

Only: At the Con of Conjunction
Reading from the New Testament: Philippians 2:4-6
Reading from the Old Testament: 1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-15

I don't know if it is my Show-Me State roots, Myers-Briggs results, or a sore neck that causes me to look askance at mission statements, but I do know that I tend to ignore them when viewing various corporate or organizational websites.

"Delivering responsible growth." Who among us has that slogan tattooed on your brain? Is it from a high school banner? A fertilizer company? No, it comes from a bank, a little local enterprise "guided by a common purpose to help make financial lives better through the power of every connection." I'm sure that each morning all our BofA folks say that three times fast before shuffling in your fuzzy slippers across the threshold into your home workspace.

"We should be about more than just selling chicken," so sayeth Truett Cathy. However, the Colonel is a bit less high-minded: "If you like fried chicken, this is why." United Airlines is succinct and direct: "We fly right. We fly friendly. We fly together," a bit too together if you're assigned a middle seat.

Corporations, institutions, and agencies spend millions to compose mission statements, goals, and values that portray, if not their true identity, at least an image of what they want customers to perceive their identity to be. The cynic would say it is all a con game, but is it? Could there possibly be a point in the planning process where stakeholders actually desire to embody the image they want the public to see? It is easy to condemn without knowledge or understanding; to put others under the very spotlight we skirt or avoid altogether.

Last Sunday we sang, *Lord, I want to be like Jesus*; so, did our Mondays, Tuesdays, or Friday's show any evidence of it, or at least some effort toward that end? Do we mean it when we promise thoughts and prayers? We'll tout family values, but do we actually value our families?

We'd like to assume we are numbered in the good guy category, but isn't the truth a bit more complicated? Oh, and what about that petition that rolls easily, almost heedlessly off the tongue: "Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done"? Hmmmm, maybe not before we get a second, third, or fourth opinion; or just pursue our own without even asking. Sometimes it's a hike between who we claim, even desire to be and where we are to be found. The Lord lamented, Isaiah quoted, and Jesus repeated: "These people draw near with their mouths and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote." It's the limp that plagues us on the road of discipleship.

Solomon, son of David, heir to the throne of Israel, is a king remembered for his wisdom if not for his chastity. In 1 Kings, Solomon is introduced in this way, "Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places." Only - That's a problematic little conjunction, isn't it? "Teresa's a great boss, only..." "Brad is a gifted mechanic, only..." "You are an excellent candidate for the job, only..."

That "only" can get you in trouble. "I have no hesitation recommending Dr. Jansen as a surgeon, only ... he's doin' ten to twenty out at Folsom Prison." "Yes, you can marry our daughter Beth, only her mom and I will be moving in with you, too." Only -

Sometimes, it is an adverb (*The temperature only dipped to 80 degrees last night!*). At other times, it is an adjective (*Guatemala has only one Olympic medal*). Yet, occasionally only is used as a conjunction meaning *except that, but for the fact that*.

So, in describing Israel's king following David's death, we are told, Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David; only..." Solomon loved the Lord; that's a good thing, right? Gotta love a king who loves the Lord! And look, he walks "in the statutes of his father David." Hey, he's sticking with the plan, you know, plan your work and work your plan. Stability, consistency are important marks of leadership. But then we get the conjunction, "Solomon loved the Lord ... only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places." That's not a problem, is it? Well...

An identity-framing practice for the people of Israel was the offering of sacrifices to the Lord in the presence of the Lord; and ever since their days in the wilderness, the presence of the Lord was signified by the Holy of holies in the innermost area of the tabernacle where the Ark of the Covenant was placed. So, sacrifices to the Lord were offered at the tabernacle. Once settled in the promised land of Canaan and established as a nation, Solomon's father, David, desired to build a temple for the Lord in Jerusalem, but the Lord refused and declared that David's heir (that would be Solomon) would build the temple of the Lord. So, when we come to our text today, Solomon, new to the throne, has not yet begun construction of the temple.

