

Proper 15 B Sermon
I Kings 3:3-12
Ephesians 5:15-20
August 15, 2021

The Wisdom of Joy
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FIRST READING

Solomon loved the LORD, walking in the statutes of his father David . . . At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, 'Ask what I should give you.' ⁶And Solomon said, 'You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David . . . 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 . . . 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, ¹²I now do according to your word.'

SECOND READING

¹⁵Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, ¹⁶making the most of the time, because the days are evil. ¹⁷So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is...As you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, ²⁰giving thanks to God at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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You will each have your own opinions on this matter and will, no doubt, feel as passionately as I do, but I hope that after this sermon we can still be friends. You see, the truth of the matter is, I like opera. That's not what you expected is it? I like opera! There is something utterly wonderful about the unique marriage of music, melody, stage, and voice and it captivates me.

If you love opera, or any other genre, you will have your favorite vocalists, the best of the best—the ones who exemplify the purity, the beauty, the versatility, and the virtuosity of the human voice. Unique to opera, however, is that when it comes to identifying the worst, one name truly comes to the top of the list. Florence Foster Jenkins is arguably the worst vocalist ever to perform opera on stage.

Born in 1868, Florence Foster Jenkins was an American socialite and amateur operatic soprano who was known and ridiculed for her lack of rhythm, pitch, and tone; her aberrant pronunciation; and her generally poor singing ability. Unable to pursue a musical career until 1909, Jenkins entered the world of music with a flourish. Often seen in elaborate costumes with wings, tinsel, and flowers she gave recitals in New York City and despite the vocal and musical inaccuracies of her performances, she became popular for the amusement she unknowingly provided. At her zenith, Jenkins performed a recital at Carnegie Hall and the tickets sold out weeks in advance. She was aware of her critics, but never let them stand in her way: “People may say I can't sing,” she said, “but no one can ever say I didn't sing.”¹

Both King Solomon and the Apostle Paul knew what it was like to sing their own songs, so to speak, without any regard to the critics. This morning we are presented with two compelling texts, one from the book of First Kings and the other from the pastoral letter

¹Nathan Salzburg, “The Worst Singer in the World,” Psmag.com, June 14, 2017, <https://psmag.com/social-justice/worst-singer-world-florence-foster-jenkins-84329>.

to the Ephesians. The First text from Kings tells the story of a young Solomon who, when visited by God in a dream, asked for wisdom above all things. Delighted with his request, the text tells us that God granted Solomon great riches, power in addition to the wisdom he so coveted.

Our second text, from Ephesians, begins with a charge to “live as the wise...making the most of the time we have.” The author goes on to urge the singing of psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, making melody to God and giving thanks at all times and for everything.

It’s almost as if the author of Ephesians was responding directly to Solomon’s request for wisdom in the first section of that text—If you want to be wise, make the most of the time you have.

“We live in a culture that pushes us to act as though there is never enough time. We are constantly rushing, with every moment of time absorbed in our desire to be connected and productive. In other ways, we try to tell ourselves that we have all the time in the world,”² we convince ourselves that certain things that really should not wait—like reconciliation, like dealing with a health issue, like having an important talk with our kids or partner, like taking time for rest and renewal, even pleasure—we convince ourselves that certain things that really should not wait, can. For the author of Ephesians, to be wise is to be “good and honest stewards of time, so that opportunities to do justice, and to live boldly during this time, are not missed.”³

The author continues saying that if indeed we live as the wise, the life we live will overflow in song, in gratitude, and, to sum it all

²Brian Peterson. “Commentary on Ephesians,” Workingpreacher.org, August 16, 2015, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2548.

³ Ibid.

up, in joy. This is where I see the connection to Florence Foster Jenkins. The author says nothing of hitting all the right notes, just about being wise, living in the moment, and singing your joy. And there is great and timeless wisdom in joy.

“In fact, research shows that joyful people have less chance of having a heart attack, healthier blood pressure, lower cholesterol, weight management, and decreased stress levels. Also, studies show that happy people are more likely to exercise, eat healthy foods, sleep better and avoid smoking.”⁴

Joy is good for you! And it’s good for our community of faith. If joy is our reason for gathering, the motivation behind our service to others, the song we sing in worship, and the goal of our learning—if joy so saturates the life we share as a gathered community of faith, it will spill over into the lives we live when we’re apart, the relationships we engage, the work that sustains us, and indeed the community we hope to minister to. The call to a Christian community—a resurrection community—is none other than a call to joy. And joy is infectious. Other people will feel it, see it at work, and catch it like a cold.

In fact, “[u]sing statistical analyses of thousands of subjects, a study in *The British Medical Journal* has shown that happiness actually spreads from person to person, up to three connections away. ‘So if your friend's friend's friend becomes happier, it ripples through the network and affects you, even if you don't know that person’ . . . A happy sibling who is a mile away can increase your probability of happiness by up to 14 percent; a nearby friend, by 25 percent; and a next-door neighbor, by 34 percent.”⁵ Want to know how to build up New England

⁴Cynthia Thaik, “A Joyful Life Supports Good Health,” *Huffingtonpost.com*, March 27, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dr-cynthia-thaik/joy-health_b_4612156.html.

⁵ Tim Jarvis, “How Happiness is Contagious,” *Oprah.com*, <http://www.oprah.com/spirit/Happiness-is-Contagious#ixzz3ii0064Xs>.

Congregational Church, especially during this uncertain time? The odds are in our favor—if we are a joyful people, others will catch our joy!

We, like Solomon, long for true, eternal, life changing, world-bettering wisdom. As we go through the days ahead as pilgrims on a quest for that Holy Wisdom, let us remember Florence Foster Jenkins and make the most of our time; do what we love with those we love for a world we love; and when it overflows in a song of joy that the critics mock, we may simply respond, “People can say that I can’t sing, but no one can say that I didn’t sing.” Be wise, live now and live well, and sing for joy. Others will join your song. May it be so. Amen.