

“Listening to the Spirit in Smyrna”

Scripture: Revelation 2:8-11

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We began last week on a seven-week series on the messages to seven congregations in the book of Revelation. In particular, our focus and theme is “What is the Spirit saying to Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church?” The way we are to hear the Spirit is to consider the words of the risen Jesus Christ to each of these seven churches.

As I noted last week, our focus in Revelation has nothing to do with any sort reading of the book of Revelation as an “almanac.” You know what an almanac is? It is a prediction of events in a year. An almanac, for example, might say “Today is January 14, 2007. Winter weather...wind chill below zero...chance of snow. We have had how many days over 70 degrees in January this year?! Some want to read the book of Revelation as “almanac” that will unlock the secrets of the future: clear understanding of the fall of the Soviet Union, the establishment of the state of Israel, the Biblical prediction of the atomic bomb. Hogwash! Remember what hogwash is: it is what you have left over after cleaning a filthy pig. The book of Revelation is not an almanac. The book of Revelation will unlock secrets, but not those kinds of secrets. In these messages to the seven congregations, the secret is that God is gracefully at work in struggling congregations. Although the struggle of Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church may not be as dangerous or as perilous as that of these seven congregations at the end of the first century A.D., we still are struggling to hear what God is calling us to be in this time and in the coming years.

So listen now...read along if you will...to the second message of the risen Jesus. This is a message to the congregation in the city called Smyrna, which is today the city of Izmir in Turkey. (Revelation 2:8-11):

⁸ *“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of the first and the last, who was dead and came to life:*

- Reminder: message to the “angel” is a message to the personality or spirit of the congregation
- Description of Jesus: “first and last...dead and came to life”—this attribute addresses the question of longevity...endurance...a time frame. Jesus holds everything (first and last): Jesus knows the bounds of life and death AND has broken those bounds.

⁹ *“I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich. I know the slander on the part of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.*

- Jesus knows their difficulty
 - The affliction: it was dangerous to be a Christian at the end of the 1st century—not so much an underground movement being persecuted by the government but more a suspicious sect that people questioned.
 - Their economic livelihood was adversely affected—sort of like being a Christian in the former Soviet Union—your opportunities were limited.

- Difficult words that seem to be anti-Semitic: Those who say they “are Jews and are not”...a “synagogue of Satan.” Remember that the church began as an offshoot from the synagogue. To outsiders, the church was just another Jewish sect. However, after sixty years, the break between Judaism and the followers of Jesus has become clear. Christians are not Jews. So, why this strong language?
 - First, John, the pastor, the writer of this book of Revelation is Jewish himself. These are “inside-the-family words.” For example, my mother can and has called me a “jerk” (and the name has fit more time than to my liking!). But don’t you dare call me a “jerk” in her hearing range—she’ll get you! This is “insider language”—you need to be Jewish to say it.
- Second, by the end of the first century, there was an enormous break between Jews and Christians, even Christian Jews; this meant disestablishment.
 - Because the synagogue repudiated the church, Christians lost the privileges that were given to Jews in the Roman Empire: Jews did not have to serve in the military (to be part of the military meant to take religious vows and swear allegiance to images: too many faithful Jews had died to keep from doing that). Likewise, Jews did not have to pray *to* Caesar, but rather could pray *for* Caesar. Because Jews repudiated Christians, now Christians could be required to burn incense and make a vow to Caesar. This break between Judaism and the church put Christians at odds with their society. Indeed, here is an odd thing: One of the charges against Christians was that they were atheists—they did not do the religious duties of the day such as serving in the military or praying to Caesar. The break from the synagogue was hurting Christians.
- Third, there was active opposition by Jews to the church because the church had drawn away sons and daughters into a faith that was now not considered a part of Judaism. Consider how you, a parent, would feel if your sons or daughters came home from college and said: “I have become a Moonie...I have joined the Hari-Krishnas...I am now a Wiccan.” Jews did not see the church as a legitimate expression of the faith of Abraham and Moses.
- So these difficult words about Judaism are not universal but rather they apply to what was happening in Smyrna at the end of the first century. The break between the church and the synagogue was bitter and difficult.

¹⁰ *Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.* ¹¹ *Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Whoever conquers will not be harmed by the second death.*

- Trouble is coming, even the possibility of imprisonment
- “Ten days”—a short-hand phrase to say that suffering will be extended but not endless (this is a phrase like a “month of Sundays,” “considerable spell,” even a “season.”). The reference to “ten days” is not literal; it is a way of saying that suffering does have a limit. It will pass. It is sort of like saying “Tough times don’t last; tough people do.”
- Receiving the “crown of life”—both in this world and the next—life continues, not the suffering.

- Intriguing historical footnote: The messages in Revelation 2 and 3 are addressed to seven congregations in seven cities. Today, six of those cities are simply archaeological sites—no continuing city or town. Only Smyrna, or Izmir, continues on. Incidentally, this is the place where cruise ships often stop today when visiting some ancient sites such as the six other cities mentioned. There is still a Christian presence there, after nearly 2000 years. “Crown of life!” Here we are talking about celebrating almost a century as Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church. In Izmir, Christians can talk about an ongoing presence for nearly 2000 years!
- Second death: a shorthand phrase for final judgment. Analogy: Perhaps you have had a course in high school or college where the teacher said that if you had an A average, you would be exempt from the final exam. There have been grades throughout the term. Those with an A do not have to take the final exam. No harm in “the second death” is a way of saying that there is no final exam or “final judgment” for those who been steadfast and enduring in their faith.

