

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time – July 30, 2017
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
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He is fabulously wealthy. He knows how to build impressive buildings. And he is ruling over a divided nation.

He always wanted power... and now he has it. And now that he has it, he is using it to purge his enemies and reward his friends. Some are saying that his family is playing too much of a role in politics. There are whispers about his relationship with a foreign leader.

Some people love him. Some people can't stand him. But he's in charge of the nation.

And his name is... King Solomon. (Who did you think I was speaking about?)

Most of us have at least heard of King Solomon, a king of ancient Israel. He succeeded King David, who was Solomon's father. You remember David – the great leader with lots of wives. Michelangelo carved a breathtaking statue of David.

Well, Solomon didn't get such a nice statue. But he *is* remembered for being a WISE ruler. In today's first reading, God says to Solomon, "Ask me for anything." And Solomon responds, "make me wise so that I can govern your people well." He sounds like the perfect national leader... a biblical counterweight to the lunacy we see going on in Washington right now.

But wait... *Solomon was not perfect*. In fact, his story is so messy it sounds like something that FOX and MSNBC would love to cover!

Here's the story: as King David neared the end of his life, his sons began to fight about who would succeed David as king. Imagine that – a bunch of men fighting over power!?! Oh, and the women were involved too. David had lots of wives, and these women wanted *their* sons to be the next king.

I can't cover all the details – let's just say that there are murders. There is backstabbing. And then an "unexpected candidate" emerges... Solomon.

His mother, Bathsheba, was the target of whispers about her immorality. Some suggested that Solomon did not really believe in Israel's God, but that he *pretended* to be faithful just for political gain.

There is name-calling and lies. And to the surprise of many, Solomon becomes the leader of the nation. He gets rid of enemies, rewards friends and family members. There are whispers about his relationship with a 'foreign leader,' the Queen of Sheba. He is amazingly wealthy, powerful, and builds the temple of Jerusalem.

The nation is surprised and divided. (Does any of this sound familiar?)

Please remember all this as you listen to today's first reading. It is *not* some 'political saint' who prays to God in the First Book of Kings: it is someone who has an imperfect history, now placed into a position of responsibility.

And what does he ask for, now that his reign is off to an imperfect start? Solomon prays, "Give me wisdom." But more importantly, Solomon apparently remembers what we so often forget: *Real wisdom comes from God.* "Give me an understanding heart," Solomon prays, "so that I can do a good job governing your people."

And notice the second aspect of Solomon's prayer: he does not ask for anything just for himself. He does not ask for riches, fame, more power. What he asks is this: "give me the wisdom I need so that the people I serve may flourish." It's not about him – it's about *the people*.

Solomon was not a saint. He was a sinner. His reign was off to an imperfect start. But, at least in this passage, he prayed with humility. And he focuses on God and the people he is supposed to be serving. So no matter what Solomon's past imperfections may be, God gives, and forgives.

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No matter whom you voted for in the last election, you may have found that the current political circus 90 miles north of here is disappointing and disheartening. No matter what your political persuasion, you may find yourself worried about the direction of our country, frustrated by failures of leadership. Many Americans are angry.

And the wise among us already know that the answers to our problems will not be found on Cable TV.

It would be easy for us to leave church today lamenting the fact that our president is not like King Solomon - at least in terms of Solomon's humility and wisdom. It would be too easy for us to leave church today lamenting the fact that Mitch McConnell and Chuck Schumer, Nancy Pelosi and Paul Ryan, often seem woefully un-wise.

It's too easy to use the scriptures to pass judgment on what we perceive to be other people's

failures. I think the Lord wants us to focus *on our own failures first* - on what we have done, and what we have failed to do.

It's too easy to watch TV and yell out our angers – “The president is an idiot!” “The Democrats are hypocrites!”

It's always easiest to judge someone else. When I was newly ordained, I observed the way that my pastor led the parish. Sometimes I'd say to myself, “He's not doing it right.” It was so easy to pass judgement... until I became a pastor, and started making my mistakes.

When Bishop Sullivan was bishop, I admired and respected him. But every once in a while he'd make a decision and I'd say to myself, “What is he thinking?” The same was true when Bishop Foley was here, and Bishop DiLorenzo. I might look at them and say, “They are not doing things perfectly.” But *you* all know that *I don't do thing perfectly!* How am I qualified to pass judgment on another person's imperfections?

Married couples have told me that, before they had children, they would observe their friends and pass judgment on *their* parenting style. And then they themselves had children, and they realized that it's not as easy as it seemed.

Every parent thinks they know how teachers should teach. But very few have stood before a classroom of third graders.

Everyone has an opinion about how police officers should react in life and death situations. But few of us have strapped on a bullet proof vest and patrolled the streets. From the cocoon of our anger and our judgments, it is so easy to shout criticisms about the imperfections of people who hold positions of authority.

But how perfectly are we carrying out OUR responsibilities?

Yes, maybe our current political leaders are not as humble and wise as King Solomon. But the scriptures tell us what to do in a situation like this. Actually, the scriptures tell us several things to do in these situation, but today I want to focus on just one, since it is the foundational one.

The scriptures tell us to pray. We are told to pray, every day, for those in positions of authority.

Notice, the Bible does not say, “post something hateful on face book about your least favorite politicians.” No. The Bible says, “Pray constantly for those who hold positions of authority. Pray for their well-being. Pray that they will be open to God's wisdom.”

And when the Bible tells us to pray for leaders, it does not mean the kind of self-righteous prayer that some of us use: “Dear Lord, please help this politician to see what an SOB he’s being. Through Christ our Lord.”

True wisdom comes from God, and from God alone. Jesus says that God’s wisdom, the wisdom of his kingdom, is like a pearl of great price. It’s like a treasure buried in the field. God-focused wisdom is worth more than anything else in life. A living, loving relationship with the Lord is where all wisdom begins, where anger and fear end, and where justice and generosity find their source.

In that way, King Solomon’s prayer is a prayer that we should *all* try to embrace. “Lord, I’m not asking anything for myself. Rather, give me what I need, so that I can carry out the tasks you have given me to do. Give me only what I need so that the people around me can be blessed through me. Lord, let me be a blessing to the people I’m supposed to care for.”

There are more than enough people in our nation constantly spewing angry words these days. What would happen if you and I, and countless other people of faith, sought the wisdom of God in an time of confusion; what would happen if we humbly prayed for guidance in a time of egos and division; what would happen if we prayed for one another, and for our leaders, asking God to bless them so that others may be blessed? What would happen if the people who claim to believe *in* God actually started turning *to* God for the wisdom that only comes *from* God?

What would happen? Things might change. And the first thing to change might have to be... me.