

“Upon What Do We Feed?”
Sermon by Pastor Tom Warren
Peace United Church of Christ
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Mitch Snyder was an advocate for the homeless who became, in the 1980s, a nationally recognized figure in the sometimes heated debate in regards to what should be done about the massive population of homeless people in our nation's Capital. Mitch Snyder was tireless in his efforts on behalf of the homeless. He was known not only for his passion in regards to the plight of the homeless. He was also known for his tactics. He was very aggressive, and he was very angry towards government officials and others who did not see his way. He was so strong and bitter in his opinions and tactics that he even alienated people who would be his natural allies. He lived and breathed the cause of the homeless, never slowing down once to reflect upon what he was doing. When asked one time about how he carried on when so many obstacles were in his way, he said “Sometimes you just grit your teeth and push forward”.

From all the good that Mitch Snyder tried to accomplish, and for all the passion and the angry energy that he put into his work, it all came crashing down on July 6, 1990, when Mitch Snyder was found hanging in a storeroom in a homeless shelter that he had started. In despair and depression, he killed himself. His death, as you might imagine, sent shock waves throughout the activist community, and the question in the wake of his death was not so much how could this have happened. It was how do we take care of ourselves—how do we not get consumed by all that we see as wrong in the world.

There is an old Cherokee wisdom tale about two wolves. In this tale, an old Cherokee Indian is talking with his grandson about the timeless battle that goes on inside every human being, and the old Cherokee says to his grandson “My son, the battle is between two wolves inside us all. One wolf is evil. It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, resentment, arrogance and ego, but the other wolf is good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, kindness, empathy, generosity, compassion and faith”. When the grandfather was done, the grandson thought about what his grandfather had just said and then asked his grandfather “Which wolf wins?”, to which the old Cherokee said “The one that you feed”.

Our story from I Kings this morning is, on a fundamental level, about what wolf we feed. Solomon, as Dale pointed out, was the great king of Israel. In this scripture he has taken the throne in the wake of his father David's death, and Solomon would lead Israel for 40 years, and this would be a time in Israel's history of great expansion and growth, and it was also the time when the seeds were planted for Israel's eventual demise. This eventual demise of Israel has to do with whom Solomon was talking—with what wolf Solomon was feeding. There are two points to this. First, before Solomon took the throne, he had to consolidate his reign. Solomon went about to get rid of anyone in his administration who would question or challenge his authority or vision for the nation.

In I Kings 2, Verse 26, we have this interesting little tidbit. Now, priests in the administration of the kings of Israel were holy men who would weigh in on the affairs of the state. They were sort of like chaplains who had the ear of the king, so Solomon said to the priest of Latar, “Go to Anathoth to your estate because you deserve death.” Anathoth is outside of Jerusalem and Solomon sends Abiathar away. He says, “You deserve death but I will not kill you because you are pretty good for my father,” but Solomon banished Abiathar from being a priest in Jerusalem. What's behind that banishment is that Solomon didn't want Abiathar, or anyone of his persuasion, around because Abiathar kept saying to the king, “You have to follow Torah. You have to follow the law of God as you develop this new administration. You have to treat people right. You can't engage in idolatry and violence to get what you want, Solomon. You have to do what the Lord wants.” So Abiathar, the priest, did not fit in with the version of reality that Solomon was committed to. So, Solomon got rid of the voices that he did not want to hear—the voices of conscience, faith and responsibility. Abiathar was one of many who Solomon got rid of, but Solomon would replace these voices that he didn't like. He replaced these

voices with the voices that would feed his imperial admissions. He would put people around him who would support his vision of Israel and what a great nation Israel could be. So, as we heard in the reading, Solomon begins his reign by marrying Pharaoh's daughter, and when Solomon and Pharaoh had "pillow talk", she would probably feed him with Pharaohic ideologies and would probably whisper in his ear "Solomon, if you want to build a really kick-butt nation, you have to do like my dad did because we could really take Israel to some awesome places".

We can assume that Solomon had many conversations with his father-in-law, Pharaoh. His father-in-law, Pharaoh, was well established at building big nations, and we have evidence in scripture that, indeed, Solomon took the advice of Pharaoh, so in I Kings 11, we learned that Solomon loved many foreign women—700 princesses and 300 concubines! There was a whole lot of work going on there!

This piece of information about Solomon is not just about sexual escapades. These are shrewd political and economic arrangements that lead to trade deals and military alliances. Pharaoh knew how to do this. Pharaoh taught Solomon how to do this but, more importantly, they are trade deals and military alliances that slowly, but surely, draw Solomon and Israel away from their primary and exclusive commitment to Yahweh. Those high places where the people were worshipping before the Temple was built, and where Solomon would go to worship, were places of mixed allegiance. It wasn't just Yahweh. There were all kinds of gods who were being worshipped in those high places.

Solomon was not unlike the wolf of Wall Street, if you saw that movie (and I don't recommend it), but the wolf of Wall Street fed his worst instincts and ambitions by surrounding himself with the voices of greed, violence and opposition, and by refusing to listen to any other perspectives. Solomon fed upon the voices that led to his demise and finally that would lead to the demise of his reign.

The question for us in our day and in our lives is: What are the voices upon which we are feeding? With what are we nurturing our spirit? Are we nurturing our spirit and our faith with positive narratives? Some of us are, but some of us constantly have our eyes focused on the T. V. or on the computer, and we are feasting on the negative news cycle that never ends. It is always the next bad news story. Some of us have our ears tuned to the radio, where the prophets of doom angrily predict the end of life as we know it, and they point fingers on who to blame. Others of us read only the books, magazines and editorials that simply spit back at us exactly what we already believe.

Like Mitch Snyder, and so many people in our world today, we can end up bitter, angry and hopeless. We need to be careful about that because that is not the way of the people of God. We are not angry people. We are not to be hopeless people. We are people of the promise. We are people who know that God is with us, and it seems to me that, at this point in the journey of our world, we must believe that God is ultimately in control, that God is taking this world in directions of love. Even when we can't see it, our faith says that God's final agenda is for a community and a world of love.

We must be informed about the struggles and pains in our world. That is part of our faith. We must be responsive, as we are able, to these struggles and sufferings in our world, but the struggles and the sufferings of the world are not the whole story. There is so much beauty in this life, and there is so much joy to take in with each moment. There is so much promise to be realized with each day, but to take in all the beauty, joy and promise of this life, we must be conscious about the people with whom we surround ourselves, the voices that form our view of the world, and the world narratives that we ingest each day. Do they fill us with hope, or do they fill us with despair?

Solomon prayed for wisdom, but what he really wanted was power, so he surrounded himself with people and ideas that offered very little wisdom in the end. They offered lots of cynical strategies, all of which fed the bad wolf in Solomon.

So, as people of faith, we are to be people of great hope, people who see the bad but who focus upon and give our efforts to the good, and to do that we must always be conscious and intentional about who we are spending time with and about the conversations we are participating in. There has been more than one occasion in my life when, at the end of a very negative conversation, I have sat back and asked myself, "Now what did I just participate in?" We have to be conscious about that because we are people of the promise of the good narrative. We are people of hope. We are people of the kingdom who are called to be models for a land and a world of joy.

So, we give thanks today for the good story that we are a part of. We give thanks for this community of faith that allows us to always find new and powerful ways to talk and to be informed and to be filled with hope. Our ministry, to one another and to the world, is to abide in God's love and God's hope and not let the negativity of this world define who we are. We thank God in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.