

“What the Spirit Is Saying to the Church: Pergamum”

Scripture: Revelation 2:12-17

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Revelation 2:12-17:

¹² *“And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword:*

- Angel: spirit of the church, the corporate personality
- Description of Jesus: a sword
 - Pergamum: seat of Roman rule in Asia Minor, the place where the decision could be made to put a prisoner to death. Pergamum was not the lead city in terms of commerce, people, arts, etc. but it was the center of governmental power. Analogy: we live, of course, in the shadow of our neighbor state, North Carolina, and Charlotte. Charlotte is the largest population center in North Carolina: banking center, arts, professional football and basketball, and so forth. However, Charlotte is not the capital, not the government center of North Carolina; that would be, of course, Raleigh. Pergamum is like Raleigh: not the greatest city of the area, but the one that carried the governmental clout.
 - Why does Jesus have a sword? Because Pergamum was the place where you could be put death...it was the city that had the power of the “sword,” as we shall see below. This description of Jesus sets up a contrast: Jesus has a sword too...but it is different kind of sword.

¹³ *“I know where you are living, where Satan’s throne is. Yet you are holding fast to my name, and you did not deny your faith in me even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan lives.*

- Satan’s throne: several possibilities, but here is the most likely: Pergamum was the place where the enforcement of the worship of the emperor was probably the most intense. In the sixty years of life for the church, there has been a noticeable change in the religious environment. Initially, the Roman government was not particularly involved with the religion out in the provinces away from Rome. Basically, if a province was peaceful, paid their taxes, the Romans let local religious practices continue. But as we know from the crucifixion of Jesus, the Roman authority left Jews do some self-government but when it came to things like “capital punishment,” they had a final say. They kept the “power of the sword.” So, for example, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, had to make the decision to put Jesus to death. Pontius Pilate held the sword, as it were.
- Now, sixty years beyond the crucifixion, in place outside of Palestine, the relationship between Roman government and religious practices is not so benign, not so laid-back. Back in Palestine, there was some autonomy and independence for religious practices. Not so in Asia Minor. Here the expectation was that religion and government were all wrapped up together. That was the way of things in Asia Minor. How wrapped up? Let me compare it to this: can you be a modern person in the United States of America and know nothing about computers? Not just the question of using a computer personally but not

even having any contact with computers? For example, try going to a library today and asking to use the “card catalogue?” You will be taken to a computer terminal. In Asia Minor at the end of the first century, city after city competed to build temples to the spirit of Rome. It was matter of community pride and spirit. Every one that was anyone paid reverence to Rome...except these Christians. In Pergamum at least one person had already paid the bill for this non-participation: put to death. We do not know anymore about this Antipas than what we have here. Clearly, someone near and dear to that congregation had given his life for the Christian faith. John, their pastor, who is speaking in the name of Jesus, has himself been banished from his home in Asia Minor. He is out on island in the Mediterranean Sea, an island that has no source of water beyond what falls from the sky in rain.

- So, what does it means to live close to the seat of Satan? It means to choose to be different from the culture around you, so different that the reaction can be violent. We do not live that close to the seat of Satan, by and large though there are certainly Christians that do today. No, when we live differently, we are simply ignored.

¹⁴ But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the people of Israel, so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practice fornication. ¹⁵ So you also have some who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

- As typical of five of these seven messages, the risen Jesus has a word of correction. Yes, the congregation in Pergamum is to be commended but... And here is the “but:” It is couched in the tradition of the Hebrew Bible of a man named Balaam who is credited with leading the people of Israel astray. Once again we have the Nicolaitans, who are mentioned here and the message to Ephesus, but whose exact teaching is never said. Here is the gist of Jesus’ complaint: The Christians in Pergamum want to participate too fully in the culture. The church in Pergamum wants to be acceptable in society and acceptable to God. This is a congregation that has stood up well during the crisis time but has drifted during the more ordinary time. I will come back to that theme. Let us finish the message.

¹⁶ Repent then. If not, I will come to you soon and make war against them with the sword of my mouth. ¹⁷ Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it.

- There is no other solution than “repent”—which is movement away from something and a movement toward something. Repentance is more than saying, “I am sorry.” That is a movement away from what is wrong. Repentance includes, “And I will make these amends.” One of the dangers of our weekly Prayer of Confession is that we will stop only on the “I am sorry” but fail to hear and enact the “I will...”
- What kind of sword does Jesus carry? The power of the word. This is not the sword of violence but the sword of persuasion. In this book of Revelation, the warrior Jesus rules by word. Indeed, in a later vision, we anticipate seeing the fierce Lion of God—be ready to be terrified! What appears is a lamb that was sacrificed. This Jesus conquered by steadfastness, suffering, and death...not by violent power. The power of God is not in violence but in word and in steadfastness: it is “lamb power.”

