

“Listening for the What the Spirit Is Saying to the Church: Ephesus”

Scripture: Revelation 2:1-7

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OAKLAND AVENUE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, 01/07/2007

Our theme for the next seven weeks focuses on what the Spirit of God is saying to Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church. Now there are some assumptions here. First, we can trust that God speaks to us. If we do not expect that God will speak to us, there is very little that we will hear. Over and over, psychologists have shown that we do not take in what we do not have some anticipation and expectation for. No amount shouting or fireworks or showy displays will get through if we are not open to the possibility that God will speak. Second, in the midst of all the communication that is going on around us—television, radio, text messages, books, newspapers, conversations, billboards—we trust that God will speak to us through the words of Scripture. So what we will do in the next seven weeks is consider a section of Scripture that has a pointed word to the church of Jesus Christ. This is not a word to Rock Hill...not a word to the U.S. of A...it is a word to the church of Jesus Christ.

Our texts will come from chapters two and three of the book of Revelation. And before you get any expectation that we are dealing with “end-time” prophecies or something like that, let me be quick to say what we have is a pastoral word to struggling congregations. There is no time-line for the Apocalypse—the end of the world; there is nothing about a Rapture (in fact, that is not anywhere in the book of Revelation and not in the Bible at all if you are speaking of some kind of great vacuum hose whooshing up all the good people). No, what we have is not fantastic words like that...what we have is even more fantastic: pastoral or guiding words to the church.

In Revelation 2 and 3, Jesus is the speaker. If you have one of those red-lettered editions of the Bible, our texts for the next seven weeks will be in red. But Jesus did not speak these words in Nazareth or Galilee or on a mountain top or in Jerusalem. These are not words from the ministry of Jesus...those three years of ministry prior to his crucifixion. These are post-Easter words. These are words of Jesus spoken sixty years after the crucifixion. These are words of Jesus spoken in a place to which he never physically traveled, what is now present-day Turkey. In those days, this was Asia or Asia Minor, according to the Romans, who ruled the Mediterranean world.

In approximately 92 A.D., the church of Jesus Christ was entering its sixtieth year of existence. The original apostles had all died. A pastor by the name of John—not John, son of Zebedee—had a message for seven churches in this region of the Roman Empire. But it turns out it is not John’s message: it is the message of the Lord Jesus Christ. John writes a message and sends it to seven churches. So from the hand of this unknown John, we have the words of the risen Jesus that were to spoken to congregations in Asia Minor.

Today we will consider the first message of seven...a message to the church in a city called Ephesus. Now there will be some details in Jesus’ words that hold a symbolism that is bigger than what we can cover in the few minutes that I have your attention (and some I may have

already lost some of you). But listen now to the words of the risen Jesus to the church in Ephesus (Revelation 2:1-7):

2 *“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:*

- Angel: the spirit or personality of the congregation
- Seven stars: likely the seven objects in the sky that seem to move on their own: sun, moon, and five visible planets (everything else seemed fixed): it says Jesus is in control, not the whim of destiny
- Seven golden lampstands: the seven churches that will receive this message

² *“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.”* ³ *I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary.*

- Oakland’s congregation is fifty years old...the third generation of Christians are in full swing...this is a mature congregation that has done the ministry in season and out-of-season. This congregation is commended for its steadfastness and endurance over the years.

⁴ *But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.* ⁵ *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.* ⁶ *Yet this is to your credit: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.*

- “But...” I like you but... It is good but... We have a condemnation after a commendation.
- Condemnation: You have abandoned the love that you had at first
- Solution: Repent...in this case, return
- Threat: lose your lampstand...lose your place as church
- Nicolaitans: we don’t who the Nicolaitans were. Likely, they were a group that wanted to adapt to the culture (we will come back to them another week).

⁷ *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.*

- Even though this is a word to the congregation of Ephesus at the end of the first century, it is a word for everyone who expects and anticipates that the Spirit will speak.
- Promise— “to eat from the tree of life in the paradise of God:” the language of the promise is symbolic and poetic—heaven is neither the Garden of Eden nor the clouds with angels playing on their harps, but we only have metaphors to describe a perfect relationship with God. However, as caught as we are in the present struggle to return to first love and to fight off the Nicolaitans, whoever they might be, there is reminder that we are not home in this life but our home is with God. Sometimes we sure get caught up in things that do not matter: measure anything you are being bothered by right now by the promise of “eating from the tree of life in the Paradise of God?” I am bothered by things

in my family, in my work, in this world and yet how urgent are they compared to the paradise of God? Most, if not everything, that is bothering me, I can say: “This too shall pass.” But I can’t say that about eating from the tree of life in the paradise of God.

