



Resistant to Repentance

In the name of him who comes in the name of the Lord, dear friends in Christ: Today's Gospel contains something of a surprise. A group of concerned Pharisees come to Jesus and warn him of the danger he's in because wicked King Herod seeks to kill him. Considering that this is the same Herod who imprisoned John the Baptist and later ordered his head removed, this sounds like a threat with real teeth – something Jesus ought to take seriously. It's so good of these Pharisees who are usually cast as the enemies of Jesus to bring him news of this disturbing development. Maybe they aren't such bad guys after all. It seems they're genuinely concerned for Jesus' safety and wellbeing.

Except they aren't. The truth is they'd like nothing better than for Herod to do to Jesus what he did to John. Their problem is that Herod has no interest in doing it. Herod was deeply saddened that he was duped by his illicit wife into ordering John's execution. He actually had respect for John and considered him to be a holy man of God. And when he heard of Jesus, how he was going about performing miracles, Herod was worried that it was John the Baptist come back to life and maybe coming to settle the score with him. A guilty conscience will do that. Herod is keeping an eye on Jesus, yes; but he's no threat to him.

And Jesus knows it. He also knows that these Pharisees with their false warning are only trying to intimidate him in the hope that he'll shut up and go away. They hate Jesus. They resent and are envious of his popularity with the people. And they absolutely despise the things he says, especially the things he says about *them*. This is evident from the text. You'll note that it begins with the phrase "at that very hour". That should make us ask, "What hour? What's going on that motivated these Pharisees to try to scare Jesus away?"

The answer is that Jesus has been traveling from town to town teaching; but it's not a random course he's taking. He's heading in the general direction of Jerusalem where very soon he has an appointment with a cross. At a certain point in this journey, the hour in question, someone approached Jesus and asked about the number of people who would be saved: would it be comparatively many or few? Replying, Jesus said the way to life is a narrow door, and that a lot of *you* who are confident of entering into it will not be allowed in. Instead you'll be stopped at the door and watch in anguish while many others from all corners of the earth go in to feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of God. You yourselves will be cast out into a place where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

With hindsight we see that Jesus is speaking of how the majority of the Jewish nation would reject him as the Christ and Savior, and how the saving Gospel would go instead mostly to Gentiles who would receive it gratefully. And that's how things worked out. But it's precisely the kind of thing Jesus would say that drove the Pharisees insane with rage. They understood enough to know he was talking about them. I mean, who was more confident of their salvation than the Pharisees? No one. The way they saw it they had everything going for them. They were of God's chosen race. They had the Law of God and they were fanatics about keeping it according the strict traditions of the elders. If anyone deserved to go into God's kingdom, it was them – or so they thought. To have Jesus say otherwise and to imply at the same time that others less deserving, possibly even uncircumcised, swine-eating, Gentile dogs would go into the kingdom—that was too much. It infuriated them, which explains their pathetic attempt to frighten Jesus with an imaginary threat from King Herod.

But Jesus called their bluff. Since you seem to be such good buddies with him, “Go tell that fox, ‘Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course.’” There’s a lot going on there. It is in part an insult to the Pharisees for Jesus to suggest that they take a message to Herod for him. The Pharisees and Herod weren’t exactly friendly and on speaking terms; but they had opened that can of worms by saying that they knew what Herod’s secret plans for Jesus were. It’s also a way for Jesus to tell them that their plan to scare him failed. “I’m not worried about Herod. I’m going to keep on doing what I’ve been doing, and I’m going to arrive at my destination.” Lastly it’s a call for the Pharisees to open their eyes and repent. “Guys, I’m driving out demons. I’m curing the sick and injured. I’m doing the work of God. Do the math. If I’m doing God’s work and you are opposing me, what does that say about *you*? Think about it.”

Jesus goes on to add another reason he’s not worried about any threat from King Herod, saying, “I *must* go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following, for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem.” These words must really have stung the Pharisees. Jesus is saying that the biggest threat to a true prophet comes not from secular authorities like King Herod, but rather from the people of God. That certainly had been the history of the Jewish people. A good example is today’s reading from Jeremiah. God sent him to warn the people of Jerusalem to repent of their sin and idolatry and to return to the Lord, because if they failed to do so they would face dire consequences. And what happened? It was the priests and prophets then serving in Jerusalem who responded, “You shall die!”

Jeremiah is just one of many examples. Most of the genuine prophets whom the Lord sent to call his people to repent were persecuted, imprisoned, and sometimes killed, not by the world at large, not by pagan kings and governments; but by God’s own chosen people – the ones who were most outwardly religious and claimed to be serving the One True God. The Pharisees are well aware of this sad history. So when Jesus says this, he is only reminding them of what they already know. He’s also prophesying his own future. “It’s not Herod who’s going to kill me. It’s guys like you.” And that’s how things played out. It was the religious leaders in Jerusalem, the priests, the scribes, the Pharisees and Sadducees who conspired together to have Jesus executed. Yes, Pilate, the Roman governor did their dirty work for them; but he was heavily pressured. He didn’t want to do it. He knew Jesus was innocent and that he was no threat. It was those who were most religious who felt threatened by Jesus. And they wanted him dead, in part, to shut him up.

