

Summit Presbyterian Church
Preached by Rev. Sue Cyre
1/29/12

Text: Revelation 1:19- 2:7
Title: "First Love"

After the glorified Christ tells John in chapter 1, "Do not be afraid" then Christ tells him, "Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is NOW and what will take place later."

The things that you HAVE seen, the things which are NOW and the things which WILL take place. Past, Present and Future.

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, is a revealing, a disclosing, but it's not just a disclosure about the future. It discloses the things which are NOW. The unseen reality of the world around us.

The Revelation OF Jesus Christ is a disclosure BY Jesus Christ and it is a disclosure ABOUT Jesus Christ and therefore about us and the world.

It makes sense of the present by showing us the future where Jesus is going to win. And the Revelation of Jesus Christ discloses the unseen present...the things not visible to our eyes. It tells us that things are not what they seem.

John is exiled on the island of Patmos when Jesus speaks to him. He is a political enemy because he would not worship the emperor as his Lord. He is probably in his mid or late 80's when he sees the Revelation of Jesus Christ.

The first message that Christ tells John to write is a message for the angel of the church in Ephesus. Ephesus would have been the first stop on a route that would take a letter-carrier to the 7 churches. The churches are listed in the order that a letter-carrier would take.

But, there may be another reason Ephesus is listed first. Ephesus is the fourth largest city of the Roman Empire behind Rome, Alexandria in North Africa, Antioch of Syria (where the disciples of Jesus Christ were called Christians for the first time) and then Ephesus.

It had a population of 225,000 people. It was a cosmopolitan city. The financial center not only for Asia minor but the ancient world. It was the Wall Street of that world. There was a huge amount of money invested in its banks.

It was the most important seaport on the coast of Asia. So it was the crossroads for people of different nationalities who lived and traveled through the city.

Ephesus was the center of Artemis worship. Artemis was a fertility goddess who was the embodiment of sexuality and lust. It was also a cult that was male-hating.

The seven wonders of the ancient world which included the Colossus of Rhodes, the hanging gardens of Babylon, and the pyramids of Egypt, also included the temple to Artemis at Ephesus.

The temple to Artemis at Ephesus was bigger than two football fields. It had between 100 and 127 columns supporting the roof. The columns were 65 feet high—roughly 7 stories. The building was 221 feet wide and 425 feet long.

The worship of Artemis was so central to the life of Ephesus that the city set aside 1 month a year for ceremonies, games, festivities connected with the goddess worship.

The city was also the center for the emperor cult. One of the ways Rome honored a loyal city was to allow it to build a temple to the emperor. So Ephesus had a temple to Domitian where he was to be worshipped as a god.

Ephesus was the center of business, politics and religious pluralism in the ancient world. And in that city one of the most influential churches in the history of Christianity was planted.

Paul stopped there briefly and planted the church. Then Priscilla and Aquila remained after Paul left and nurtured the young congregation. Later Paul returned and spent 2 ½ years there. The longest time he spent in any one place.

He left Ephesus when his preaching and the growth of the church disrupted the local economy whose biggest industry was making and selling miniature statues of Artemis.

The trouble began when people who became Christians stopped buying statues, the statue business dropped off and those who depended on the business started a riot forcing Paul to leave. The book of Acts describes the riot.

Paul left Timothy, his “Son in the Lord” to pastor the church. Just as an aside, some of Paul’s most serious comments about women’s role in the church were written to the young Timothy as he pastored the church in this large city steeped in Artemis worship which denigrated men, scorned marriage and children.

By the time the book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ was written, Ephesus was probably the center of the Christian movement. The center had moved from Jerusalem, to Antioch and now was in Ephesus.

According to tradition, Mary the mother of Jesus was a member of the Ephesian church, having moved there with John who cared for her after Jesus was crucified.

Now what does Jesus say to this church. Notice first that his message is for the “angel of the church at Ephesus.” There are two possible interpretations of “angel.” First, the word for “angel” can be translated “messenger.” This could be the human messenger of God’s word in each church...the preaching pastor.

Or it could mean a super-natural, heavenly being who has some role in the life of the congregation. Those are the two options. Which is it?

