

“Listening to What the Spirit Says in Laodicea”

Scripture: Revelation 3:14-22

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This morning’s Scripture was originally scheduled to be the seventh in a series of reflections on “What is the Spirit saying to the Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church?”, following the seven letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3. Logically, we would consider this text at the end of the series.

However, we are not working with that kind of straight-line logic. Of the seven messages, it is the only one that has a direct reference to Communion or to the Lord’s Supper. Because we today we celebrating the Lord’s Supper, I am choosing to skip to the last message in this series of seven. Ironically, this sort of “skipping to the end” and then “continuing on” fits the logic of the book of Revelation. At several junctures, the end is clear and complete...and the book continues.

Revelation 3:14-22:

¹⁴“And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God’s creation: ¹⁵“I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. ¹⁶ So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. ¹⁷ For you say, ‘I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.’ You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. ¹⁸ Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. ¹⁹ I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent. ²⁰ Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. ²¹ To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. ²² Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

We will not spend as much time on the fascinating details of this text as we have in past Sundays. What we have today is the message of Jesus to the congregation in Laodicea. That is not a familiar name. I know of Presbyterian churches that have taken their names from the five of the seven cities mentioned: there are Smyrna Presbyterian Churches, Sardis Presbyterian (one in Charlotte), Philadelphia Presbyterian, Thyatira Presbyterian (one just outside of Salisbury, NC), and Ephesus Presbyterian. There are no Pergamum Presbyterian churches as far as I can tell (neither Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, nor Episcopalian). You may recall that the congregation in Pergamum got a mixed report card from Jesus: they were doing some things well but could improve.

I don’t know if you caught it, but the congregation in Laodicea got an F on their report card. Unlike all the other congregations, there are no words of commendation here, no pats on the

back, no “at least some of you are getting it right.” As you might expect, there are no Presbyterian congregations that have adopted the name, Laodicea. Just as matter of curiosity, I did an Internet search and found that there were some non-Presbyterian congregations that had chosen the name, Laodicea. I had wonder why?

An odd choice...here is what we can gather about this congregation. They were caught up in their own self-sufficiency. They were just fine by themselves...didn't even need Jesus in their midst. Indeed this self-sufficiency is part of the community spirit of the city of Laodicea. Some thirty years before the writing of the book of Revelation, there was a major earthquake in Laodicea with extensive damage. The Roman government offered to come in and help...sort of the like first-century equivalent of FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency). The people of Laodicea refused that help. “We are just fine without you; thank you very much” was the message.

So the church of Laodicea had what it needed. One of the hardest congregations to reach is one that feels self-sufficient, that feels no need, no longing for the presence of God. A few years back, a Baptist minister named Tony Campola coined the phrase, “the danger of affluenza”...not influenza but “affluenza”...too much affluence. One clear symptom was the thought that with enough money, I can take care of all my problems. With enough education, I can solve any problem. With enough intelligence, I can figure out what to do.

Contrast that to the odd twist in Jesus' words of blessing, those words that we call “The Beatitudes.” The opening one is “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for they shall see God.” Poverty is not virtue that many seek but poverty has a way of finding us. All too frequently, people return to the church, to their faith, only when they confront their poverty, their powerlessness, their fear, their anxiety...their need. It has been almost fifteen years ago when an inactive member of this congregation came to worship. I knew he was coming because he had been publicly quoted in the newspaper that he would be church the next Sunday. It was the first time I saw him here...and the last. He was in the news because he had been fishing about fifty miles out in the ocean and his boat sank. It happened so quickly that no one was able to contact anyone as to the mishap. Alone...fifty miles out from shore...even another boat passing within a quarter of mile would easily miss this member and his fellow fishermen. There would be no one searching for at least a day. No one would know where to look. It was a foreign fishing boat that just happened along...happened upon him floating on an ice cooler, as I recall. He had not even been able snag a life preserver before the boat went down.

So he came to church because he felt the need to say “thank you” to God for his life. His eyes were opened to realization that his life was a gift from God. I have not seen him since then...and that was almost fifteen years ago.

Self-sufficiency...or a sense of need for God? What might that need look like? This summer during my sabbatical, I attended several services that were designed for those in recovery: recovery from addiction. There was the usual cast of addictions: alcoholism, drugs, sex, and finances. That's right: one of these congregations had a twelve-step recovery group for those for

whom money was not just a problem but was making their lives out-of-control. In this service, designed for and led by those who knew recovery. The feel in the room was incredible: no one was there who did not sense something about those first couple of steps in Twelve-Step recovery: first, that my life is out-of-my control and unmanageable and second, it is a daily commitment to a Higher Power that enables some stability in my life. The atmosphere of the service was marked by this pervading sense of need for God.

Coming back to this church in Laodicea, here we have a congregation that is not in trouble due doctrinal conflict or in-fighting or budgetary problems. They are not dividing into factions and competing groups. They just do not sense any need for the presence of God in their lives. The response of the risen Jesus is graphic. Jesus says: Because you are neither hot nor cold, I am going to spit you out. The people in Laodicea knew something about this image. You see, despite their self-sufficiency, their city had a water problem. Just a few miles away (downhill), there was a neighboring city, Colassae, which had delightful, cool fresh spring water. Then a few miles uphill, there was city called Hierapolis that was known for its hot sulfur springs, valued for their comfort and for their medicinal effects. Laodicea had no cool, clear water sources like Colassae and it was down stream a few miles from Hierapolis. By the time the waters from these hot sulfur springs reached Laodicea, you had a stream of lukewarm, sulfur water. Hot sulfur water had a purpose...lukewarm sulfur water did not. It was non-functional. Laodicea was neither hot nor cold.

In of the most graphic images of judgment, Jesus warns that he is going to “spit them out.” That’s the future should things not change. Here is the oddest twist of all: Jesus still makes them a grace-filled promise. Each of these seven messages has a grace-filled promise about the future. Of the all seven messages to these seven congregations, this congregation receives the most intimate promise, the most touching promise, the dearest promise. Some of the promises sound great: eat from the tree life, get a white stone, get a morning star, have name written in the book of life and so forth. But none are as personal as this one. To this congregation that just does not feel a need for Jesus, here is the promise: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. I am that close to you.”

There is a famous painting of this text by an English painter named William Holman Hunt. Jesus is pictured standing at the door, knocking. The door has clearly not been open for a while. Vines have grown up around the door...but still Jesus knocks. If you look closely, you will see that the door does not have any sort of doorknob or keyhole. The door cannot be opened from the side that Jesus is on...it only can be opened from the other side.

So between you and the communion table this morning, imagine with me, a door...see that there is handle on your side and know that there is not one the opposite side. Only you can open the door. Look at the hinges and ask yourself, have “I opened this door recently...have I opened enough.” Listen for the knocking. The question the Spirit is asking us today: Will you open the door so that he might come in eat with you and you with him? The table is set; the meal is prepared. There is knocking at the door. Let anyone who an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

