

FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

ANNO † DOMINI 2023

“Guard Your Heart”

Once upon a time there was a prince who had a castle. Within the castle was a great treasure, which the prince had received as a gift from his father, the king. The king had tried to impress upon his son the importance of guarding this treasure, which, if kept, guaranteed him an inheritance, including no less than the kingdom itself. But the prince was foolish. As the king’s son, he felt invincible. He couldn’t imagine anyone possibly posing a threat to himself or to his inheritance. So, he let down his guard. He lowered the drawbridge, opened the gates, dismissed the guards, and let anyone in who desired it, whether friend or foe. The prince was *so* lax that he did not even notice when one day the treasure went missing. He was so used to the hustle and bustle of those who freely came and went, that he hardly gave a thought to the treasure anymore. And so, when the king returned one day and asked to see the treasure, that he might give his son the inheritance, the prince was surprised to discover its absence. That while his castle was filled with all manner of worthless things, which he suddenly saw for what they were, the most valuable thing in his possession, the one thing he *should* have kept with all vigilance, was lost.

Such is the picture that King Solomon paints for us in today’s Old Testament reading from the Book of Proverbs. We all know what a proverb is: a familiar short saying that conveys general truth or advice,¹ like, “An apple a day keeps the doctor away,” and, “Don’t count your chickens before they hatch.” These are nuggets of *human* wisdom gained by real, practical experience. The proverbs of Solomon, however, are much more than that. I’m sure we’re all familiar with how Solomon got his wisdom, responding to God’s offer toward the beginning of his reign as king of Israel to give him anything he wanted with a request for an understanding mind.² “And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore.”³

¹ Definition from Dr. Andrew Steinmann, *Concordia Commentary: Proverbs*.

² 1 Kings 3.

³ 1 Kings 4:29-30.

So when he says, "Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life," that's not just good advice, it's *God's Word*. It is *divine* and not human guidance for living our lives as the people of God. These words, along with *all* of Proverbs, are written to *Christians*, believers in the promise given by God to humanity in the garden to send a Savior from sin, death, and the power of the devil. These aren't things we must do in order to *be* forgiven, but rather what we ought to do *because* we are forgiven. We're the prince, the son of the King, by virtue of our Baptism. "My son," the pericope begins, making it a *family* affair. At the font we received adoption as sons, God sending the Spirit of His Son, Jesus Christ, into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"⁴ Whereas we "were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another," as St. Paul describes our natural fallen state, "God saved us...according to his own mercy...through Jesus Christ our Savior."⁵ Although we have sinned, our sins are forgiven. Although we deserve nothing but death and punishment, God kept His promise by giving His Son to die for us. And although the devil seeks to devour us, his head is crushed in victory. By grace we have been saved. We are bought and paid for. We are sons of the King.

And as sons, we have received a great treasure. Proverbs 4 says, "My son, be attentive to my words; incline your ear to my sayings. Let them not escape from your sight; keep them within your heart. For they are life to those who find them, and healing to all their flesh. Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life." This is a reference to none other than the Holy Spirit, whom we receive as a gift through the hearing of the Word of Christ. Jesus says, "Whoever believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of His heart will flow rivers of living water.'" And it goes on to say, "Now this He said about the Spirit."⁶ There's also Peter's Pentecost sermon, in which the apostle says, "Repent and believe everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."⁷ And Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 3, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?"⁸ Indeed, He dwells in each one of us who are called, and therefore are, children of God. What's so great about that? As we confess(ed) in

⁴ Gal. 4:5-6.

⁵ Titus 3:3-7.

⁶ John 7:38-39.

⁷ Acts 2:38-39.

⁸ 1 Cor. 3:16.

the Nicene Creed, the Holy Spirit is “the Lord and Giver of life.” He is the source of our life in *Christ*, connecting us with His grace, which overflows for us, because of the blood that flowed from His veins on the cross. Without the Holy Spirit, we cannot believe and so receive the life and healing that come through faith in Christ alone. “But the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.” He is the guarantee of our inheritance, which includes no less than the kingdom itself, for “unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”⁹ But as those who have been washed and justified by His grace, we have become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Now, says God in Proverbs 4, *guard* that treasure. “Keep your heart with all vigilance.” More than you guard anything else in your life, guard the Holy Spirit within you. Take care to defend your castle, because you *can lose* your inheritance. You may be a prince, a son of the King, but you’re not invincible. You have enemies, who seek day and night to penetrate your defenses. And while it’s true that God our heavenly Father defends us from all danger and guards and protects us from all evil, He also impresses upon us the importance of being vigilant *ourselves*, lest by our own negligence we quench the Spirit of God.¹⁰ This is, as perhaps Solomon knew, what happened to Israel’s first king, Saul, who repeatedly disobeyed the Word of God spoken directly to him, and the Spirit of the Lord departed from him.¹¹ God freely forgives all who repent and turn to Him in faith, but that’s not what Saul did. That’s not what *anyone* does who stubbornly persists in letting evil in.