The human being who is head of the church makes the most sense. After all this is a physical letter to a physical congregation. How can the letter be delivered to an angel.

Yet, no where else in the book of Revelation does the word angel refer to a human being. So it appears that God has assigned “guardian angels” over each congregation. In 1 Cor 11:10 Paul writes that women who pray or prophecy in public should, “have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.”

We have to be careful here. Angels are not to be worshipped. We should reject the current fad of seeing angels everywhere and speaking to them or seeking their favor. The only one we speak to in the divine realm is God and we do that through Jesus Christ our mediator. That’s why we offer our prayers in the name of Christ. We don’t talk to angels or seek their power or favor.

Paul warned the church in Colossae, “Let no one defraud you of your prize by ... the worship of angels.”

What John seems to be saying is that God has assigned angels over the churches, and these angels are responsible for making sure the message gets told...to somehow make sure the human messenger speaks the Word accurately and faithfully.

I’m not sure it matters a great deal whether we assume the angel is a human messenger or a divine-representative.

Notice that in each of the letters to the seven churches, Jesus refers back to one of his traits described in chapter 1. In the initial vision in chapter 1, Jesus HAS the seven stars in his hand now he says he HOLDS the seven stars in his right hand. Before he said he was in the MIDDLE of the lampstands, now he describes himself as the One who WALKS among the seven golden lampstands.

The seven stars are the seven angels...heavenly beings or pastors. He is holding them and won’t let go. They are in his hand. Safe, secure. No matter what.

And he is walking among the churches. One commentary asked an important question. Is Jesus sending this message to prepare the church for himself—to cleanse the church of its sin so that it is ready for him? Or is it to prepare the church for the persecution she will face. To remove any weaknesses that will mean the church is unable to bear the persecution?

We aren’t sure and maybe its both/and. He is preparing the church for himself. But, only a church rooted in Christ, healthy and alive can withstand the world’s persecution.

Jesus begins by commending the church. “I know your deeds, your toil or hard work, your perseverance.” The church is actively working on behalf of the Kingdom of God. They are doers. All of its members are engaged in ministry.

The word for “toil” or “hard work” means exhausting, strenuous labor. They are working hard, pushing themselves for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

Imagine the kind of ministries going on in this large, pagan city. Full of immigrants, no doubt with an underclass of poor that any industrial city generates. Artemis was the goddess of lust and sexuality so there were health ministries. And preaching the gospel. The Ephesians did good deeds among their people for the sake of the kingdom.

The Ephesians persevered in the face of the goddess cult and the emperor cult. They refused to participate in the idolatrous worship and that meant that they were rejected by friends, ostracized by trade and craft groups, it was probably hard to find work. They were often imprisoned by political leaders, had their businesses taken from them. Yet they persevered.

And more than persevered, they didn't grow weary.

They were discerning. When false teachers came into their midst, like the Nicolaitans, they tested their message and rejected them. Twenty years later Ignatius wrote a letter to Ephesus whose bishop then was “Onesimus.”

Ignatius learned from Onesimus that “no sect could win a foothold in Ephesus, and that when anyone tried to introduce any harmful teaching, the people closed their ears and would not allow it to be disseminated.”

Theologian John Stott summarized the condition of the church saying it was, “energetic in their service, patient in their suffering, orthodox in their faith.” ---what then could possibly be wrong? Repeat.

Jesus commends their deeds but then Jesus offers this condemnation, “you have left your first love.” Throughout the Scripture, the church is called to be the bride of Christ. Christ's relationship with the church is a marriage covenant. It was in the OT and it is in the NT.

“First love” is the first love experienced between two people who are “in love.” Its the love the church is to have for her bridegroom.

Just before Walling and I met while in school in FL, Walling accepted a job in New Mexico. I was in FL and he was in NM. We spent hours on the phone several times a week. Our phone bill was higher than my tuition. But, it didn't matter, we were in love.

We wrote each other every day. We couldn't get enough of one another. We wanted to be together. No matter how tired I was at the end of the day, if Walling called, we talked. No matter how busy the day was with job and school, there was time to write.

