



Leadership And A Discerning Heart
(From A Longer Sermon Entitled, Who Needs Love)



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1 Kings 3:5-12 (New International Version - UK)

⁵ At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon during the night in a dream, and God said, Ask for whatever you want me to give you.

Solomon responded:

⁸ Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number.

⁹ **So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong.** For who is able to govern this great people of yours?

¹⁰ The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this.

¹¹ So God said to him, Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice,

¹² I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be.

What does my God require of me? It is another way of saying, what are the ideals I'm trying to live my life by and if I stood in judgment, on what grounds might I be judged?

For me the answers to these questions always come back to love.

Solomon was king of Israel circa 900 BCE; the son of David, Israel's second king, making Solomon third. Batting third in any lineup means run production and believe me he needs a strong will to knock in a few runs. The whole experiment of this kingdom of Israel in the bible is off to a bad start.

It is looking like a failed one in fact, Saul was a lousy leader, David had promise but failed in so many ways, and Solomon is up to bat. So God asks him, "What do you need to be a good leader?" And he replies, "A discerning heart."

Now that is interesting. You know if God comes to you and asks what you want, is a discerning heart the first thing you are going to think of? Solomon could have had anything.

Think of all the things a king or president or prime minister could use to lead his country...strong armies or peace, gold, corporate campaign financing or the ever popular, 1,000 more wishes.....

God says what he does because Solomon hasn't asked for long life or great riches...like most of us would have...he grants him this request.

What Solomon needed was not only a discerning heart for himself but a kingdom filled with discerning hearts. And like Solomon, We all need that; we need families, friends, communities, countries filled with discerning hearts.

What we have mostly is just normal human stuff, reactive, quick to anger, or self-oriented families and communities and leaders. In a world where selfishness has thrived, we need a few more discerning hearts.

So in the story, Solomon knows that the heart has power. It has power to draw to itself all things in the world, because the

heart is the place of all things in the world. A listening heart is what he needs and gets.

A listening heart is four things.

1. A listening heart is always open: it is willing to hear bad news with respect and objectivity. Its first response is to let in the news and let it grow inside the heart rather than judge it at the door.
2. A listening heart is sensitive to the joy and pain of others: in other words it truly feels for others—it experiences the ups and downs of others lives not in thoughts but in feelings.
3. A listening heart offers a space within itself for the other to enter (generosity, welcoming, hospitality)—for one with a listening heart there is not fear of strangers, it has no allergy to the “other.”
4. A listening heart gives each person what he so badly needs—an affirmation of his/her place in the world. You know the listening heart because it makes you feel known, real, worthy and that you belong.

In the kaballah, the mystical tradition of Judaism, this is heart wisdom. Heart wisdom is in Hebrew *Binah*, understanding, and related to *Boneh*, to build.

Heart wisdom is always constructive, seeking to build, to set a person on his feet, to give another a place to stand. It listens beneath the surface of a person’s words, and hears within all their struggles and searching and pain, the essence of a common desire—which is the longing to find that place where we all can grow in love.

The next thing that happens to Solomon and his new discerning heart is two women come to him with a child. You know that painful story. They say they both had infants and one died in the night. Now both claim the infant is theirs and so they want him to judge which is the real mother.

One woman is trying to steal the child the other has given birth to and without fingerprints and DNA and birth certificates I guess this was a common problem in those days.

Just in time, Solomon is granted a listening heart. He listens to the women without interrogation techniques or cross examining witnesses. Then with a surprising act he calls for a sword to split the child between the two and the true mother jumps forward and in another act of deep love says, “Don’t do it. Give the child to this woman.”

Scholar and writer Eliezer Shore writes of this situation, “A listening heart yearns to hear where all things belong.” Solomon yearns for a kingdom of God where all things find their right place, where his new gift can restore us from our greed and temptations so we might uncover that deep love we all have.

I tried to get to a sense of this listening heart while preparing this sermon...so I wondered to myself, “Who is the kindest most loving person you know? What did they do for you? Who do you know who has the four sides to a listening heart?”

Besides the Dalai Lama and my late maternal grandfather, and a few teachers I had who steered me right, I would have to say one person I met only briefly who had this was a Native American Abenaki elder in Vermont. She lived in a trailer in a small northern Vermont town, she was poor as dirt, and I only met her once. She received people to guide them, discuss their dreams, and look into their eyes. She was for the poor native people of northern Vermont like a King Solomon. I went to her with a friend to tell her about a poignant dream I had had. She received us like relatives; I felt in the presence of old heart love. She expected nothing and requested nothing. We brought her fruit and she cut it and offered it back to us.

We sat in her trailer at the kitchen table looking out on the dirty snow and mud that surrounded her land. She spoke to us like we had been

there every day that week, like we were part of her family, like we had shared harvest dinners together, been to family funerals and were present when her granddaughter was born. Visiting her was a mystical experience, and yes, maybe I was young and prone to mystifying experiences, but at a time I needed a lot of love and comfort, she was there just momentarily, as if to put perspective on things with a kind and gentle touch, as if to say look up at the sky and see how grand the world is and how much you are part of it. As if to say, with what will you present your God, with the riches you have gathered or a heart of love? I don’t even know her name, I don’t know where she lives or if she still lives. If she walked in here today I could not distinguish her from any number of you I have never met before. I only know she was there at that time for a moment with the kind of listening heart that I needed.

How can you be more discerning, more open, sensitive, generous, and affirming? Ask yourself, what do you need to do so

you will be filled with light and gladness in the eyes of your lord? I say this knowing how much I need this exercise, this practice and the benefits it provides.