

Decisions, Decisions
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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1 Kings 12:1-17, 25-29

We all need a little advice now and again, don't we?

In the world of advice-givers perhaps no one does it better than Dear Abby. You probably know that Dear Abby is an advice column written by Abigail Van Buren (which is actually a pen name for Pauline Phillips, twin sister of Ann Landers). The original Abby passed away a few years ago, but her daughter still writes the column using the same pen name.

Since 1956, thousands of people have written to Dear Abby seeking advice on topics ranging from relationships to finances to the meaning of life. Some of the questions are serious and others are just plain hilarious. Here are some examples:

Dear Abby: My boyfriend is going to be 20 years old next month. I'd like to give him something nice for his birthday. What do you think he'd like? —
Signed, Carol

Dear Carol: Never mind what he'd like, give him a tie.

Dear Abby: Our son married a girl when he was in the service. They were married in February and she had an 8 1/2-pound baby girl in August. She said the baby was premature. Can an 8 1/2-pound baby be this premature? —Signed, Wanting to Know

Dear Wanting: The baby was on time. The wedding was late. Forget it.

And my all-time favorite, especially during an election season... Dear Abby: I have always wanted to have my family history traced, but I can't afford to spend a lot of money to do it. Have you any suggestions? —Signed, M.J.B.

Dear M.J.B.: Yes. Run for a public office.

The world is filled with advice givers, from Oprah to Dr. Phil, from your friend's wise grandmother to your crazy neighbor. For so many of us, the problem isn't finding people who are willing to give advice; but discerning who to listen to. And that is what is at the very center of today's story.

Last week we heard part of the story of King David. While David and his son Solomon are remembered as great kings, the biblical story doesn't hide their failures. They each had moments when they did what all human beings do – they messed up. They made the worst mistakes when they forgot they were called to serve God and God's people and wound up serving themselves.

Today we come to the story of Solomon's son, Rehoboam, who was anointed king after Solomon's death. Early on in his leadership, he is faced with a choice. He has to decide whether he should carry on his father's oppressive forced labor and heavy tax policy, or grant his people some relief. The bigger question is... will he be a king who serves God and God's people or a king who serves himself? Will he continue down his ancestor's oppressive path, or will he grant relief and liberation to the people?

Rehoboam seeks the advice of two different groups. He goes first to those who have been there before, the wise elders who served at the side of his father. These voices of experience were in touch with the people, they knew how desperate and brutal the previous regime had been. Forced labor, high taxes, brutality towards those with dissenting views, they had witnessed it all. The wise ones counseled him to ease up, to change his political priorities, to be a servant to the people. Effective leadership, they say, is not in how much you demand, but in how much you give.

You have to understand... the reform that the elders were suggesting would be SO MUCH HARDER than staying the course. Change is hard! How would he get his big building projects done without conscripted labor? And how would he pay for it? All of that work... seems a shame for it to grind to a halt.

So Rehoboam seeks a second opinion. Perhaps someone out there will give him the advice he actually wants to hear! He turns to his peers, his chums, his childhood friends and asks them how he should lead. Perhaps because they are young with career aspirations of their own, they advise him to begin throwing his weight around. Rehoboam should be, in their eyes, even tougher than his father! There's a new king in town! Time to really show the people that you're the boss!

It's the free pass he's been waiting for. He falls for the seduction, believing that the best way to greatness is through coercion and control. He becomes even more ruthless than his father was at his worst. His ego grows,

unchecked. It only took a few years of this until the country was plunged into civil war and broke apart into two separate nations. The ten northern tribes made their own government and became Israel with their capital the city of Samaria. The two southern tribes, Judah and Benjamin, remained loyal to the House of David centered in Jerusalem and they became known as the kingdom of Judah.

As President Abraham Lincoln famously said (quoting Jesus in the synoptic gospels), "*A house divided upon itself cannot stand*". The division between the Northern and Southern kingdoms continued for approximately 160 years until the Assyrians defeated the kingdom of Israel in the North, sending it into exile. That left only the kingdom of Judah in the South, which existed just another 160 years until the Babylonians conquered them and drove them into exile.

Decisions, decisions. We all make them. Sometimes we listen to the wrong people, and we take the wrong advice, and the consequences can be devastating. How do we know who to listen to? How do we know whose advice to seek and follow?

From the very beginning of Rehoboam's rule, his heart and his motives were focused inward, on himself. Listening to ourselves is important, but sometimes it's not enough. Sometimes we're so close to a situation that we can't see it clearly, we need the wisdom and the perspective of others. Rehoboam's father, Solomon, wrote these words in the book of Proverbs, "*Fools think their own way is right, but the wise listen to advice.*"

Listening to the advice of others can be incredibly helpful too, as long as we don't call upon the advice of just anyone. Seek the advice of people whose wisdom you respect, people who have a track record of making good decisions, people whose faith and values are worthy of honor, people whose lives honor God and God's Creation. If Rehoboam had done that, perhaps he wouldn't have rejected the wisdom of the elders so quickly.

At the end of the day, our best decisions are made when we learn to listen to God. Did you happen to notice in today's story that Rehoboam never stopped to pray when he was thinking about the kind of king he should be? He seemed to listen to every voice except the voice of God.

Life is full of hard choices and competing voices. And there are no burning bushes, at least ones we can recognize. How can we make faithful decisions in the absence of a clear booming voice from the heavens or a miracle right in front of our eyes?

Perhaps we can listen for guidance when we spend time in scripture. Although many of the stories are archaic and awkward, it is possible that there is still something for us to learn through these ancient words. And learning is so much richer when it is done in community. We come to worship to hear what others are thinking. We may go to a Bible study on Thursday morning or a Sunday Forum and ask those questions that poke at us. Or we may sign up for the United Church of Christ's daily online StillSpeaking devotional¹. Spending time immersed in the story helps open our ears and hearts.

We can also listen for guidance when we spend time reflecting in prayer, meditation or even service. If the Spirit of God dwells within us, than the wisdom and the answers we seek are also within us. But we need to slow down to help them come out. We need the rest of the world to be quiet enough so we might hear that still, small voice or that gentle nudge that is so often the Spirit's language.

Someday soon you will need to make a decision or you will be asked to give some advice. The reason you might do so is that SOMEONE looks up to you as a leader. As you consider what to say or do, keep these words in mind from Mark's Gospel...

"So Jesus called them and said to them, 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'²"

Amen.

¹ http://www.ucc.org/daily_devotional to sign up

² Mark 10:42-45