which we can never be separated . . . ever.

This One Thing . . . this one truth . . . becomes the wisdom out of which we live and love . . . one situation at a time, one person at a time. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.