- The promise: Each of these messages includes a closing promise. Here are two promises that probably do not immediately connect.
 - Hidden manna: manna was the food that God gave the people of Israel in the wilderness as they made their way to the Promised Land. It was enough for the day and it could not be stored up for future use. “Manna” is likely behind the phrase in the Lord’s Prayer: our daily bread. Our prayer is for manna: what will get me through today. We cannot borrow on tomorrow’s trouble. We cannot live on the anxieties about the future. Our prayer is “Help me live by what is God’s gift today.” You know the line: Yesterday is history. Tomorrow is mystery. Today is a gift...that is why it is called “the present.” This promise is of “hidden manna” is a reminder of God’s daily provision for us.
 - Now “hidden manna” would work for anyone who knew the Hebrew Bible...but some may not have known this story. So here the promise is expanded beyond the Hebrew Bible to a common cultural occurrence. White stones were used to permit entry into clubs, to theater. White stones were used in lotteries—to draw the white stone meant you were a winner. Many of you actually know something of “white stones” whenever you hear or use the phrase “to blackball someone.” In many fraternities and sororities, the choice of new members was made by a secret vote using black and white marbles.. The name of a new member was proposed and a bag passed around. The members could put a white marble or black marble in the bag. After the bag was passed around, the bag was poured out. If all the marbles were white, there was a new member. If there were a single blackball in the collection, membership was denied. And so to “blackball someone” came to mean to stand in the way of someone else...to thwart their efforts to belong or succeed. So to the Christians in Pergamum who were experienced being “blackballed” by their society, the promise is made: you are already a winner...you are already in...you are part of the family of God.

Again, as has been our pattern for the past several weeks, as we move away from the details: What is the central message to the church in Pergamum? The central message of commendation is that we do well in a crisis. Think about the goodwill and the efforts that we undertake when there is a crisis: after September 11, after Hurricane Hugo, after Katrina, after any major catastrophe. There is a spirit that grabs us and we pull together. But then the spirit ebbs away and we begin adopting and adapting to the dominant culture. In Pergamum, that is what the reference to Balaam is about. That is in all likelihood what the Nicolaitians are about. Can we be fully Christian and fully enmeshed in our world? Balaam and the Nicolaitians say “Yes.” But the answer here is a thunderous “NO!”

This is a difficult message for Presbyterians, for Oakland, and for me personally. For one thing, we have a long tradition of participating in the world. Our view has been that we are called to serve as “city built on a hill,” a “light to the world.” We are the “yeast” that is to influence the entire loaf. We jump right into city government, civic clubs, school board, PTA, and booster clubs. We are looking for those projects and ideals that bring us together and make us better. Not just those things that have noble purpose--we like entertainment, sports, dance, and leisure activities. We jump right into this world.

But here's the danger: we lose sight of who we are and our calling. We lose our orientation. Your officers last weekend spent time considering their shepherding ministry. Each of the officers have a shepherd group and each member's household should begin hearing from their officer shepherd in the next several weeks. But as the officers were talking about their "sheep"—that's you and me (yes, some poor officer has me as one of his or her sheep!), I remembered the old line about how do sheep become lost. How do sheep become lost? One nibble at a time. A bite here...a bite there...a bit further away...a bite way over there. All of a sudden: the sheep is gone from the flock.

So here is the question for us today: Where is your nibbling leading you? Few folks consciously say, "I am going to become unfaithful." No, what happens is that we nibble here, nibble there, and nibble farther away, and we do not know how to get back. The path of least resistance is to "go with the flow." The flow around us is driven by the big three: money, power, and pleasure (usually defined in terms of sex). Do we have enough money? Do you know what the biggest influence to that question is? It is how we compare to others. Studies have demonstrated that we can be perfectly satisfied until we find out someone else is ahead of us. Then there is power. Do we have enough power? Do you know how we define power? Usually, it is in terms of how much control we have over others. Can I bend someone to my way of thinking? Powerfulness is generally about how we can get someone to do what we know they should do. Then there is pleasure. Pleasure, we say, provides ecstasy. Our word for ecstasy is derived from two words that mean "to stand outside of ourselves." Ecstasy is when we become so wrapped up in something that we lose ourselves. We lose ourselves! We lose our being. We lose our identity. We lose. To what shall we lose ourselves: food, entertainment, and, the usual, sex.

Where is your nibbling leading you? Money...it not bad, but it has ruined many a person. Power...it is not bad, but it has ruined many a person. Pleasure...it is not bad, but it has ruined many a person. The word of Jesus to the church in Pergamum is a commendation for hanging in through tough times: most of us are pretty good in a crisis. However, beyond the crisis, it is just one nibble after another.

We get taken in by all that around us. Having completed another Christmas season, some of you have no doubt heard of those people who refused to say "Merry Christmas." I do not mean those being politically correct. No, I am talking about our ancestors in the faith, some of the followers of John Calvin. Some Calvinists refused to say "Merry Christmas." They refused to observe Christmas. They tried to ban all celebrations of Christmas. Why? Because such celebrations lead to excesses that take us away from faithful living. We spend more on Christmas gifts for people who have plenty than we do for people who have real needs of food and shelter. Americans, on average, spend more on Christmas gifts than they give to charitable causes. Anyone want to calculate what is spent on electricity for all the Christmas displays, both by individuals and local governments. As someone has put it, we now have a season called "Hallowmas"—from October 31, Halloween, to December 25, Christmas. All of this hoopla to honor the one who said "I came not to be served but to serve and give my life as a ransom to many."

Here is the hard question the Spirit is asking us: When are we more driven by our culture than by our faith? Now I am not ready to join those Calvinists who gave up on Christmas...but they challenge me with a question that the Spirit asked the church at Pergamum...that the Spirit is asking Oakland...that the Spirit is asking you.

What is the Spirit asking us? In the first letter, to the church in Ephesus, it was about our first love – the spirit that we once had, but have lost. In the second letter, to the church in Smyrna, the question was not do you want the crown of life but rather do you want what it takes to receive the crown of life? Then here the question is, “What will drive us...our faith? Or our nibbling?” Let anyone who has ears to hear, listen to what the Spirit saying to the churches.