And what was true back then is equally true today. In our times many in the church are concerned about the government’s growing control over what can and cannot be spoken from our pulpits. The PC police want to make sure no one is ever offended. And by attempting to pass laws that prohibit so-called hate speech – which can be defined as anything that hurts someone’s feelings – there is fear that one day in the not too distant future it may be a crime for the church to preach and teach against certain sinful behaviors, and that anyone who does so may be fined or even imprisoned. I suppose it could happen; but I doubt it. Not in this country anyway where free exercise of religion is and will remain a constitutional right.

No, the real threat to those who are called to proclaim the whole counsel of God comes not from the outside but from those who are within the church. I’ve said before that there’s a Pharisee in each one of us. It’s the part of you that thinks of yourself as a generally good person and that looks down on others you judge to be less moral and upright. You know it’s in there, don’t you? Okay, that part of you is just fine with the Law of God. After all, it’s evaluating yourself by God’s Law that you come to the conclusion that most of the time you keep it. That’s

how you know you're a good person. So, when the Law of God is proclaimed, it's the Pharisee in you that thinks, "You tell'm preacher. That's what those dirty rotten sinners need to hear."

And all is well and fine until the preacher applying God's Law says something that steps on *your* toes, that points out *your* sins, that calls *you* to repent. That's when the Pharisee in you wants to defend itself and fight back. It may be with threats. Or it may take more forceful action. But let me give you a few examples of what I'm talking about.

We'll start with a general one. There are a number of congregations in our synod that don't use the liturgies for the divine services that appear in our hymnal. Why? It's mostly because they contain the confession and absolution. The members of those churches don't want to stand there and say, "I a poor miserable sinner confess ..." because that's not how they think of themselves. Besides, they say it's bad for business because it scares off potential new members, and reaching out to them with the Gospel is the most important thing. My question is what good is the Gospel to those who think of themselves as righteous? Jesus came to save sinners. Those who are well have no need of a physician. Without the Law condemning you there can be no Gospel to save you.

Then there are congregations that have given their pastors (some of whom I know personally) a list of sins they are not to speak against when preaching or teaching. These lists might include sins such as divorce, adultery, homosexuality, and almost always fornication, that is, couples shacking up or otherwise engaging in sexual relations outside of marriage. One pastor I know has been told not to preach against abortion, as if murdering babies in the womb has suddenly become acceptable in the sight of God. The reason for these lists of forbidden topics is, of course, that members of the congregation or their sons and daughters are engaged in the sins and they don't want to hear about it. And heaven help the pastor if he faithfully proclaims God's Word and calls them to repent – or worse, bars an unrepentant sinner from the communion rail as he must do.

It's a dirty open secret that we have in our Missouri Synod this thing called the CRM roster. It stands for Candidate for the Reverend Ministry. It's a list of ordained men who are currently without a call to serve a church. Now, some are on this list temporarily for health reasons. Others have gone back to school to earn a higher degree. A handful were serving churches that simply became too small and had to close their doors. But many, probably the majority of those on the CRM roster, are faithful pastors who were forced to resign their calls because the congregations they were serving forced them out or just stopped paying them because they preached and taught according to God's Word rather than the desires of the congregation. Every pastor I know fears being put on the CRM roster. Once you're on it, it's awfully hard to get off. It's like pastoral purgatory because congregations and specifically call committees perceive the men on this list to be damaged goods. Who wants a pastor that couldn't get along with his last congregation?

So, like the Pharisees in this morning's Gospel, just the threat of being condemned to CRM status is often enough to get pastors to be silent about the congregation's protected pet sins. Yes, pastors are sinners too who often fear men and what they might do more than they fear the Lord. And this, not coincidentally, is how Jerusalem kept ending up being led by false priests and prophets. It's safer and easier to tell people what they want to hear rather than the Word of God they need to hear. And I don't need to tell you that whole church bodies that call themselves Christian have gone down this road and no longer call sin certain behaviors that the Word of God plainly prohibits.

Personally I'm grateful to God and thankful to you that I've never felt any direct pressure to steer clear of certain topics. But make no mistake, there are times when I know I'm dealing with a sensitive subject and have to say things that I know will offend people. Do I approach these topics with a certain amount of trepidation? You bet I do. And for that I need to repent. I can only be faithful to God and to you if I preach the whole counsel of God without fear. I can only be faithful if I convict you of your sins.

But this is the problem: that Pharisee in each of us is resistant to repentance. It wants the Law of God, but only on its own terms. And that is nothing less than idolatry of the self. It's an attempt to rewrite the Law of God in such a way that it leaves you righteous. And the righteous don't need a Savior from sin.

You need to be convicted of your sin. You need this so that you will repent. So, instead of condemning or threatening or simply avoiding one who faithfully proclaims God's Law, what each of us needs to do (and I'm including myself here) is to condemn the Pharisee within who takes offense. Condemn to death the part of you that is resistant to repentance. Only then will you be ready receive again the forgiveness, life, and salvation Jesus died to secure for you.

Jesus came for sinners and only for sinners. Therefore may God grant to his whole church faithful preachers who are bold to show us our sins that we may always acknowledge our need for a Savior as great as the One he sent in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!