

THE ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Luke 19:41-48

The Emperor Has No Clothes

There was once an emperor who loved clothes and always wanted to be well-dressed. It was his main endeavor in life. One day, swindlers came to his great city and claimed that they could make beautiful clothes that were truly special, that were invisible to all unworthy of beholding them, those unfit for their offices or unpardonably stupid.

The Emperor desperately wanted these clothes, both for their beauty and to discover those unfit for office or the unpardonably stupid within his kingdom. He paid a great price to the swindlers and provided the finest silk and gold cloth. The swindlers, stowing all this away, labored at empty looms, making the Emperor's clothes. The Emperor was curious what kind of progress they were making, but was scared to check himself, because he knew those unfit for office could not see the clothing, and was afraid of the embarrassment he'd face if he couldn't see them. The Emperor sent several trusted ministers, but they became so frightened when they couldn't see the clothes that they asked the swindlers for a description and reported their beauty to the delighted Emperor.

One day, the clothes were brought to the Emperor, but he could not see them. He was afraid of being exposed as unfit for office, so he pretended they were the most beautiful clothes he'd ever seen and put them on. All his servants praised him for his fine outfit. The Emperor pretended to admire his garments in the mirror as they praised him.

Later, a procession was held through the town. No one wanted to reveal that they were unfit for office or unpardonably stupid, so they shouted their approval and praise for the outfit from the windows.

As the procession continued, however, a little child said, "But he has nothing on at all." "Good heavens! Listen to the voice of an innocent child," said the father, and one person whispered the child's words to the next until the whole city exclaimed, "But he has nothing on at all." The Emperor and his servants were too proud to admit their ruse, though, and continued the foolish charade, even as everyone saw the Emperor's nakedness. (Paraphrase of *The Emperor's New Clothes*, by Hans Christian Andersen)

Israel had been warned. Like the Emperor's, Israel's nakedness and shame had been exposed, pointed out by prophet after prophet, by the Word of the Lord spoken for generations and centuries. There was no excuse for their persistence in their pride and sin. Their sad state had been made clear. They couldn't hide their nakedness before the Lord. Yet this nation so dear to God, that He Himself had led out of slavery and into the Promised Land, that He had delivered from countless enemies and preserved for so long at such great odds, this chosen people had rejected the God who chose them, had chosen instead the gods of those they'd conquered, had made themselves gods.

Are you the Emperor? Are you Israel? We call ourselves Christians. Are our lives that different than those who don't? Would someone know you are Christian from the words you speak among your friends, the things you post on the internet, the entertainment you enjoy, the care you put into your employment, the use you make of your time, the time you spend in contact with the Word and the Sacraments, the way you fulfill your role in your family, the commitment you make to your marriage, the way you conduct yourself before marriage? We've been warned. We too have had the Word of the Lord, have had pastors and teachers. Do we persist in our pride and sin? We might like to think ourselves dressed in splendor before the Almighty, but our nakedness is impossible to hide.

It is a dangerous thing to listen to God's Word and then fail to improve our lives, to continue in the same ways we did before. We would perhaps be better off never to have heard it than to make a mockery of the approaching Judgment Day by ignoring it. No, Israel ought to be an example for us. Yes, it seemed God was slow in punishing them, that He never followed through on His threats, but when He acted, His vengeance was devastating, and decades after Christ's ascension, they were utterly decimated, slaughtered, and scattered throughout the known world in the diaspora.

It is tempting at times to become bold in our sin because its consequences don't seem immediate. There's no thunderbolt from heaven the moment we curse, lie, or deceive; no thunder from on high when we wander on the web or in the bedroom. And so we can start to think that because we weren't punished on the spot, we won't be punished at all. Yet, as Luther says in a sermon on this text, "If God were to punish us immediately when we deserve it, none of us would reach the age of seven." The punishment is in the pipeline.

Growing up, I often wondered if my mother had a sixth-sense. One time when she came home, she asked if my brother and I had been wrestling. We had been, but we'd carefully picked up and hidden every clue. How did she know? We had no clue. Years later we found out the neighbors saw us and ratted us out. Other times I was more successful. I hid things for weeks, maybe months, but in the end, almost without fail, Mom got the scoop on me, and I got whatever punishment was coming. Mom wasn't omnipotent. God is. Mom loves me. God loves me more. How much more, then, should I seek His mercy rather than test His patience as I did with my mother?

Israel should have seen it coming, but Israel didn't see it coming, because they listened to the Word and then went on with their lives as if that very Word didn't really matter, failing to improve their lives and continuing to sin in the same ways they had before. Sure, they offered fine lip service to the Lord, and yes, they came up with some wonderful man-made works to give Him as they ignored the works He'd actually commanded, but in the end the Word never really moved from their ears to their hearts, and so after Christ had come and been rejected, and when most of the believers in the city and countryside had been driven out by Israel's stubborn and unbelieving persecution, God's wrath fell upon them without the mercy that had led Him for so long to delay. And when the Romans crashed down upon them, there was no more time for excuses, for them to say how busy they were on Sundays or Mondays, or how they were planning on making some changes in their life, or how they still prayed even though they disobeyed. Their time had come, and they weren't ready, and there is a place for such, a place I pray none of us here find ourselves for all eternity.

Sin against the Third Commandment is usually accompanied by gross sin against all the rest. A failure to take the Word to heart often skips hand in hand with adultery, greed, drunkenness, sloth, gluttony, vulgarity, and every other shame. We should be concerned, then, when we find persistent sin of any sort in our lives, whether it seems big or small, for such indicates clogged ears, and clogged ears lead to cold hearts.

There was recently an article about a doctor in Cape Cod whose finger was bitten off by a patient. I had a great joke about what kind of exam the doctor might have been trying to do, but I don't think it would be appropriate, so I'll get to the point. Do you think that doctor is going to accept more appointments from that patient? Yet how often haven't we bitten God's finger when it was pointed at us in stern admonition, rejected His care when He tried to rid us of the spiritual sickness that infects us?

In his sermon on this text, Luther quotes the old adage, "A jug keeps on going to the well till it finally breaks." What is your well? What disobedience have you been inclined to, and what iniquity has filled a part of you that only God should have. At some point, we break. Oftentimes, we can even feel that moment coming. We know we're going nowhere good fast, but we don't know how to stop, or even worse, we're unwilling to do so.

This Gospel is not all law. There is also hope offered here for us as we struggle with sin, as we seek to clear the obstacles to God's Word from our lives, to remove the wax from our ears, to let His Word penetrate to our hearts and minds. God delays punishment for our good, precisely because He wants us to repent and be saved. He is merciful. The very thought of His wrath coming upon us grieves Him. He does not want our destruction, but our salvation. That's why He was born in Bethlehem, baptized in the Jordan, murdered on Golgatha, and risen in the garden, after all. He longs to forgive, and not only to forgive, but through the very Word that bids us Absolution, to instruct us in new life as well.

All of us are planning to change someday, aren't we? It's what we say at least. Someday might never come, so why not now? Like the Emperor, don't let fear or shame or embarrassment keep you from ending the charade. As St. Paul urged the Corinthians, "*Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.*"

I would love to tell the Emperor he has great duds, but he's naked, and so are we before God without Christ. Only dressed in His righteousness, with our sins cast off and His obedience our own through faith, are we truly dressed and ready for the heavenly banquet. We've been warned. We've had the Word of the Lord, pastors and teachers. We don't have any excuses. We do however, have Christ. Let's cling to Him and let go of all that would separate us from Him and lead us to destruction. Amen.

Note: *Many thoughts borrowed from Luther's sermons on this text.*