

“Be Careful What You Wish For”

1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14

Once upon a time a fisherman and his wife lived in a pigsty by the sea. And every day the fisherman would fish. And he fished and he fished. One day he was sitting with his line, looking into the smooth water. And he sat and he sat. His line sank to the bottom, deep deep down, and when he pulled it up there was a big flounder on the end of it. And the flounder said: “Look here, fisherman. Why not let me live? I’m not a real flounder, but an enchanted prince. What good would it do to kill me? I wouldn’t be much good to eat. Put me back in the water and let me go.” “Save your breath,” said the fisherman. “Do you think I’d keep a talking flounder?” So he threw him back into the smooth water.

When the fisherman went home his wife said: “Husband, haven’t you caught anything today?” “No” said the fisherman. I caught a flounder who said he was an enchanted prince, so I let him go.” “Didn’t you make a wish?” she asked. “No” said the fisherman. “What would I wish for?” “That’s easy,” she said. “It’s so dreadful having to live in this pigsty. It stinks! It’s disgusting! You could have wished for a little cottage. Go back right now and ask for one.”

The husband didn’t really want to do it, but neither did he want to cross his wife. So, reluctantly he went back. The water wasn’t nearly as smooth as it was the first time. He said: “Little man, whoever you be, flounder, flounder in the sea, my wife, her name is Ilsebil, has sent me here against my will.” The flounder came swimming and asked: “Well, what does she want?” “It’s like this,” said the fisherman. I caught you, didn’t I, and now my wife says I should have wished for something. She’s sick of living in a pigsty. She wants a cottage.” “Just go home,” said the flounder. “She’s already got it.” Sure enough. When the fisherman went home, there she was sitting on a cute little bench outside an even cuter little cottage. Inside there was a lovely little hallway, lovely little parlor and a bedroom with a bed for each of them, a kitchen and a pantry, all the best furnishings, utensils, tinware, brassware...Behind the cottage was a small barnyard with chickens and ducks in it, and a little garden with vegetables and fruit. “See,” said the wife. “Isn’t it nice?” “Yes it is,” said the fisherman. If it only lasts, we shall be happy and contented.” “We’ll see about that,” said the wife. Then they had something to eat and went to bed.

All went well for a week or two. Then the wife said: “Listen to me, husband. This cottage is too cramped and the garden and barnyard are too small. The flounder could have given us a bigger house. I’d like to live in a stone castle. Go tell him to give us a stone castle.” The fisherman argued with his wife, telling her that they didn’t need a stone castle, that the cottage was fine. But she insisted. So finally, with a heavy heart, and saying to himself, “It’s not right,” he went back to the sea. This time the sea was a darker color and was a little rougher than the last time. “Little man, whoever you be, flounder, flounder in the sea, my wife, her name is Ilsebil, has sent me here against my will.” “Well, what does she want?” asked the flounder. “Dear me!” said the fisherman. “She wants to live in a big stone castle.” “Just go home,” said the flounder. “She’s standing at the gate.”

When he got home there was a big stone castle and his wife was standing at the top of the stairway. She took him by the hand and said: “Come on in.” Inside there was a great hall with a marble floor and lots of servants. The walls were all bright and covered with beautiful tapestries, and in the rooms, all the tables and chairs were made of gold. Crystal chandeliers hung from the ceiling. Behind the castle was a big yard with barns and stables and the very best of carriages; there was a wonderful big garden with the loveliest flowers and fruit trees. “Isn’t it nice” said the wife. “Yes, indeed” said the husband. “If only it lasts! We will live in this beautiful castle and be contented.” “We’ll see about that,” said the wife.

The next morning the wife woke up first. It was just daybreak, and from her bed she could see all of the beautiful countryside. Her husband was still stretching when she poked him in the side with her elbow and said: "Husband, get up and look out of the window. See here. Couldn't we be king over all that country? Go to the flounder and tell him we want to be king." "Wife, wife," said the husband. "What do you want to be king for? I don't want to be king." "Well if you don't want to be king, I'll be king," said the wife. Go now to the flounder." "It's not right. It's not right at all," thought the husband. And he didn't want to go. But he went. When he got to the sea it was all gray-black, and the water came churning up from the depths and it had a foul smell. "Little man, whoever you be, flounder, flounder in the sea, my wife, her name is Ilsebil, has sent me here against my will." "Well, what does she want?" said the flounder. "Dear me," said the man, "she wants to be king." "Just go home" said the flounder. "She is already."