That’s the meaning of those difficult words from today’s Epistle, where Paul lists the works of the flesh, e.g., sexual immorality, idolatry, jealousy, fits of anger, and warns that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.¹² He’s not saying that anyone who *ever* does those things will miss out on the inheritance, but whoever *does* these things, as in, *persistently*, on a *regular basis*. The entire life of the Christian is to be one of *repentance*, not of sinning that grace may abound. Let down your guard, give evil free reign, and you run the risk of cutting off the Source of life. So David prays in Psalm 51, after committing

⁹ John 3:5.

¹⁰ Eph. 4:30; 1 Th. 5:19.

¹¹ 1 Samuel 16:14.

¹² Gal. 5:21.

a number of grievous sins, “take not Your Holy Spirit from me.”¹³ He knew that that was a real possibility, and he did not desire it.

Neither do you, I imagine. So, what does this mean? What *is* the way to guard one’s heart? Again, if we return to the idea of the body as a castle, then the way in would be through the *senses*, which is how Solomon talks about it here, where he instructs us to avoid evil by focusing on the *body*: “Put away from you all crooked *speech*, and put devious *talk* far from you. Let your *eyes* look directly forward, and your *gaze* be straight before you. Ponder the path of your *feet*; then all your ways will be sure. Do not swerve to the *right [hand]* or to the *left [hand]*; turn your *foot* away from evil.”¹⁴ This does not deny the fact that evil comes from within.¹⁵ We do not subscribe to the monastic way of life, precisely because we understand that no amount of curbing your sinful desires can ever make you righteous before God. The righteous live by *faith*.¹⁶ But we also don’t agree with those who say it doesn’t matter what you do, because, you know, “God will forgive me.” The wisdom of God begins with *fear*. We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things, so that we do *not* sin, and that means setting a watch before our lips, our eyes, our ears, our hands and our feet for the sake of the Spirit who dwells within us.

James writes to his readers about the dangers of the misuse of the tongue, calling it “a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!”¹⁷ Our words are not idle things; they have *power*, hence the Eighth Commandment, “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.” Gossip is a terrible sin. Our lips were made to bless, but when we use them to hurt our neighbor’s reputation, whether or not that’s our intention, we invite evil in. As the saying goes, there’s a reason God gave us two ears and one mouth. “Put away from you crooked speech, and put devious talk far from you.” When you hear something, a rumor or otherwise, even if it’s true, take Luther’s advice and turn your ears into a grave and cover it.¹⁸ Do not fall into a greater sin by going out and telling it to everyone you know, but do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

¹³ Psalm 51:11.

¹⁴ Prov. 4:23-27.

¹⁵ Mark 7:21.

¹⁶ Rom. 1:17.

¹⁷ James 3:5.

¹⁸ LC I 266.

“The eye,” Jesus says, “is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness.”¹⁹ What you take in is what you will become. And I’m afraid that for many of us the gates are wide open. How discerning are you *really* about what you watch? How much time do you spend looking at worthless things? Did you know your eye can cause you to sin? That’s what Jesus says. After telling His disciples that it is adultery to even *look* at someone, man or woman, with lustful intent, He says, “If your right eye *causes you to sin*, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell.”²⁰ Now, do I think He means that literally? No. But the point is to use *caution* when it comes to your gaze. What you take in with your eyes can lead all manner of sinful thoughts, words, and actions. So, if your favorite show is full of sex, drugs, and an affinity for taking the Lord’s name in vain, then tear it out and throw it away. Find whatever is truly excellent and praiseworthy in the sight of God, and think about *these things*.²¹ “Let your eyes look directly forward, and your gaze be straight before you.”

And don’t forget where it is you’re going. The prince grew lax. He was so used to the hustle and bustle of those who freely came and went, that he hardly gave a thought to the treasure anymore. Don’t let that be you. “Ponder the path of your feet, then all your ways will be sure.” Remember who you are, what you’ve received, and what you have to look forward to. Remember your Baptism, the Word of God that claimed you as His own dear child. Begin each day with the sign of the cross, drowning the sins of yesterday and turning to live a new day in Christ. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within you, keep your eyes fixed on Jesus. Be attentive to His Word; incline your ear to His sayings. More than anything else in your life, *guard your heart*. And when your King comes again, you will acquire possession of your promised inheritance, to the praise of His glory, and live happily ever after.

Amen.

¹⁹ Matt. 6:22-23.

²⁰ Matt. 5:29-30.

²¹ Phil. 4:8.

