Solomon’s Wisdom . . . or Not

A Sermon on 1 Kings 3:5-12

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In my reflections on today’s reading from the First Book of Kings, I was greatly inspired and informed by the insights shared by two creative and compelling professors, Carol Gilligan and David Richards. Professor Gilligan is a psychologist best known for her book titled *In a Different Voice,* based on her ground-breaking research on the moral development of young girls and women as contrasted with young boys and men. Arguably, Professor Richards’ work is less well known though no less transformative. As a legal scholar his research interests include the history of ethical resistance to injustice generally, and to the injustices wrought by patriarchal religion and sexuality in particular.

Together, Gilligan and Richards have coauthored a book titled *Deepening Darkness.* Among the questions they ask are these: “Why is America again fighting an unjust war? In this era of rising economic inequality and diminished human rights and values, why is America’s political discussion distorted by religious fundamentalism, the fear of gay marriage, and the specter of abortions outlawed?” The answer to these and related questions is hinted at strongly in the book’s subtitle, *Patriarchy, Resistance, & Democracy’s Future.* Said plainly, whether represented in a monarchy or presidency, patriarchy is anathema to democracy and must be resisted.

There are at least two ways of hearing and interpreting the title, *Deepening Darkness.* One interpretation is that the perils of patriarchy are ever more pervasive and poisonous*.* “Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely.” A second and not mutually exclusive way to understand the title is that the very existence and persistence of patriarchy is ever more obscure, hidden in plain sight, its pathologies glossed over as it were.

Seeing and intuitively feeling our way in the darkness, we return to today’s Old Testament reading. And the first thing to almost go unnoticed is the very title of the book in which the reading is nested: 1 Kings. For better or for worse the king, of course, is the epitome of patriarchs! At first blush this particular patriarch, King Solomon, is for the better . . . he is humble, selfless, and benevolent. God appears to Solomon in a dream and says to him, “Ask what I should give you.” Solomon asks for a listening, discerning heart with which to govern God’s numerous people. Ask not what your God can do for you but what you can do for your God. “Bada bing, bada boom!” God grants Solomon the gift of wisdom by which Solomon would come to be known far and wide.

But wait. There is more to the story than immediately meets the eye. For example, we are told at the very beginning of the reading that it was at Gibeon that God came to Solomon in a dream. And Gibeon was the home of Hivites. And the Israelites had an explicit and strict prohibition against fraternizing with the gods and women of the Hivite and other Canaanite nations. Still, Solomon had an Egyptian wife, the daughter of Pharaoh. And legend has it that he had 699 other wives, most of them foreigners. Solomon had a fetish for foreign women.

We can understand Solomon’s relationship with women even if we do not condone it. After all, he is himself the child of an adulterous father King David, and a mother, Bathsheba, who had been raped by the king. As Frederick Buechner, a much beloved Christian theologian put the case, growing up in King David’s court was “less than conducive to the development of sound moral character.”

Patriarchal apples fall from patriarchal trees.

Dominance over women is a hallmark of patriarchy. Mere objects of desire, you can have as many women as you want, in serial monogamy or all at once. You can obtain a bride by sending her husband off to be killed in one of your imperialist wars. You can literally or figuratively grab any woman by any desired body part and still be enthroned as king.

Now about King Solomon’s wisdom. Surely we can concede that much to the patriarch. Yet even here there is room for questioning. For example, although the Book of Proverbs is attributed to the king, my Jewish study Bible reveals that “actual Solomonic authorship of any part of this book is doubtful.” Rather, anonymous wise men and women likely made up the sayings.

However, all is not lost. There is a case-in-point with which we might better debate the matter. Fortunately, the “case” comes immediately after Solomon awakens from his dream at Gibeon-almost as a test of the veracity of God’s promise. Near the close of the chapter from whence today’s reading is excerpted, two women came to the king for resolution of a breathtaking, heartbreaking claim. In scripture the two women are described as prostitutes. Except to imply that both are liars, this reference is a gratuitous slap to the face of both mothers and should have no bearing on the matter before the king. In any event, each of the women had given birth to sons three days apart. One of the boys died from what we would today diagnose as “crib death.” In the dead of night, the mother of the dead child switched her infant for the living one.

