

Ephesus Sermon
Ephesus and the Unwinnable Fight Over Righteousness
Revelation 2: 1 - 6
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March 21, 2010

Throughout Lent we have been preaching through Revelation – not the most common Lenten discipline. The point of these sermons is to uplift the critical commentary that Revelation makes about the church and the world and see if in some ways these critiques can apply to the PC(USA) – our denomination. Revelation begins with admonitions to seven churches which are each in modern day Turkey – biblical Asia. We are preaching through Revelation to see if we hold anything in common with those churches then – to discover if there are any guiding principles within its words to show us the church we are to become.

Revelation was written around 100 AD by John of Patmos, a prisoner of Rome. It is the account of a vision that Jesus gave to him. It is the concluding chapter of our Bibles for many reasons but my favorite reason is its beautiful and hopeful ending. It does not end with trauma or terror – no! – it ends with some of the most beautiful words of the entire Bible.

“Come Lord Jesus. Come Lord Jesus.”

Two weeks ago we focused on the church at Laodicea (Revelation 3) – they have a Lukewarm faith. Their theological conviction and their faith was lukewarm – it was growing weak. And we asked whether it was a similar lukewarm faith that was causing the Presbyterian church to lose its influence in larger culture.

Last week we focused in on the message to Sardis – and it was rather ironic that it was the same day of the spring forward time change. The critique of Sardis is that the church is asleep – they have fallen asleep at the wheel of the church and we asked whether or not we were sleepy sometimes, sleepy in our faith. We asked, “is it time for the church to wake up?”

Today I want to look at these words for Ephesus, Revelation 2: 1- 7 - especially the stinging indictment, the tough critique that Jesus through John levels on Ephesus. "You have forgotten the love you once had."

Revelation 2: 1-7 (NRSV)

"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands: "I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance. I know that you cannot tolerate evildoers; you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false. I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. Yet this is to your credit: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God."

Years ago in Johnston County I was called to a home to tend to a dying woman. She was in her early 80's and was in hospice. It was hot -- July DownEast North Carolina hot.

Oddly enough, it was hotter inside than it was outside even though the air conditioning was running. Tempers were flaring. The six adult children, and there many multiples of grandchildren, cousins and other relations, didn't like each other. It was a junction of dysfunction.

All ready fighting over the estate, which wasn't much in the two bedroom one bathroom shotgun row house where she lived, these people were furious at the mother. They were mad with each other. And they were ready to pounce on the next fellow with a tie and cheery disposition who walked through the door. Namely, me.

They don't teach you what to do in that moment in class -- it's not really in the Hebrew Lexicon of the Old Testament.

So I apologized for interrupting their "discussion" and I went in to pray with the mother. I held her hand and she cried as two of her adult sons began pushing and shoving and shouting and hitting and cursing in the back yard. I finished my prayer and she said, "I'm sorry." And I said, "Bless you" because that seemed like something my grandmother Rubye would have done. When in doubt, I follow grandma Rubye.

What was happening that day is that no one wanted to compromise, be wrong, give an inch, gain a mile. No one was willing to move. They were all right and nobody was willing to be wrong over whose stuff it was, over who loved mama the most, or over who mama wanted in the room with her. I visited three times that summer and it was always just like this.

What happens to a family, to a friendship, to a church when conflict reigns?

What happens when there is no give and all take?

What happens when everyone believe they are righteous and right and cannot be wrong?

What happens when we see the specks in eyes of others and refuse to acknowledge the logs in our own?

What happens when we lose the love we once had?

I think that was the problem in Ephesus all those years ago, and I think it is a problem vexing much of the church today. I would even go so far as to suggest to you that it is vexing our entire culture and making us poorer along the way.

What you ought to know about Ephesus is that it was capital city of Roman Asia -- modern day turkey. The roman governor was there. This meant that it attracted folk from all over the Empire - like little children growing up in south Georgia who want to live in Atlanta, folks wanted to be in Ephesus.

The Apostle Paul loved Ephesus -- spending nearly 3 years there and writing his letters to the Corinthian Church - 1 and 2 Corinthians while there. The church in Ephesus began with a flourish and was successful out of the gate. And Jesus recognizes their faith and their strength.

Jesus, in the vision to John of Patmos initially praises the church -- your works are good, your witness is strong, you resist evil. Remember Ephesus is the capital -- this meant that Roman idol worship would have been everywhere. It was an explosive religious environment.

The Ephesians are praised by John of Patmos for "testing" and rooting out false apostles and teachers. They are praised for keeping the work and the witness of the church pure. They are praised for their righteousness.

Ah, what a funny word that is: righteousness. I cannot imagine a world without right and wrong. We need the guideposts don't we? Some things, some abuses, some decisions ought to be avoided and God is not lying to us by asking us to live just and appropriately righteous lives.

But here's the rub: there is something in the human heart that quickly takes God's righteousness and makes it our righteousness or self-righteousness. Very quickly we are fighting in the living room while mama is crying in the bedroom. Like the family in Johnston, this self-righteousness leads to loss -- "you have forgotten the love you first had." That is what Jesus tells them.

