

October 30, 2022

Good News of Great Joy for All People!

Revelation 2:18-29

I titled this morning's message, "Good News of Great Joy for Everyone!" Have you read our text, Revelation 2:18-29? Let's read it now ...

At this point you might be thinking, "Bruce is having a bad reaction to his medication (or needs some medication)" if he thinks this letter has anything to do with good news. Before you think I'm one piece of bread short of a sandwich, let me explain ...

Last week was tough. I was going from first thing in the morning to bedtime each day. I had several conversations with people who are discouraged and disheartened by things in their lives and here at church. When we thought we'd be all back to normal, we're still feeling a sense of loss, and discouragement. Last Friday, I had a funeral for a community member, my 13th funeral of 2022. It's an honour – an incredible honour – to help families through the process of grieving for and honouring their loved ones. But it takes a toll.

Last Wednesday night as I was awake praying, I was praying in particular about 3 things:

1. I was praying (as I have been for months) for a vision for our church as we go forward. We may dearly want to just time warp back three years, but that's not going to happen. Who are we now? Who is God calling us to be? How do we move forward?
2. I was praying about this sermon. These letters are reading rather like broken records to me: the same problems again and again. They're more depressing than I remember. I don't know about you, but I can't handle more bad news. How can I find anything good?
3. I was praying about my own vision, passion, and motivation. During a tough week, I needed a compelling reason to carry on. I was tired. I felt like quitting. I needed hope. I have felt called to serve God since I came to faith, but I was struggling to see how.

Some of the things I do when I'm struggling is to (1) thank God for His faithfulness in the past, and (2) count my blessings in the present. As I was thanking God and thinking about my call to serve Him in the past, and how I move forward in the present, I sensed the Spirit saying to me, "*What if your personal mission in life, Bruce, is to be good news of great joy to all people?*" That got my attention. What if I can be good news of great joy to people? That's a vision and mission I can get excited about. What if I could use that as a filter through which to try to assess everything I do? Say? Plan? That could be exciting. Motivating. Life-giving. Excited, I got up in the middle of the night and began thinking ...

Then God nudged me further, "*What if the church's mission is to be good news of great joy to all people?*" I've seen all sorts of mission and vision statements over the years. Some I resonate with more than others. But this one caught my imagination. Churches can be about all sorts of things, especially in these weird times. But what if we focus on being (1) good news (2) of great joy (3) to all people? What if that was the filter through which we assess everything we do? Say? Plan? As a church? That is a church I could get really,

really excited about. It would be a church full of life. Hope. Joy. Anticipation. Possibility. Creativity. Enthusiasm. We'll come back to this ...

Then God nudged me further, "*What if the letter to Thyatira is really about being good news of great joy to all people?*" That seemed a step too far. Then the Spirit got me thinking.

This is Jesus speaking – *the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand, the one who walks among the seven gold lampstands*" (2:1), *"the one who is the First and the Last, who was dead but is now alive"* (2:8), *"the one with the sharp two-edged sword"* (2:12), *"the Son of God, whose eyes are like flames of fire, whose feet are like polished bronze"* (2:18). This God speaking. This is the Holy Spirit speaking. And if He says it's about good news, it's about good news. I just need to pray a little longer and think a little deeper.

Yes, in this letter there is bad news. The Thyatirans have their problems in a world of pagan temples, "religious" gluttony, drunkenness, and prostitution. For us to dissect their issues in detail might be an interesting exercise, but would not be helpful or uplifting. It is, of course, always worth remembering that we have OUR problems and issues, too, of course.

Notice what Jesus says to the Thyatirans FIRST, though: *"I know all the things you do. I have seen your love, your faith, your service, and your patient endurance. And I can see your constant improvement in all these things"* (2:19). THAT is good news! This is, in fact, good news of great joy to all people. What if this is a compelling vision for us? What if this gives us a glimpse of who Jesus really, really wants His church to be?

What if Jesus wants us to be a church that's loving? That little phrase, *"good news of great joy for all people"* is NOT original to me. That's part of why it excites me. It's straight from Scripture. In Luke 2, an angel appears to some shepherd – ordinary, humble people – and says, *"I bring you good news of great joy for all people"* (Luke 2:10). And what is the good news? *"Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you: He is Christ/Messiah the Lord"* (2:11). This all about how God loved His world so much, He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him has eternal life, now and in the future. It's about unconditional love. Unconditional mercy. Unconditional grace. That's good news.

The great commands Jesus give us are that we are to love God, with all our hearts, soul, souls, and mind. And we are to love our neighbour as ourselves (Matthew 22:36-40). He adds a new command: *"Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples"* (John 13:34-35). Love is the key hallmark of Jesus' church. It's not rocket science.

Of course, it's easy for any Christian and church to add layers of complexity to this – other behaviours, beliefs, and requirements that often don't sound a lot like love. What if those things just don't matter? What if we simply focus on the good news of great joy that God loves us; that we have life – a forgiven life, a hopeful life, a joyful life, a new life in Jesus. And what if we simply love one another in the name of Jesus. We care for one another. Encourage one another. Forgive one another. Build one another up. Bless one another.

