

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Proverbs 9:8-12

“The Fear of the Lord is the Beginning of Wisdom”

“I pity the fool.” As a child, my hero frequently spoke these words. Locked in a different factory or barn every week, assembling some sort of tank out of pop cans and a lawnmower engine, this American icon would angrily punch one fist into his other hand and speak this inspiring cliché. “I pity the fool.” Bullets would fly, vehicles would crash, punches would be thrown, miraculously no one would die, and the A-Team would escape with whomever they were rescuing from typecast villains that week. Today we too with Mr. T, “Pity the fool.” Who is the fool? Not an overbearing landlord or a South American drug lord, but the one who ignores verse 10.

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.” Let’s take this sentence apart. *“The fear of the LORD”* is the subject of the first clause. As good Lutherans, we ask, “What does this mean?” Here the English does not match well with the Hebrew way of thought. In English fear simply means being, as a young child would say, “scared.” It is what we feel when we hear a noise during the night, ride the new roller coaster at Cedar Point, realize that our parents are onto us, or think we are about to get in a car accident. Biblical fear is something more, however. This is the fear Luther has in mind when he begins his explanations of the commandments, *“We should fear and love God that...”* David writes in Psalm 34, *“Come, my children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD”* (11). The fear of the LORD is something we are taught, not just something we feel. To fear God, simply put, is to know Him, to revere Him, to marvel at His grace, and, yes, to be terrified of His judgment when we sin.

Do we fear God? I think the best way to tell is how we approach Him. Are we terrified of His judgment when we sin, or do we “sin boldly” in a way Luther never intended? Are there things God calls sin which we have decided are not sin? Do we want worship that is reverent and built around Christ’s presence in His sacramental gifts to the Church, in absolution and in the sermon, or do we want whoopee worship that knows no fear of the LORD, and is concerned only with the fear of complaints of boredom, boredom that really finds its source in the sinner, and not in the service, because it is the sinner who fails to see the awesome things taking place? Do we look at the world through Scripture-colored glasses, or do we look at the Church through world-shaded contacts? *“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.”* Notice the direct object is the LORD. The LORD, all caps, is God’s saving name. As Christians, we fear the LORD who saved us when He had no reason to do so. We fear the LORD who died so that those who hated him most could live. We know Him, revere Him, marvel at His grace, and, yes, are terrified of His judgment when we sin.

The fear of the LORD is expressed well in the opening chapters of the gospel according to St. John. In chapter 3, verse 20, St. John explains, *“Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.”* The fool, the scoffer, refuses to fear the LORD, because fearing the LORD means placing one’s sins in the light. The drunk claims he can quit at any time, and he never drinks at work, and so there’s nothing wrong with it. The adulterer claims that his wife doesn’t take care about his needs and has gotten fat, so it’s not his fault he has to turn elsewhere. The thief claims

that she is just stealing from the rich, and he needs the money more than them, so it's ok. The speeding driver claims she needs to be to work on time, and so, rather than waking up earlier, it is best to NASCAR her way to work. The list could go on. You all can find your place on it. Sinners who do not fear the LORD fear fearing Him, because it means acknowledging one's sin and confessing one's manifold unworthiness, as we do at the beginning of the divine service. *"Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed."* Such people however, and such people often includes us, fail to understand what happens when we expose our sin. God does a merciful and gracious thing beyond what any sinner could imagine or expect: He takes those sins away and nails them to Christ's cross; He makes us a new creation, products of our Baptism. Thus, St. John says in the very next verse, *"But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God."* In other words, we confess our sinfulness so we can confess God's grace. We confess we are sinners so we can confess that God has made us saints. That is wisdom, that is faith, which clings to Wisdom personified, God's Son and our Savior, Jesus Christ.

"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding." Knowledge and understanding are connected here. Knowledge is a factual awareness of something. Knowledge knows what the numbers two and four are. Understanding is the processing of data through the filter of our knowledge. Understanding understands that two dollars plus two dollars equals four dollars. Only when we have knowledge of the Holy One, the direct object of this clause, will we have understanding. We can only truly appreciate the sky when we understand who made it. We can only appreciate the crucifixes that so thoughtlessly hang around the necks of many, when we understand who is dying on that cross, for whom, and why—that God is dying there for you, held not by nails, but by love. *"Knowledge of the Holy One is understanding."* Only when we see the LORD as He has revealed Himself in Scripture and in Christ will we see the world as it really is. When we understand the seriousness of sin, we will not be so shocked by sinful tragedies. When we understand the seriousness of God's judgment on sin, we will not blink at the awful calamities that have befallen the world. And when we understand the incomprehensibility of the Holy One's love for fallen sinners, we will marvel that He has kept us from destroying this world long ago, that He has given so much time for repentance to so many, that He has lovingly taken many home early to spare them future suffering, that He loved us more than He loved Himself, suffering death at the hands of those He Himself created.

Every believer, no matter how uneducated, is wise, because He accepts the Lord's instruction and loves and supports the teaching of God's Word. The greatest professor, who does not fear the LORD, is a fool compared to the unimpressive infant fresh from the waters of the font. Be wise; and spread your wisdom around. "Pity the fool." Call back those who have fallen away. Don't just talk football, or weather, or family when you see them, but tell them to come home, because Christ is waiting to welcome them back. Give them a chance to show their wisdom, because *"rebuke a wise man and he will love you."* Solomon says, *"If you are wise, your wisdom will reward you; if you are a mocker, you alone will suffer."* My friends, always accept God's correction, because in His correction is His grace, to which He wants to lead you. My friends, fear the LORD, who saves you. Know Him. Revere Him. Marvel at His grace. Amen.