The Ephesians' church had rightly judged the false apostles, but then turned that judgment upon one another. My friend Brian Blount from Richmond in his landmark commentary on Revelation shares these words which I think say it perfectly: "Apparently the Ephesians became TOO discerning. Preoccupation with the work of love for the lordship of Christ overwhelmed and allegiance to the first love they had once demonstrated toward each other. In the same way that a healthy cell can metastasize into a cancerous one, their commendable insight degenerated into discrimination. They segregated those who were deemed workers of appropriate righteousness from those determined to be unrighteous. Once a loving community, they had become a policing community. Ephesian faith had become a matter of quality control. Assessment became more important than love."¹

What happens when in our zeal to be right we forget the love that we are called to share?

One of great concerns I carry as your pastor is that we live in a culture that plays a lot of winner take all - zero sum games politically, financially, and theologically.

The culture seems to want to force us into either or positions.

Either you are for the war or you are against the war.

Either you are for the bailout of the banks or you are against the banks.

Either you are for immigration reform or you are against it.

Health care reform good, or health care reform bad.

And if you disagree, then you are naive about the problem. That is not a left or right response – they both play at that game. Yes that is the game, that media and culture want us to play and I for one am tired of playing it.

These are important issues -- worthy of best thinking, our best praying, and our best listening. They need our wisdom.

But what happens is we human beings so easily become righteous. We stop listening because we assume the other must be wrong because only one of us can be right. It's like having three daughters and mama only has one heirloom chest-of-drawers. We end up shouting and our arguments are not longer about wisdom and compromise --they are instead about using "my rightness to prove your wrongness."

My dear friends, I have studied the gospels daily for 15 years. I cannot find one example in the life of Jesus where he employs this style of leadership or debate. He, who I will confess was more right than anyone who ever lived, never wields his righteousness like a weapon of conquest. Why then do we, Christian people, sometimes do this?

What happens when in our zeal to be right we forget the love that we are called to share?

It was the great southern Presbyterian theologian John Leith, who held theological court in Richmond for more than 4 decades who cautioned against self-righteousness and fundamentalistic positions in the life of the church and the culture. In his final book, Basic Christian Doctrine, Dr. Leith once wrote, "Once we reflect on the pathetic tragic ironic aspect of human life and sin itself it becomes clear that we grossly oversimplify life when we make unqualified distinctions between good people and bad between the successful and the failure. One of the great failures of 'fundamentalism' in theology as well as in politics is its inability to

¹ Brian Blount, Commentary on Revelation page 51.

recognize the pitiable the tragic and the ironic dimensions of human existence. Fundamentalism in any of its various forms, whether on the left wing or the right wing of the ideological spectrum makes too simple a distinction between people."²

These fundamentalisms – left and right on the spectrum -- are present in all sectors of our culture and they are present in all sides of the debates that vex our larger church.

One of the finest experiences that I have ever had – and it was strange because it felt like an abject failure – occurred when Art Ross, the now retired minister of White Memorial Presbyterian Church, invited me and several others to meet monthly to discuss what the Bible, the church, and culture were saying about the problems and challenges surrounding human sexuality and its role in the church. We met to try to come up with an answer about what the church should do.

I was the centrist in the group – which should come as no surprise if you are listening to this sermon – and there were two from the far left on the issue and two from the far right on the issue. We met for nine months and I listened and it was remarkable – these four amazing intelligent people agreed on 95% of everything but on the other 5%, they could not agree. And after nine months we decided not to meet any more. It felt like we failed. After nine months we had solved nothing. And it felt like we no wiser for the endeavor in the first place.

It was not because the issue was hard – it is hard.

It was not because the people there were not smart – we were smart.

It is because everyone had decided they were right before they arrived there in the first place and the effort failed, and we all returned to our own corners of self assurance.

I say we were no wiser because we simply walked away. Now I don't know if the problem of human sexuality is every completely solved but I do know that it cannot be solved while you are sitting at your own desk, alone.

One has to wonder is our church losing ground because people who need a break from the culture's fighting come to us and find us fighting just the same?

Imagine walking into a church for the first time and the conflict hangs in the air. Like Mama's living room in Johnston County?

Our church is largely devoid of conflict thanks to great leadership and sensible decision making but the challenges ahead -- technological, the limitations of accessibility in our sanctuary, fianancial ones as more of our most loyal donors leave us to move to Raleigh or Wilmington or simply pass away in their 90 -- debate, conversation, conflict will come up.

How are we going to address these questions?

Will we forget the love we once had? Or, will we choose the way of Jesus? Whenever somebody asks Jesus a question he usually didn't give a direct answer. Instead, when Jesus was asked a question he sent the asker on a quest. A quest for new life. A quest for new faith. A quest for fuller love and community. A quest for church at its best.³

As your pastor that is the quest I pray that we will be on together. But nothing will end the journey more quickly and limit the new lives that Jesus is calling us to lead -- nothing will end it more quickly than deciding that we know the answers before our detractors have had a chance to speak. Nothing will end it more quickly than deciding that we cannot be wrong or converted to wiser thinking before the meeting has ever begun.

We get in our way, and the gospel suffers when we decide we are more afraid of losing than in being church with some people with whom we disagree.

² John Leith – Basic Christian Doctrine – page 181

³ This is a riff on major themes in the writings of McLaren and Campolo.

Fundamentalist thinking and self-righteous living only push the very community that Jesus by his love creates. Let us, the church that is and the church that is to come, never been spoken of in terms like that said of Ephesus. Let us not forget the love with which we started.

My friends these are interesting times we live in. I pray that we listen with the ears the Spirit is giving us.

Amen.