

SERMON | TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14 • John 6:51-58 • The Rev. Catherine Healy • August 15, 2021

I recently read about a fascinating study¹ done here in Chicago a few years ago, on reducing violence among teenage boys. The project was evaluating a program² that served boys who were in juvenile detention or had otherwise experienced significant trauma. The goal of the program was to help them pause in stressful situations and ask: *Is aggression the best response here? And if not, what should I do instead?*

In one activity from the program, one participant was handed a ball, and the other given the instruction, "Get the ball." Usually, some tackling ensued. The boy with the ball would fight back, and whoever was stronger or scrappier would emerge victorious.

Then the adult leader would say, "Why didn't you just ask for it?"

There are a lot of ways to have a wise and discerning mind.

And, in fact, the project succeeded in its goal: to help its participants develop wise and discerning minds, to discern between good and evil, and to discern whether or not something presented a threat.

What it did *not* do was try to teach its participants that violence was never the answer. These were kids for whom aggression was an important survival tool.

Instead, it posed the question: What if aggression is just one of the many important tools in your toolbox? What if violence isn't *always* the answer? It's always available to you as an option, but you have the power to slow down, rummage through that toolbox, and decide that you have a better tool for the job.

I think we all have that toolbox of responses to every situation, filled with some tools that are very handy and some that we might be prone to overuse.

Not everybody's default response is aggression. We didn't all learn to fight for the ball.

Instead, we might turn our backs and say loudly to anyone who will listen that we didn't want the ball anyway.

We might try to wheedle or please or guilt-trip the person holding the ball, and get so absorbed in their response to us that we forget why we wanted the ball in the first place.

We might give up and decide that we don't deserve the ball, or any of the other joys or successes that other people have. And so we lose the will to try.

All those responses are tools available to us. But none of them is the tool that helps us look another person in the eye and say, "Hey, wanna play catch?"

¹ Sara Heller, "Thinking, Fast and Slow? Some Field Experiments to Reduce Crime and Dropout in Chicago," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 2017. Discussed in Emily Oster, *The Family Firm: A*

Data-Driven Guide to Better Decision Making in the Early School Years, 2021.

² The program in question is called Becoming a Man: www.youth-guidance.org/bam/

King Solomon was remarkable not only for his wisdom but for his self-awareness. He was a young man when he ascended the throne—we can't know exactly how young, but probably in his late teens or twenties, not so far in age from those boys in the study. And yet he understood that governing the Israelites was a task bordering on the impossible, and that his own considerable intelligence wouldn't be enough. He turned to God to ask for "an understanding mind"—for his intelligence to be matched by wisdom.

When God said, "Ask what I should give you," he reflected on the most important thing. And he had the mind-bending realization that the most important thing is *the wisdom to figure out the most important thing*.

He could have asked for long life or riches, but instead, he asked God for a new set of tools.

And there lies Solomon's *real* wisdom. He understood that riches can't do much for you if you don't know the difference between using them for good and using them for evil, and that a long life won't be very enjoyable if you perceive everything as a threat.

He prayed for the power to know and do what was truly important, and God answered his prayer.

This wisdom of Solomon, I think, has something to teach us about seeking the Bread of Life.³

This passage from John, indeed this whole chapter from John, is not one of the user-friendliest parts of the Gospels. It's repetitive; it frankly sounds a bit

cannibalistic; and by the end of it, you wonder if Jesus is ever going to stop chattering about bread.

But what Jesus is trying to tell us, what all these bread stories are pointing us toward, is that it's hard to have the wisdom to know what is truly important. Without a spirit of discernment, without a truly understanding mind, we can spend our whole lives chasing the things that don't really feed us and then wondering why we're still hungry.

We all want success and comfort. We all want riches and long life. Even if we deliberately forfeit those things, it's impossible not to want them.

Yet those things on their own can never bring us true joy. There is a hunger inside us that money and power can never fulfill.

The only bread that can truly nourish our souls is living bread, of which Jesus is the embodiment. The only source of true joy is found in the love of God—a love that we can experience in prayer and worship, a love with which we are united in the Eucharist, and a love that we are given the privilege of showing to one another.

None of us is always good at using the right tools for the job. But we can work to cultivate wise and discerning minds. We can support one another in seeking out what truly nourishes us. Throughout our lives, we can desire the wisdom to figure out the most important thing.

And we can trust that God, the source of true life and infinite wisdom, is just waiting for us to ask.

³ I heard someone say this week: "Pity the preacher who has been working their way through John 6 this summer, for they have run out of stuff to say about bread."