Remember those days in your life? You wanted to do things for each other. Unnecessary things—things just to delight one another.

You invested time in one another. You couldn't help yourself. You wanted to spend time together. Nothing was an effort, it was a joy. You wanted to know each other better.

You wanted to tell others about your first love. You couldn't hold in the news or hide the joy.

That was how we were when we first understood that Christ loved us and claimed us for his own. The Bible was so exciting, it wasn't hard to find time to read it. It was a priority. You wanted to know more about God.

Worship was a delight, you wanted to be with God, to spend time adoring and praising him. Your heart leaped with praise.

Prayer, talking with God, was natural and effortless.

You couldn't help sharing the joy of the gospel with others—it was a delight to talk about your love.

That's first love. The desire that translates into spending time together, serving each other, delighting in one another.

Ephesus, the most influential church of Asia minor had fallen out of pure and simple devotion, out of affection, out of intimacy with Jesus Christ.

Jesus says "you have left your first love." The church at Ephesus was saying but we are working hard for your kingdom, we have all kinds of projects and programs going. Jesus says, "I know, and that's good and important. It shows your response to who I am and what I've done for you. But you left your first love."

We are careful to keep the teaching of the church pure, orthodox, true. Jesus says, "I know, and that's good and important. You can't love me if you don't know who I am and it's the teaching and doctrine that explain who I am and what I've done for you. But you left your first love."

The church at Ephesus says, "Lord, we have fought the spiritual battle. We've been persecuted, we've given up everything, we've spoken out." Jesus says, "I know, and that's important. It shows you understand that if the world hated me, it will hate you. But you have left your first love."

You've lost the attentiveness, the tenderness, the extravagance of your first love." You're doing all the right things, but your heart is elsewhere. Your heart is focused on the missions and you've forgotten me. Or Your heart is on the doctrine and you've forgotten to whom it points... me. Or your heart is on the persecution you are suffering and your family is suffering. Your focused on the cross you're carrying. But, you've forgotten me.

Marva Dawn's wrote a book on worship called, "A Royal Waste of Time." Worship is a waste of time... we may come away from worship with a thought or a new insight. But, worship isn't about what we get out of it. It's about being with the one we love and to the world that may seem like a waste of time.

.....That's the extravagance Jesus is talking about. The way you waste your time with someone you love....waste your time talking, and getting to know one another, waste your time writing letters and doing things for one another. Not because of what you can get out of it. But, because you can't do anything else but that because you so delight in one another.

Well what do we do? Jesus tells the Ephesians what they can do to return to their first love, "Remember from where you have fallen, and repent, and do the things you did at first."

First remember what it was like in the beginning. Remember your joy and dedication and delight in Christ. Remember the heights from which you've fallen. Remember how it was at first.

Second. Recognize that you've fallen out of love and confess it. Repent. Turn around, stop and make a u-turn to shift the focus back on him. Tell God how you feel, confess that you've lost your zeal, your enthusiasm, your joy, your relationship, your love.

Third. Do the things you did at first. Change habits and schedules and attitudes to restore intimacy. Isn't that how you would restore the romance in a marriage. Go back to what you did when you were dating...spend time together, go out to dinner, write notes, buy roses.

Do what you used to do. It may not restore the love immediately, but it will in time. When everything else is cleared out of the way, when the distractions are removed, when the priorities are straight the love will return.

Jesus speaks a solemn warning. "If you do not repent I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. " Churches that don't have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, don't survive.

After a while all the busy work seems empty, all the deeds have no purpose. Just like a marriage without love doesn't survive long, a church without the love of Christ doesn't survive long either.

Jesus makes the wonderful promise that those who “overcome” in the future will “eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise or garden of God.” What we couldn’t have in the Garden of Eden, the tree of life, because of our sin, those who overcome will have in the Garden of God, in the new creation.

That’s the future, but Jesus is also telling us, each of us, something about the present. He is moving among us now, he is in the midst of the church now, this minute. This letter is for us...for this church and for each one of us. He is calling his Bride-to-be, us, to love him now.

He stands before each of us now. What is he saying to you? How do you respond?