

First Sunday in Advent
November 28, 2004
Revelation 2:1-7

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

Jesus Speaks to a Church that Has Lost Its First Love

1. Strong in doctrine
2. Weak in love
3. Needing repentance

*NIV **Revelation 2:1** "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands: ² I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. ³ You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. ⁴ Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. ⁵ Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. ⁶ But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. ⁷ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.*

Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus, Our Coming King,

A little more than a year ago, I was part of a five-man team that spent four days at a large church in Minnesota, assessing the ministry of that congregation. We interviewed pastors, teachers, numerous members and church leaders, secretaries and janitors, and even the leaders of the town. We pored over bulletins and financial reports. We toured the facilities. We attended worship services and Bible classes and checked to see that the nursery was staffed. And when we were finished, we reported our findings to the congregation, findings which were then printed up in a thick binder called the "diagnostic analysis."

Even if you've never been part of a parish consulting team, you've done some parish analysis. Probably even today you're analyzing the condition of our facilities, the quality of the music and the preaching, and even the temperature in the sanctuary. I'm pretty sure that without too much difficulty, we could all write our own "diagnostic analysis" of St. Peter Lutheran Church.

What we have before us this morning in the first of the letters to the seven churches is also a sort of parish consultant's report. But there is no mention of things like a nursery, adequate parking, or well-kept facilities. Rather, it becomes clear from reading these letters that Jesus is primarily interested in two things

when it comes to his churches: he's interested in knowing how we're handling his Word and he's interested in knowing how we're treating each other. Jesus' version of a diagnostic analysis is written by the apostle John and—in contrast to the analysis I had a hand in—it's much shorter and entirely free of opinions. Can you imagine how quiet it must have become in these churches as one of their leaders read Jesus' diagnosis of their church? But, really, these seven churches here in Revelation are representative of the whole church, so it's fitting for us, too, to think carefully about what Jesus says here.

We begin today by looking at the first letter, the one addressed to the church in Ephesus. As the leading city of Asia Minor, was a center of commerce and government. It was home to one of the Seven Wonders of the World, the temple of the pagan goddess Artemis. The apostle Paul had served in Ephesus for three years. Timothy served there, too. And toward the end of his life, the apostle John also lived in Ephesus. What's noteworthy in the assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the church at Ephesus is this is **A Church that Has Lost Its First Love.**

1. Strong in doctrine

The theme of this seven-part Advent sermon series is, "Behold, Jesus is Coming." But as the first verse of this section reminds us, Jesus is already here. It says, "*These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands.*" That's how Jesus was described in the opening chapter of Revelation. His face was shining like the sun and he was walking among the lampstands as he held seven stars in his right hand. Jesus quickly explains to John that the stars in his right hand are the "angels" (or messengers; we might say "pastors") of the seven churches. And the seven golden lampstands amongst which Jesus is walking are the seven churches. That's fitting, because Christian congregations are designed and commissioned by Jesus to shine with the light of his love in this dark world of ours.

It's impossible to miss in this opening line of this letter that Jesus is with his people as they gather to hear his Word and worship him. The Jesus who once came in human flesh, the Jesus who will come again in glory on the Last Day, this same Jesus is here now. He's speaking to us through the Holy Scriptures that are read and taught here. By his promise, he's here with us whenever two or three of us gather in his name. He's with us pastors as we work on our sermon and Bible studies in our offices. He's present when the elders, the council and the voters gather to do the Lord's work. He's present in our school rooms and Sunday school rooms and as we gather for Bible class and confirmation class. And he's the unseen Guest in our worship this morning. He's intimately familiar with what's happening here, with the strengths and weaknesses of our church, just as he was with the church at Ephesus.

There's a pattern to these letters. After the command to write and a description of the speaker, there is in every case but one a commendation of the congregation. Here's the commendation of the church at Ephesus: "*I know your*

*deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false.*³ *You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.*” Isn’t it interesting that the Ephesians are commended for their intolerance? Tolerance is touted as one of the greatest virtues today. Tolerance goes beyond conceding that those who hold different beliefs have a right to hold those beliefs and to hold them without being persecuted. Tolerance is defined as “a *sympathy* for beliefs or practices that differ from one’s own.” And that’s a problem, when the truth starts to have sympathy for error, the truth gets lost. Another consequence is that, increasingly, those who think in terms of right and wrong when it comes to morality, or true and false when it comes to religious teachings, are labeled “intolerant.”