So, stepping back from the details of this message: what is the Spirit saying to Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church? What is the word to the angel of the church at 421 Oakland Avenue, Rock Hill, SC? The word of Jesus to the church in Ephesus was both a commendation and a condemnation. Commendation: they have hung in there for the long-haul. The church in Ephesus has fought the good fight, stood the test of decades, been faithful in the good times and the hard times. Isn’t that Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church as well?

- Here we are few short years away from being a hundred years old. There are four-generation families among us...some with living representatives of all four generation still with us.
- We have recently renewed one of our first mandates, to be a witness to the Winthrop community, as Providence Presbytery funds campus ministry through us.
- We have been a leader in the work of Providence Presbytery, as the letter that I read at the beginning of today’s service is just one small example.
- We have educated our children in the Christian faith. We have put a premium on the nurture of our children and youth in our programs.
- We have been part of this community: one of the most effective compassionate care ministry in this town is HOPE, which we helped found, which we continue to staff with unpaid servants, and which we continue to fund. There is no other church ministry like our STAR tutoring program with Ebenezer Avenue Elementary School. We help found and have continued to support IHN in making a difference for the homeless families. As far as I can tell, we hold one of the largest and most regular blood drives in the city of Rock Hill.

And I could go on about support of the Presbyterian Church, our Stephen Ministry program, and so forth.

Commendation...but is there a condemnation for us as well? The condemnation against the church of Ephesus is that they have lost the love they had at the first, their “first love.” Have we retained the first love we had? In some ways, to ask the question at all gives the answer: No. You may have heard about the couple in their “golden years” rocking in their rockers. The wife pats her husband on the knee...her husband who will not wear a hearing aid. She pats on his knee and says, “Through the years, I found you tried and true.” “Eh,” says the husband. “I’m tired of you too!” Through the years, God has found Oakland tried and true...but is there some tiredness about us as well?

Last year, when seventy of our church leaders gathered for a retreat with a church consultant named Jill Hudson, one of the exercises was to evaluate where Oakland was on a growth curve: were we young and immature? No. Were we an adolescent, brimming with life but with unrealistic expectations? No. Were we in our prime, surging ahead with focus and energy? No. Were we looking back to the time when we were in our prime? Yes. Were we in a time of

decline...a time of looking at the prospect of death or non-existence or non-importance? No, we were not there, but we could see that possibility. As strong as the generational ties are in this congregation, we are still only one generation away from extinction. Our greatest loss of members over the years has not been to death or to other churches: our greatest loss of members has been to inactivity in the practices of faith: our neighbors, our friends, our sons and daughters, and grandchildren.

So what is to be done? Begin putting our affairs in order, writing our obituary, closing down? That's not the word of Jesus to the congregation in Ephesus. His word is "repent." Repent! Here come the should, must, ought, and have to requirements! Aren't you ready for some pulpit pounding shouting at you? That is not it at all! This repent is not "Shape up" but rather come back, recall, relive, re-practice, redo in those places where love blossomed in us.

Here is where you are going to have to fill in the blanks of this sermon. The sort of repenting here requires an answer to one of these three questions:

One, what practices that energize you have you gotten away from? I can tell you some of mine. Every time I pick up the guitar and play, I say to myself, "why don't I do this more often?" Every time I stop my busyness and do my daily devotional time of reading and praying...that is not so daily...I say to myself: "Why do I quit doing that."

Two, what extraordinary work have I let become common? I remember the excitement of reaching the practice of tithing: the good news is that I do not find it very hard now...the bad news is that I have lost the excitement about financial stewardship. We have the extraordinary commitment of new officers today: persons who are taking holy vows to be faithful, creative, energetic, focused, and dependable. The pay is not good. The hours can be long. The measurable results may take years to become clear. And yet they will make that commitment, many of them kneeling before you as they take office for the first time.

Question one: what energetic practices have you neglected? Question two, what extraordinary service have you let become common? And now, question three: where are you nostalgic? This is the real question: How many of you remember "Christian Endeavor?" That was a youth program shaped the generation before us after World War II. Gone, but we are still doing youth ministry. How many remember the Covenant Life Curriculum? Gone, but we are still doing education. How many remember the green hymnal...not the red one or the blue one? It is gone, but there is still music that will stir us if we will seek it out. No, we cannot recreate the past...but we can find parallels, similarities, comparables.

Years ago, when you could order things from the Sear and Roebuck catalog, there was the option on the order form that read, "May we substitute?" If you checked that box, you were saying that if what you ordered was not in stock, could they send you a similar, more expensive and higher quality item. God does not give us back the past, but God is saying: May I substitute? Follow your nostalgia.

So here is the meaning of repent today: it means to remember. To re-member means to put the pieces back together again. It is like another re-word: Re-mind. Put the thoughts back together again that worked in your first love. Or better yet—and I know this not a word—but to re-soul, and I am not talking about shoes! Remember your first love and begin to do it...again. Repent...remember...remind...re-soul.