

Let us be together in a spirit of prayer. “Dear God, let some word that is heard be Yours. Amen.”

Our sermon for today is based around a single question: “What is the best prayer?” Now, I don’t want to give anything away, but I have to admit that I don’t *know* the definitive answer to this question. I mean, mathematically speaking there’s *got* to be a kind of prayer that’s the best, just like there’s *got* to be a “best movie to watch on Halloween.” (It’s Tim Burton’s “A Nightmare Before Christmas,” and I don’t *care* if you think it can only be a Christmas movie—they all live in “Halloweentown” and the main character’s a skeleton.)

But I’m not so certain about the best kind of *prayer*. What prayers are just objectively *better*? Prayers that we should be making a *habit* of praying, not just because they have a “better rate of success,” but because they are pleasing to God. I’d like to submit for consideration “prayers for wisdom and guidance.”

Now I’m not saying these are the *only* prayers we should be praying, and I’m *certainly* not saying that praying for anything *else* is *bad*. You can watch “The Addams Family” and “Beetlejuice” on Halloween all you want, but if you don’t *also* watch “Nightmare Before Christmas,” I’m telling you, you’re missing out.

When I say the name “Mister Rogers,” who here gets a warm feeling in their heart? Raise your hand.

Fred Rogers was the kind and talented creator and host of “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood,” a public television show for children that ran from the 1960s to the early 2000s. If there’s a serious contender for *best* human being out there, Mister Rogers is definitely in the running. He taught the generations of young children who watched his show... that they were special just the way they are, and he helped them develop tools to deal with situations of anxiety and worry in their lives.

Everything about Mister Rogers was comfort. From his sweater and comfy sneakers, to his calming voice, to the gentle and

compassionate way he approached real-life struggles common to all young children—and many adults besides. He made you feel seen and understood, and offered wisdom and guidance that is just as relevant today as it was then.

In this world that sometimes feels like its falling apart around us, we could all use a visit to Mister Rogers' house every now and then.

Mister Rogers was a person of faith, an ordained Presbyterian minister in fact, but his show wasn't a religious program or a televangelist pulpit. He simply lived *out* his faith in the ways he interacted with children, and he sought God's wisdom in the work that he did for people of the world.

The prayer that I opened this sermon with is actually what *he* would pray before walking into the studio to begin taping an episode of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood. "Dear God, let some word that is heard be Yours." He explained this prayer in a letter he wrote years ago, saying, "I always pray that through whatever we produce (whatever we say and do) some word that is heard might ultimately be *God's* word. That's my main concern. All the others are minor compared to that. As you know in this business there are countless decisions every day (every hour!) and I solicit your prayers for guidance from above in all the decisions which must be made all the time."

Not only was Mister Rogers a man of prayer, but he began every working day of service with a prayer for guidance, and for the discernment of God's own wisdom. And he passed that wisdom on to *us*, all those children across nearly forty years worth of sweaters and tennis shoes... And anyone who ever tuned into Mister Rogers' Neighborhood was the better for it.

King Solomon, from our Scripture reading today, wasn't much at all like Mister Rogers. Not even close, really. But one thing I think they would have recognized in each other, was... an honest desire for God's wisdom and guidance.

Solomon was the son of King David, as in “David-and-Goliath” King David, and while he idolized his father and sought to walk in his footsteps, he also sought to please God in all that he did, and *earn* the title *birth* had given him. Now Solomon was far from perfect. In the Bible... the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings were an exercise in showing both the greatness of Israel’s early rulers on one hand, and those same rulers’ follies and failures that led to the *fall* of Israel on the other. Sort of a cautionary tale that no matter how righteous we are, we are not immune to doing wrong.

But our Scripture today highlights one of the things Solomon got *right*. The reason he came to be known as the wisest ruler in Jewish history, and perhaps even in all of ancient civilization. And it all comes down to a prayer. A prayer that I think Mister Rogers would have recognized.

Early in his reign, Solomon went to the top of a mountain and offered sacrificial animals to God at the altar there. That night, God came to him in a dream. “Ask what I should give you,” God commanded him. This is a real genie-and-the-lamp moment. When God appears to you with a blank check in hand, that’s something you take seriously. And Solomon thought long and hard about his answer. His answer began as a prayer of gratitude for all that God had done in his life and the life of his father that brought him here, and then it shifted to something else.

He acknowledged how *little* he knew, and how underqualified he was for the work God had asked of him. He even went so far as to call himself “a little child,” even though he’d been an adult for quite some time... and then he made his request. The request God had commanded, saying, “Ask what I should give you.”

I can think of about a million things I could ask of God if I were ever offered a blank check like that. I wouldn’t know *what* to pray for, if only because I had too many choices. Which brings me to the question I asked at the start: “What is the best prayer?”

What did Solomon ask of God in that weighty moment? He asked for an understanding mind, able to discern between good and evil. He

asked to be blessed with God's wisdom—for guidance to navigate the complexities of his life, his reign, and his *responsibilities* to all of God's people.

To deliberately *mis*-quote John F. Kennedy: "Ask *not* what your God can do for you, ask what *you* can do for your God."

And how did God respond? "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." God granted Solomon a wise and discerning mind, and more than that, God *granted* him riches and honor and legacy he had *not* asked for.

Solomon is a great example of how God surprises us with the answers to sincere and righteous prayer. Solomon stood before God with humility, making a selfless ask not just for himself, but for the good of others. And his life and legacy are a testament to the fact that when we pray for wisdom, God grants us that and much more: the tools to accomplish God's work with the wisdom we're given.

Just as God heard Solomon in his imperfection, so too does God hear *us*.

And what *does* God hear when we pray?

I don't know about you, but a lot of times when *I* pray it's kind of my last line of defense. It's a habit I've spent years trying to break, I think because it's a common human tendency. When pressures mount, we exhaust every avenue we can to try to solve the problem or alleviate the issue, and *then* when we are at our wits' end with no way out in sight... *then* we ask for God's help. That's not a bad thing... that's what God's *there* for. To be the hope to the hopeless, the answer to the ones with only questions. The way out when all ways are shut. That's what faith is: trusting God to *be* there for us... when nothing else *is*.

But those can't be the *only* prayers we pray. It shouldn't take *desperation* to remind us to talk to God. It didn't for Solomon. I mean Solomon had it *made*. Son of the great King David, all his political rivals were dead, he had riches beyond riches and a divine mandate giving him authority. He wasn't in desperation when he sought out God on that mountaintop.

And yet he prayed to God for something we *all* should. Something we all *need*. Wisdom, the understanding to discern between good and evil, and the guidance of God to better serve others. That's one of the best prayers we can *offer* to God. One we *should* be lifting up even when we think we've got everything figured out. And of course when we haven't got a clue.

And truly I tell you, God's answer to a prayer like that *will* surprise us, just as much as it surprised Solomon, who thought he had used *up* his one shot at a golden ticket.

God's answers to our prayers are *never* what we expect. Sometimes we even *miss* them because we're looking for the wrong answer. But when we pray for wisdom and guidance, God gives us that and *more*: the tools to *accomplish* God's work with the wisdom we are given.

In all that we do... may we seek the same wisdom Solomon did. The same wisdom Mister Rogers sought every day before he switched on the cameras and pulled on his comfy sneakers. May that wisdom shape the way we relate to God and to one another... and may that wisdom shape the work each one of us does in service of God and our fellow human beings. Our fellow *children* of God. Because Solomon was *right* to call himself a child. We're *all* children when you get right down to it. We're all children of God. Children who *always* need a wise neighbor. A good neighbor.

Won't you be my neighbor? Amen.