The mothers came before the king with their claims and counter-claims. Unable to discern which mother was telling the truth, the king gave an order: “Fetch me a sword,” whereupon he threatened to slice the child in two giving half to each mother. In response, so as to save the life of the child and at great sacrifice to her own well-being, the actual mother bade the king give the child to the fraudulent mother. It was on the basis of her apparent self-sacrifice that the real mother was awarded custody.

We know this to be the very case that established Solomon’s reputation because we are told explicitly so. Scripture reads, “All Israel heard of the judgement the king had rendered; and they stood in awe of the king, because they perceived that the kingdom of God was in him, to execute justice.”

What say we? Notice the almost prototypical response of the patriarch to draw the sword to resolve yet another already tragic social conflict. An ethic of care is generally foreign to patriarchal institutions and practices. In what way might such an ethic have met the needs of both aggrieved mothers? Where in this story is there evidence of a wisdom that flows from a listening heart?

If we can now see through the darkness at the existence and effect of patriarchy in King Solomon’s time, we might reasonably inquire of its manifestations in the twenty-first century. Consider the following examples.

A Congresswoman of color fights year after year for 16 years to rescind an authorization of the use of military force that has been used to justify a host of military interventions never debated or approved by the US Congress. Finally, and to the surprise of many, her amendment was approved with the near unanimous support of the House Appropriations Committee. Then, literally in the middle of night without any debate, a single white male stripped the amendment from the Department of Defense appropriations bill. Such an act may be many other things but it is at least undemocratic and qualifies as patriarchal.

A white female Senator was reading into the Senate record a letter from a deceased woman of color opposing the nomination of a known racist as Attorney General of the United States. The Senate Majority Leader invoked an arcane rule to silence the female Senator and force her to sit. Sounding very much like a domestic abuser, the Leader later declared, “[The Senator] was giving a lengthy speech. She had appeared to violate the rule. She was warned. She was given an explanation . . . Nevertheless, she persisted.”

In her effort to question the US Attorney General, and later a deputy AG, a woman Senator of color was interrupted by at least two white male Senator colleagues. The interruptions by the visibly disturbed men were atypical for senatorial hearings.

Can there be any greater evidence of the patriarch’s sexism and rank misogyny than the creation and distribution of the so-called “Hillary Nut Cracker”?

The evidence suggests that patriarchs are more and more deeply disturbed as the voices of women resound in solidarity with an ethic of care.

If there is any merit to the assertions made thus far, regarding patriarchy as anathema to democracy, what must we do? What, in particular is the Christian imperative? The answer is as simple as it is complex. The general implication is to follow the biblical injunction to love God and love thy neighbor as thyself—that is the epitome of an ethic of care and antidote to patriarchal dominance.

For examples of an ethic of care, there are some equal to but none better than the way in which Jesus of Nazareth relates to women throughout the New Testament, from the Samaritan woman whom he meets at Jacob’s well and holds the most extended, nuanced theological dialog of any other character in the four Gospels; to the Canaanite woman who pleaded for Jesus to heal her daughter of evil spirits. Unlike King Solomon who exploited foreign women, Jesus stood in solidarity with them. So, the Christian imperative is to take up our crosses and follow Jesus.

In a book titled *Joining the Resistance*, Carol Gilligan brings the fruits of her research out of the academy into the streets. She counts herself as a feminist, where she sees feminism as “one of the great liberation movements in human history. It is a movement to free democracy from patriarchy.” In this sense we must all count ourselves feminists—men and women, gay and straight, bisexual and transgendered, black and white, yellow and red, young and old, rich and poor. The movement requires that we see and name patriarchy through the deepening darkness that would otherwise obfuscate and intoxicate.

Make no mistake! The resistance will invite a backlash including silencing and literal or figurative assassination. Ask US Congressional Representative Barbara Lee, or Senator Elizabeth Warren, or Senator Kamala Harris!

We will be told to shut up and sit down. But we must find our collective voices, speak up and stand up in solidarity before we annihilate ourselves through climate change or a nuclear holocaust triggered by another social conflict that we attempt to solve with the sword.

The danger is too great, the darkness too deep. We can no longer make peace with patriarchy.