So, backing up from the details, what is the basic message to the church in Smyrna? Does it have anything to say to Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church? First, unlike Ephesus last week and all but the church in Philadelphia, there is no condemnation, no correction; no “you have done well BUT...” What has the church in Smyrna done well? They have done well in keeping on “keeping on.” The church in Smyrna has kept on through suffering.

Jesus knows they have suffered but seems to refrain from intervening. He offers encouragement; but he does not offer to fix their suffering. This, of course, is the sticking point of much of our religious faith. We look for what we are going to get out of faith. Where is the payoff?

A Jewish rabbi by the name Harold M. Schulweis once lamented about how Jews have forgotten how to be Jewish and that he is often approached by those who want to recover what being Jewish means.

They come to see me as a rabbi. They come for personal faith, personal solace and personal strength, for something they call spirituality. “Teach me to believe. Teach me to feel. Teach me to pray. Make me feel Jewish.”

In turn, I speak to them of loyalty to the tradition, to the Synagogue, to the community. I speak to them of the shiver of Jewish history, of the Holocaust, of the State of Israel, the imperative for survival and continuity. I urge them to belong, to join, to affiliate, to pray, to serve, to commit.

They do not argue with me. They even nod a sad assent. But I can read it in their faces, their disappointment and sometimes a burst of anger, “Rabbi, don't tell me what I can do for Judaism. Tell me what Judaism can do for me. Don't tell me what I can do for the Synagogue. Tell me what the Synagogue can do for me. Don't tell me to pray. Tell me what prayer can do for me; for me in my loneliness, emptiness, alienation, sadness, the

*disharmonies of my marriage, disappointment with my children, the lightness of my career, the staleness of my life."*¹

To put this in starkest terms, what Rabbi Schulweis is saying is that people come to him for a "fix." A "fix:" That word has become part of the lingo of the language of addiction. Users are looking for a "fix" to their craving, to their desire, to their hunger. But neither in faithful Judaism nor in faithful Christianity does God work that way. The promise of the God of the Hebrew Bible and the promise of Jesus is that "I will be with you," not "I will take your suffering away." Whether that suffering is the physical threats that church in Smyrna faced or the emptiness that comes from having plenty of "stuff" and not enough of what matters, or a life-threatening disease, or a breaking up of relationships that you wanted to work and has not, there is a suffering that will either makes us strong in faith or beat us down.

The risen Jesus does not make a promise to fix that suffering...but rather to be with us as in the pattern and practices of faith, particularly during the hard times. Frequently, I hear people speak with admiration, "I want the peace that so-and-so has...I want their spirit...I want their faith." I hear a person admire someone that seems to have reached "the crown of life." Here is what I do not hear people say: "I want the practices that will get me there...I want the patterns that will make it happen. Or, more to the point: "I want the suffering that molded and created that faith."

Years ago, I heard an old golf pro say, "too many people want to buy a game." People come to him and ask: "What clubs should I buy? What shoes should have? What golf ball should I use?" Golfers did not want to hear that there is no substitute for the boring repetition of practice. They did not want the practice...they want the results of the practice.

The risen Jesus commends the church in Smyrna for their endurance, for their hanging on, for their steadfastness through suffering. They are richer for that. What is the Spirit saying to Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church? We, who want the best facility, the top-notch staff, generous benevolences, a reputation for being witnesses to Jesus Christ in this community and in the world! That is what we want...but do we want the practices that will make that happen?

Recently someone observed that we spend more time watching television than we do in spiritual practices, and we wonder why we are so materialistic and empty. We buy televisions and computers for our children's rooms where they can spend hours and we are "hit or miss" on 45 minutes in Sunday School. Statistically speaking, the wealthier we have become, the less generous we are proportionally. In terms of church giving, church members gave a more proportionate share of their income during the Great Depression than in the midst of the comparative abundance that we experience today—an astonishing abundance that those during the Great Depression never knew. Here is another statistical "factoid:" the more education we have, the less likely we are to be practitioners of faith. Our very emphasis on getting as much education as we possibly can correlates with a spiritual decline!

What is the Spirit saying to Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church? We, who want the "crown of

¹ From <http://www.vbs.org/rabbi/hshulw/indivjew.htm>

life;” we who want no harm from the “second death,” who want to be exempt from the final exam? We are being called to want the “crown of life” AND to want to pursue...to strive for what it takes to get us where we want to be. Some of you are still puzzling, working through, toying with your “first love”—the theme of last week’s sermon. This week it is not about wanting the “crown of life”—that is assumed. No, the question is this: Do I want...will I seek...will I strive for what will get me to there? Will I accept suffering as just part of the process...a part of that which will enrich? As Jesus says, let the one who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.