Well, you get the idea. The story goes on from there, with the wife wanting more and more. Being king is not enough. Soon it is emperor and then pope as well. And each time when the fisherman goes back to the sea the water is murkier and more turbulent. Until finally, when the wife has gone as far and as high as she can go, she wants to be like God, making the sun rise and set. She was in a fury. She insists that her husband go back again. "Will you get a move on," she says. This time when he gets to the sea a storm is raging. The wind is blowing so hard he can barely stand. Trees are falling, the sky is black, thunder roars, lightning flashes, the sea is in a turmoil. The fisherman can't even hear his own words as he shouts: "Little man, whoever you be, flounder, flounder in the sea, my wife, her name is Ilsebil, has sent me here against my will." "Well, what does she want?" asks the flounder. "Dear me," he says, "she wants to be like God." "Just go home," says the flounder. "She's back in the old pigsty already." And there they are living to this day. *Grimm's Tales*, p. 70

Another story about someone making a wish, only this time it is a little more edifying: King David had died and Solomon, his son, had taken his place. One night he had a dream in which God said to him, "Ask what I should give you." Solomon said this: "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David....And now...you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. 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?"

Do you hear what he is saying? You have given me an awesome task, to be king over this great people. They deserve a king who knows what he is doing and I don't have a clue! Give me an understanding mind. He was focused on the task before him, and the task before him was to govern his people. And we know that Solomon's wisdom was legendary.

Like Solomon, we have been given tasks as well. There are people that we are called to serve. When we have an ordination/installation service here at Westminster and we ask all those who are ordained to come forward, we nearly empty out the pews. So many come forward! So many of us have taken those vows of ordination, one of which is this: "Will you serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination and love?" Will you serve the people? Will you use all of your gifts, your powers, your intelligence, your imagination, your energy, your love, to serve the people? What are you doing to fulfill that vow? Well, I attend a monthly board meeting or committee meeting, or both. Well, that's great. But what are you doing to serve the people?

There are tasks that God has called us to, people to serve. There are lonely people who need a visit. There are people who need a friend. And whether you are ordained or not, if you are a Christian, you are called to serve. There are people in need, in real need, and some of them live right here in Auburn. How are you serving the people?

I have a friend who is a pharmacist. He lives in Colorado now, but when I first got to know him he lived in Burlington, Iowa and worked in a small drug store there. Jerry looked at his job as a ministry and his customers as people he was called to serve. So when someone had trouble getting around, he would deliver the medication. That wasn't store policy. That was Jerry's policy. When a man came in one day looking down, Jerry asked him what was wrong. His brother was dying out in Arizona and he would like to go see him but he didn't have the money. Jerry thought about that and how he would feel. The next time the man came into the store, Jerry took a credit card out of his wallet and bought him a round trip ticket.

Solomon asked for an understanding mind because he knew that he had a great task before him and he needed help with it. Now I've got to ask, if you were given a chance to make a wish as Solomon did, would you have chosen "an understanding mind?" Or would you have gone for a brand new Twilight Grey Metallic Lexus with the four zone automatic climate control, electrochromic rear view mirror, cashmere leather trim with medium brown walnut accent, and a 19 speaker, 450 watt surround sound audio system? Let's see, an understanding mind or the Lexus. Hmmm.

The truth is that we who live in this country and who have even an average income, despite the downturn in the economy, despite the fact, as I heard someone say this week, that your 401K is now a 201K, we live in many ways better than Solomon did, whose wealth was legendary. We live a lifestyle that most people in the world could not even begin to imagine. Most people in the world, given a chance to visit in just about any of our homes, would walk in timidly and look around and would be in awe. They would open our refrigerators and freezers and would stand there with gaping mouths to see all the food that is there. They would go to our bedrooms and see our four poster beds, our Posturepedic mattresses with pillow topper mattress pads, our air conditioners, tiled bathrooms with hot and cold running water at the turn of a handle, the closets filled to overflowing, the basement overflowing with stuff, the garage. Most of the people in the world have a problem that they have hardly anything to call their own. Our problem is storage! We don't have enough room to store all the stuff we have. We live in palaces. And yet, what would we ask for if given a wish? What would it be? "Go back and tell him that we want more," said the wife in the fairy tale. But Solomon said, "give me an understanding mind so that I may rule this great people."

Diane and I were at the Chautauqua Institution this past week for study leave and had the opportunity to hear Karen Armstrong who is one of the most prolific writers today in the field of world religions. Last year she won a prestigious award from an organization called TED (no relation, as far as I know, to our own Ted O'Hara). TED is part of a private non-profit foundation and stands for Technology, Entertainment and Design. Every year three individuals are chosen and are given \$100,000 and granted a "wish to change the world." What would you choose? Karen Armstrong said she thought about a villa in the Bahamas, but she chose to establish what she is calling a "Charter for Compassion." Her idea is to get compassion back to the center, since it is the heart of all of the world's major religions. She has called for a council of Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu leaders to draw up this charter of compassion, set to be launched on November 12 this year.

What if you had one wish? Be careful! As the woman in the fairy tale found out, wishing only for yourself ends up leaving you very poor. Or as Jesus put it, "The one who seeks to find his life will lose it, but the one who loses his life for my sake and the sake of the Gospel, will find it." Choose carefully!