But as Jesus sees it, the lack of tolerance for wicked men—the refusal to sympathize with their errors—is a strength of the church at Ephesus. Historians tell us that a false teacher by the name of Cerinthus tried to get a hearing in the church at Ephesus around this time. Cerinthus believed that the Jesus who was born in Bethlehem, as well as the Jesus who died on the cross, was just a man. And Cerinthus apparently tried to claim apostolic authority for his heresies. But the church at Ephesus tested his claims by comparing them with the teaching of the real apostles and found the teaching of Cerinthus to be false. They wanted nothing to do with his teachings. That could not have happened if the Ephesians hadn’t prized sound doctrine. The Ephesians were like the believers in Berea, who examined the Scriptures every day to see if what they were being taught was true. And Jesus wants every one of his churches, every one of us, to be strong in doctrine. As we grow in our knowledge of the Scriptures and in our faith in Jesus, we are better able to discern what’s true and what’s false, and we are less likely to be blown here and there by the winds of false teaching. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow up into Christ.

The church at Ephesus received other commendations from Jesus, too. The Christians at Ephesus worked hard for Jesus and they stayed with it even when it got hard and they grew weary. But another pattern in these seven letters is that each one also contains a word of criticism from Jesus.

2. Weak in love

Jesus voices his criticism of the church at Ephesus this way: “*But I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love.*” There was a time when the Ephesians were stronger in love. That was very likely just after they had become Christians. Then their love for their Savior, for his Word, their love for each other and their love for the lost, was like a rolling boil. It was active and visible in their lives. They were so relieved to be free from the threats of the law and so grateful for the promises of the gospel that their thankfulness translated into regular acts of self-sacrificing love. But as time went along, they began to take God’s grace for granted.

Jesus doesn't say much more about how this lack of love showed up in the lives of the Ephesians, but we aren't in the dark about it because we know how it manifests itself today. A lack of love can be a lack of love for each other in the body of Christ. When that happens, congregations break up into cliques and factions and even simple acts of Christian service are grudgingly rendered or left undone. Like the disciples in the upper room, we sit around expecting someone else to wash the feet. That's also when the hurting are left to deal with their hurt by themselves and the needy remain in need. A lack of love can also mean a lack of love for the lost. When that's the case, then the plight of those who don't know Jesus barely registers with us. Then visitors to worship receive no welcome and opportunities for personal witness are neglected. A lack of love can show itself as a lack of love for Jesus' Word. When that happens, worship becomes a dreary obligation seldom met and Bible study opportunities go begging. It's a serious matter, because no matter how many spiritual gifts we may have, no matter how much Bible knowledge we may possess, if we don't have love, it means nothing. When Jesus said, "**By this all men will know you are my disciples,**" his reference was to our love for each other.

But there's a remedy for the lack of love. That remedy is repentance.

3. Needing repentance

Jesus admonishes the Ephesians to take stock of their spiritual condition. He says, "*Remember the height from which you have fallen.*" It's quite possible that the diminishing of our love may have happened so gradually that we didn't even notice the change. Maybe some of us believe that right now we're in the best spiritual condition we've even been in our whole lives. But some of us might also remember a time when we were much more spiritually fit, when we were more into the Word, when our prayers were more regular and fervent, and, correspondingly, our love for each other was much more vibrant.

It's not too late to return to that place. And there's no time like this season of Advent to make such a return. If this Advent and Christmas season is going to be something more for us than a time of commercial and culinary excess, if it's going to do something more than leave us thicker around the middle and thinner in the wallet, then repentance is what's called for. Repentance involves walking up to the very edge of the pit of hell and staring into that abyss, all the while acknowledging that that's where I deserve to be on account of my sins. Repentance begins with the realization that I desperately need a Savior. My mind and heart are home to too many lusts. My words are often critical and uncharitable. And my actions are too often the evidence of the evil that lives inside of me. With the tax collector in the temple, we have to say, "**God, have mercy on me, a sinner.**" (Luke 18:13)

And Jesus has a promise for those who make such an admission. He says, "*To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is the paradise of God.*" The tree of life was one of two trees called by name in Genesis 2. The fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was off limits, but the

fruit of the tree of life was there for the eating. Those who ate of it would live forever. But then came the Fall and eviction from paradise. And that was when access to the tree of life was cut off. Angels served as sentries and a flaming sword flashed back and forth to discourage any fruit-pickers. But now Jesus' death and resurrection have re-opened the way to the tree of life. Through faith in Jesus' promise of forgiveness we can eat that life-giving fruit again. You're eating it this morning as you hear and believe the announcement of your forgiveness for Jesus' sake. As you confess your sins and then remind yourself that you are a baptized child of God, clothed in the righteousness of your Savior, you are eating of that fruit, too. All this is due, the apostle Paul says, to **"the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel."** (2 Tim. 1:10)

Unlike the rest of the book of Revelation, the first three chapters, including the letters to the seven churches are not presented in symbolic language. These are real letters to real churches that were meant to be taken literally by their recipients. But that doesn't mean that we can't benefit from them today. As we examine these seven letters during this season of Advent, I think we'll see something of ourselves and our congregation in each letter. And as we take to heart what Jesus says in these letters, we'll be better prepared to celebrate the miracle and grace of his birth. To that end, he encourages us to continue strong in the teaching of his Word and, through repentance, return to the heights of Christian love. Amen.