When was the last time you felt awkward, uncomfortable, or just plain ashamed because you went along with something you didn't like, respect, or think was smart or right? Rather, you bowed to social pressure or were afraid to go against the authority of your boss, supervisor, or parent.

It could be one of many scenarios: You are in a gathering where someone unleashes some tasty gossip about someone and you suspect it is not true, or half true, or at least unfair, but rather than say something, question the story, defend the person, or confront the destructive power of gossip, you just sit there.

Or someone with whom you work is doing something that you suspect is either illegal or at least unethical but it gives your business an advantage. But hey, its business, and you can be sure your competitors are doing it. Plus, to raise a stink would put you on the outs with your colleagues. So you just sit on your hands.

You see things going on in the city or in the North Carolina legislature that strongly violate what you believe is right, moral, or best for Greensboro or the state of North Carolina. You wish someone would do something about it! But rather than raise your voice or find appropriate ways to dissent, you go about your business. “It's just politics.”

So I wonder, what would it take inside of you and me not merely to sit silent and go along?

We learned about the power of going along, of conforming, as well as the temptation to please authority figures, in the delightful children's morality tale, *The Emperor's New Clothes*. It was written by Hans Christian Andersen two centuries ago. We heard it as a kid or at least read it to our own children. It could have been a feature on the ten year reality show, *What Not to Wear*, which some of you may have seen.

Remember the Emperor’s story? A vain emperor is visited by two swindler weavers who promise that their fabric is not only exquisitely beautiful but has within it a magic power: “Clothes made of this cloth have a wonderful way of becoming invisible to anyone who is unfit for his office, or who is unusually stupid.” The emperor is hooked, not only because he will get a new set of clothes, but he also will be able to discover which of his subjects and
advisors are unfit. So the emperor commissions a magnificent set of clothes from the tailors.

One after another of the emperor's officials are sent to check on the work in progress. But they see nothing at all on the loom, and stricken with the thought that they are either stupid or unfit for office, they carry on with the pretense.

When the Emperor goes to visit the weavers, they make an enthusiastic show over the clothes but he cannot see anything at all. He is too proud and arrogant to admit that he cannot see the cloth. To do so, he feels, would be to label himself as stupid and unfit to be the emperor. Nor do any of his advisors admit to seeing nothing, for they too would be admitting to their own incompetence and unworthiness.

Then the minister of public processions announces: “Your Majesty's canopy is waiting outside.”

The Emperor turned for one last look in the mirror. “It is a remarkable fit, isn't it?”

When the Emperor finally walks out among his subjects in his birthday suit, the crowds watch eagerly. No one says anything except words of praise for the clothes – afraid to be the only one who cannot see and is stupid.

Only one small child (who is far too innocent for this pretense) finally shouts out, “But he hasn’t got anything on!”

At first his father tries to correct the boy but gradually everyone realizes they are not alone in their inability to see the clothes, and with strength in numbers, the crowd begins to laugh.

Then Andersen ends the story: “The Emperor shivered, for he suspected they were right. But he thought, ‘This procession has got to go on.’ So he walked more proudly than ever, as his noblemen held high the train that wasn’t there at all.”

You have to love a story like this because it is so full of truth... about human nature... and, as I hope you will see, truth about why faith, Christian faith, is so important. This story is also full of spiritual lessons, or at least an entry into the things that trip us up along the journey we call life.

Obviously, the Emperor is tripped by his own vanity and arrogance. But it’s the folks around the emperor who have such resonance with me. The court officials who surround the Emperor are beset with their fear of incompetence, their fear of being or looking stupid, inadequate, which results in their fear to tell the truth. And the crowd, afraid to say that the
emperor has no clothes, is the classic scenario for the social pressure “to go along” with everyone else. Have you ever felt that way?

One of the books I read this summer is the national bestseller, *All the Light We Cannot See*. Actually I listened to it...a five-hundred page novel that took thirteen hours! Okay, I was in the car a lot!

It starts in pre- World War II France and Germany, and its primary characters are a French girl who is blind, and a German boy who lives in an orphanage with a dozen children cared for by a young Protestant nun. When the story begins, these two are children, but by the time the war ends they are teenagers of eighteen.