However, the Israelites were not the only ones offering sacrifices. The various peoples who also populated the land offered sacrifices to their own deities, and as a consequence of this, there were (*I guess you could call them nondenominational*) altars,

often called high places, erected throughout the land, sort of like the Moose Lodges, Masonic temples, and picnic shelters that dot America's heartland.

However, altars, like sanctuaries, mosques, and synagogues were set apart for particular religious traditions, and as Levitical sacrificial practices evolved in Israel, it became important to distinguish sacrifices offered to the God of Israel from the sacrifices offered to the various deities worshiped by others in the land. Indeed, throughout the age of ancient Israel, it was a challenge to maintain the loyalty of the people to the one true God of Israel. "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone." "You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them..."

In later generations, the prophets would have a field day exposing the ease with which God's people were seduced by idols and false gods. Jeremiah testified, "As a thief is shamed when caught, so the house of Israel shall be shamed— they, their kings, their officials, their priests, and their prophets, who say to a tree, "You are my father," and to a stone, "You gave me birth." For they have turned their backs to me, and not their faces. But in the time of their trouble they say, "Come and save us!" But where are your gods that you made for yourself? Let them come, if they can save you, in your time of trouble; for you have as many gods as you have towns, O Judah."

Over time, that seemingly innocuous little conjunction, only, would become a big problem for Israel, and as for Solomon, that conjunction would sew the seeds for Israel's

collapse. In chapter 11, we read, "For when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not true to the Lord his God" It seems Solomon had a penchant for collecting foreign wives like Christian McCaffery collects yardage, and indulging them, he would not only offer sacrifices to their gods, but even build altars, or high places, for them. Consequently, the Lord would declare to Solomon, "Since this has been your mind and you have not kept my covenant and my statutes that I have commanded you, I will surely tear the kingdom from you and give it to your servant..."

Who would have thought that one little conjunction could affect such a disastrous end? "Solomon loved the Lord ... only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places." Solomon wasn't a bad guy; he just caved to the con game we so often play at life's junctions. We state our intention, define our priorities, declare our faithfulness, promise our loyalty, fealty, devotion ... only ... we get distracted, our eyes, hearts, and feet taking us in different directions: "I'll always be here for you, except;" "You can count on me, but..." We're all in ... until something pulls us away. Put it this way, with many relationships and commitments, we tend to be singing *My One True Love* and *Cat's in the Cradle* simultaneously – "Can you teach me to throw, I said-a, not today; I got a lot to do, he said, that's okay..."

Solomon wasn't a bad guy. He truly desired to be faithful, saying all the right things. In his encounter with the Lord, Solomon acknowledges and is grateful for the *steadfast love* of the Lord. He acknowledges that he is ill-equipped and without hope, except for the Lord's strength and guidance as he faces the tasks before him. Solomon asks for "an understanding mind," or as it is rendered in the New English Bible, "a heart

with a skill to listen." What a poignant hope. A heart with a skill to listen. Think about what a transformation that could bring about if that was the defining characteristic in your life.

The love of the Lord is revealed here in the fact that, even knowing Solomon's flaws and vulnerabilities, the Lord provided him with these gifts and more. There would be wisdom demonstrated in Solomon's governance. There would be signs of faithfulness in many of his actions ... only ... when Solomon's impulses and appetites eclipsed his values, clouded his understanding mind, and clogged his ability to listen, both his character and the nation's health suffered.

Yes, Solomon was a king of old, but Solomon is also you, Solomon is also me. We're here. We want to serve the Lord, only... And you know what follows the "only," in your life, what undermines your values, what pulls you away from your priorities, what obstructs your calling to serve, heal, love. I think maybe it comes down to a comma, a comma that changes a crucial adverb into a problematic conjunction. What a huge difference it would make if we could lose the comma. Think about it: I only love the Lord --- I love the Lord, only...

Let us lose the comma and gain a heart with the skill to listen. Amen.