

Sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

'For on their way, they had argued about who among them was the greatest.'

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The disciples, far from showing us the way of being a perfect light of faith; a guide upon our way as common Christians down the narrow path of pins, that we might avoid piercing our feet upon the broad highway of needles; rather they show themselves to be just like us; that is, they show to us that they too are but man, with all the weakness of men.

[It was once written that man is the most frail of all creatures on earth. He is neither strong nor fast nor, if we are to watch the evening news, particularly intelligent. What sets him apart, the ancient generations would say, is the fact that he walks on two legs, not four, allowing him to gaze up toward heaven to see his true home, as opposed to being forced to look down at the dirt, which is nothing but the grave that one day his body will rejoin.]

Perhaps an angel would be surprised to hear such a remark, for we rarely, if ever, cast our minds on celestial things, of beautiful and spiritual thoughts or the contemplation of the source and origin of all things *visible and invisible*. They, however, should not be surprised to see the disciples walk *upon the way*, for here, Christ's followers do perhaps the most human of all things. They boast.

"Who, then, is the greatest among us?" We are embarrassed to admit that we ever as much as think such a question, even as were the Twelve when asked what they were talking about on the road to Capernaum. They were ashamed to the point of refusing to answer even the Christ. They do better than us, for we even cannot make a defense of our thoughts and words against our own conscience.

You too, when you walk upon the way, with family, with friends, with neighbors; you too walk softly, but think haughtily upon the way. You witness your parents

fighting. Do you not think, 'How foolish they are to yell about such petty things?' Your friend talks about how much she spent on a new haircut, or your comrade how much he plans to blow on a new car. You smirkingly mock them for their spendthrift attitudes over such shallow and meaningless things. You see your neighbor's lawn go unmown for two weeks, and you wince your brow at the eyesore of their yard, even as you perfectly manicure your own, or perhaps pay someone else forty dollars to do the same.

You hear a woman you know complain about her new boyfriend, and you think to yourself 'I would never be like such a man, I am a great boyfriend.' Or you hear a guy talk about how exacting his girlfriend is about going on dates, and you think, 'I always know what my girl will enjoy.'

You go to church, and hear the pastor speaking, and think in your critique, 'That is not how I would have taught that lesson,' or listening to the sermon, 'the pastor is being confusing, I would have explained all this in a much more simple way, a way that anyone could understand.'

You sit in the pew next to your daughter, and hear the whining and fussing of a child a few rows back, and think 'Our children are so well behaved compared to theirs.' You see the offering plate pushed before you empty, and as you slip your wealth over the well-being of the house of God, you think just-so-slight a judgment as to render upon all who has received the plate before you as stingy, worldly, materialistic, or else they would otherwise give more to the mysteries of our Lord.

All of this comes ever so naturally for us, since they are all lies, and are *children of our father, the devil, the father of lies*. Every wickedness, judgment, accusation that he plants within us we embrace as yet another weapon to throw like a javelin against our neighbor, and rarely do we hesitate long to do so. We wait until we are just a little out of earshot, and then we *cast the first stone*, for surely gossip is indeed a ranged weapon, and striking at a distance always gives one enough room to run from the skirmish before any injury befalls oneself. But do not be so assured, for even as such arrows sink into the good name of others from far off, so someone else buries your good reputation as well.

Now some of you may say, and perhaps truly, that you try as hard as possible to *judge not, lest we be judged*. You tie your tongue when venom fills it, and seal

your mouth shut at the smallest provocation to seek a wordy revenge. It is no matter. The devil cares not whether you cause others to suffer, or you yourself become the object of suffering. It is well enough for him that there be at least one voice accusing you at all times, for whether that voice comes from your throat, or your wife's, or your friends', it is always the same voice: it is the voice of Satan, the Accuser.

Indeed, there is no more severe a prison keeper, and no more cruel a torturer than our own conscience, for the conscience knows all sin, recalling from ages past the Law of God carved so deeply into itself. You may be able to tell the world to *shut up* when it speaks ill of you, these so-called friends, family, these church folk, those coworkers.

But who then tells your conscience to keep quiet? Who will silence it? Even this, the deepest part of your own very soul; this has come to devour you from the inside out. Some call this 'guilt,' others 'shame.' But it is more than this: it is the sickness unto death.

It is the still, small voice, deep within the echoing caverns of your mind, calling out from an unlit corner, these words that reverberate through the still silence of the hallows. Before it, it bears the book of sin, and slowly opening it, it clears its throat as you wander down dead-end paths between the stalactites and columns and mirror still ponds of what you thought to be the safest recess of your soul. Phrases that begin with such words as 'Didn't you also...?' And 'But were you not also there when...?' Or 'How can you mock so-and-so, it is clearly written here that you, too...?' I will not go on any further than this, for the book of sin is very long, and the font quite small.

You demand this voice shut up, but how can you? That voice is nothing other than yourself, speaking the truth about yourself that only you and the demons below, and the Lord above know.

How will you silence this voice? To many, it seems there is only one way: to shut up the voice, you must shut up yourself, permanently. This is not a *beautiful thought, so we will not dwell on such things.*'

The Lord travels amongst His disciples, even as He walks with us, day in and day out.

Who knows if He heard what the disciples thought and spoke about. They probably dwelled upon all most men ponder: their own superiority; the weakness and inferiority of others. Yet the Christ does not rebuke them in this moment. He passes on through *not to be noticed*, and says only this: *'The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.'*

Who would mutter such a thing along the way, and in response to what? The disciples, it said, are confused. Why would the Lord start speaking of His death? You see, they, like us, could never understand, for we dig deeply into whatever is hateful and wicked, dishonest and unforgiving. The Lord, on the other hand, seeks only *what is beautiful*.

Having settled into a house on the way, the Lord again asks what the Twelve were speaking of. They spoke not a word. So the Lord finds a child, conveniently playing nearby in the house, and takes him into His lap, and says only *'If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and the servant of all.'*

With these words, the Son of Man retires. You, too, dear Christian, quiet your mind, and go to rest.

Crush the voice of every liar and proud spirit which haunts you, every double-minded fog which rises up between the craigs in your soul. Silence them all, for beyond all the flattery of pride and the accusation of the conscience, a voice can be heard, ever so far off, and quiet, a whispering that says only *'humble yourself before the Lord, and He will exalt you.'*

*'let me see your vengeance upon them,
for to you have I committed my cause.'*

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Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Texts: Jeremiah 11:18-20; James 3:13-4:10; Mark 9:30-37.