What if we are a church known for our unconditional love, unconditional mercy, and unconditional grace? We would blow the socks of some people's preconception of church. And we would be a breath of wonderful fresh air in a toxic culture. That's a church that lives out the vision of being good news of great joy to all people. And that's a church I can get excited about. That's a church I want to be part of.

What if Jesus wants us to be a church that has faith? What do I mean by that? Yes, as we mentioned last week, we are a church that believes in Jesus, as God's Messiah, our Saviour. In faith, we believe He forgives our sins. But more than that, we are a church who looks to the future, with faith and with hope. Jesus – the First and the Last, the One who died and rose again – He is our Lord. We are His church, yesterday, today, AND tomorrow.

I can look at life two ways on October 30, 2022:

- I can lament that we're not in the pre-covid era, OR, in faith, I can acknowledge the reality of where we are now. I can pray, in faith, asking for wisdom to move forward.
- I can think our glory days are in the past, OR with faith in Jesus, I can believe maybe, just maybe, great days – our best days – might actually be ahead of us.
- I can face the future with fear and retreat, OR, I can be excited our God specializes in resurrection. Resurrection is His stock in trade. In faith, I can move forward in hope.

Jesus is alive. If we have eyes to see where God is at work, if we give thanks, if we genuinely have faith and hope in Jesus, then we can be a church that is excited about the future. In faith, we believe we can be good news of great joy to all people. That's a church I can get excited about. That's a church I want to be part of.

What if Jesus wants us to be a church that serves? We don't just believe good news about Jesus. As we shared last week, we also live out the good news. We find ways to love each other – to love this broken world – in the name of Jesus. Love is not an emotion, It is a verb, an action word. We put the love of Jesus into practice in practical ways.

In organized ways, we serve globally, through our partners with Canadian Baptist Ministries (including Cuba, the Blankenstyns in Kenya, and Lisa Ratzlaff in Zambia). We serve regionally, working with other churches to support Mill Creek Camp. Locally, we serve organizations in our community (Soup Kitchen, knitting projects, food Banks, schools, hospital, Days for Girls, victims services, seniors' centres, and many other volunteer places).

But most of our love for our neighbour and for another is informal. We serve through a thousand little acts of love, mercy, and care each week. We're like a couple of hundred living sparks of light that get blown from here each Sunday, coming to rest in all sorts of places each week. In each of those places we can be good news of great joy. And then, miracle of miracles, Jesus regathers us each Sunday into an(awkward) dandelion, to be reconnected, reenergized, and resent into the world for another week.

Through each of us, our church is changing our community, one life at a time. When we live find small ways to serve, we are good news of great joy to all people. That's a church I can

get excited about. That's a church I want to be part of.

What if Jesus wants us to be a church that patiently endures? We are in strange times. This is a season unlike any I've seen in 40+ years in churches. In a pastors' meeting last week, our colleague from Cranbrook, said *"We need to see this not as a time of trying to bring back the old things, but of planting something new."* That was helpful for me. I need an attitude that looks forward, with love, with faith, with a servant heart. It may also take some patient endurance and hard work. But I believe, Jesus has an amazing future for us.

We may be in a time of patient endurance, waiting for God to do what He will do. There's a lot of waiting in the Bible. The Israelites waited for deliverance in Egypt. They waited years in the desert. They waited generations for the coming of the Messiah. Jesus was born, then there were 30 years of waiting before He said or did the things that changed the world. The early church waited for the Spirit to come. We are waiting for Jesus to return.

I'm not a patient person. I need to learn patient endurance. Hope-filled patient endurance. We don't just patiently endure for the sake of patiently enduring. We are people of genuine, God-given hope. In these challenging times, I choose to have HOPE for our church. I don't know exactly who or what or how or when God will do whatever He will do, but I know this is HIS church. And our future is in His hands. I will keep saying. And loving. And serving.

If we can be a church that patiently endures. If we can be a church that models a deep hope amidst a fearful anxious, angry culture, that's a church that lives out the vision of being good news of great joy to all people. That's a church I can get excited about. That's a church I want to be part of.

I hope I'm communicating how excited I am about thinking and praying personally through how I, personally, can be *"good news of great joy to all people."* Of using that as my "filter" for my prayers, thoughts, actions, and words moving forward. I'm only a little annoyed it took me 59+ years to "get it." What about you? Is that something you could think about?

I'm also excited about thinking of how this could shape us, as a church. Do you think we, as a church, can talk about how we could be *"good news of great joy to all people"* moving forward? What do you think about that as our guiding principle? What if that were the filter we use as we talk with one another, worship with one another, pray for one another? What if that's the filter through which we plan, give, and serve? What if that's the filter through which we move through our community? What if we were known as the church with good news of great joy for all people?

I think this could make us a church everyone gets excited about. I think we could be a church everyone wants to be part of. What do you think? What is the Spirit saying to you?