The German boy is Werner, an orphan in a coal-mining town, who is smart, curious, and gifted with mechanics and mathematics. He learns to repair an abandoned radio at age eight. “Nothing he’s encountered before has made so much sense,” Werner thinks. At night, he and his younger sister, Jutta, search the airwaves until they find the voice of a Frenchman who talks to them about science and plays classical music.

Werner gets a reputation of being able to fix small appliances for people in the town and after he repairs the radio of a Nazi official, he wins a scholarship to a prestigious school for Hitler youth.

This keeps him out of the coal mines which he was destined for at age fourteen, but, he soon realizes, the Nazi school comes with its own perils. The Nazis are brutal and inhuman. Their demonic worldview concerning Jews and anyone conceived to be weak or not full-blooded German, plays itself out again and again before the talented boy prodigy. One of the compelling story lines is that young Werner has to choose between conformity and morality. How do you as a fourteen year old or even as a thirty year old stand up against an immoral system, an immoral worldview, and against popular opinion that has swept over an entire country?

This storm is about Germany – but it’s a question for us as we think about our history of race and racism, of guns and violence, or popular opinion when we invaded Iraq. What would it take inside of you and me to not merely sit silently and go along?

We notice how Paul the Apostle uses the metaphor of clothes in describing the new life given by Christ. In Colossians Paul says ... *as God’s chosen people....clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.*

In Romans he writes: *Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ.*
In today’s second lesson, Paul uses the metaphor of a tent to describe the human body to the Corinthians.

_In this tent we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling— when we have taken it off, we will not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan under our burden, because we wish not to be unclothed but to be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee._

In the early church, Paul's imagery of clothing and nakedness would have made immediate sense. New converts to the faith were often baptized naked, and then they were given a white robe as they emerged from the water.

Paul wants the Corinthians to understand that their destiny is not to be “unclothed” but that Christ gives people a new robe of worthiness, a new identity.

Andy Couch, editor of Christianity Today magazine, makes an interesting observation, citing Adam and Eve’s realization that they were naked, and made fig leaves to cover themselves. He writes: “Naked is a fascinating word. It applies only to human beings. God clothes the lilies of the field…. Only human beings require clothes because only human beings can be naked. And God will also clothe us.”

So here’s the point: When we go along, conform – it’s about being naked and vulnerable, when we don’t feel good enough, or powerful enough about ourselves to risk being courageous.

I asked earlier, what would it take inside of you and me not to merely sit silent and go along?

The spiritual issue is somehow related — worthiness. When we don’t feel quite worthy, we go along. We don’t feel powerful enough to say, “The emperor has no clothes!”

What Paul says is that Christ clothes us with a new worthiness.

Remember the name of Jeb Stewart Magruder? If you were around for Richard Nixon’s fall from power because of the Watergate scandal, Magruder’s name will be familiar. He worked for the Nixon Whitehouse and was chair of the Committee to Re-elect the President. With names like Chuck Colson, Bob Halderman, John Mitchell and John Dean, Magruder was part of the Nixon team that gave authority for the break-in of the Democratic National Headquarters at the Watergate complex. When the break-in was exposed along with its cover-up, Magruder pleaded guilty and was sentenced to seven months in federal prison.
What you probably don't know is that later, Magruder had a spiritual change of heart and a change of life. He attended Princeton Seminary and became a Presbyterian minister, with ministries in Ohio, Kentucky and California. As it would turn out, I had a chance to work with Magruder on a church project back in the '90s. But nearly thirty years after his Watergate involvement, what people wanted to know from him was why he simply didn't say no to the unethical shenanigans, or to question what it was he was being asked to do.

His answer was something like this: He was addicted to power, and didn't know its strength. It happened faster than he knew it, and held on to him stronger than he could ever have imagined. He spoke of losing his ethical compass to his ambition. What could give you and me the courage, power, character and a sense of worthiness – not to conform?

So here's the thing — the gospel has the power of putting on new clothes, the wardrobe of Christ. We are always tempted to go along, to play it safe in aligning ourselves with popular opinion or to go along with people who have authority. In the end, it seems, the root issue is about our own worthiness, or feeling that we are not adequate or worthy to step up or in.

Truth is – often we find ourselves in places where we have to make decisions about going along or having the character not to. The gospel is about Christ's giving us a new wardrobe – clothes that cover our weakness of character. With these clothes we put on the character of Christ and with the spirit’s help we grow, our character grows to the point where we just might say “The Emperor has no clothes.”