

## The Message to Ephesus: "Something's Missing!"

Revelation 2:1-7

Sunday, October 9, 2022

Last Sunday 7 different people read the 7 letters to the churches in Revelation chapters 2 and 3. It was excellent to hear the common themes and phrases, as well as the specific warnings and encouragements to each of the churches, from different voices.

In the parade of people coming to and from the stage to read, something caught my attention – **glasses!** Some readers would come up and put their glasses on so they could read. Others took their glasses off. There was a constant parade of on-off-on-off with the glasses.

As funny as I found the pattern of glasses on-glasses off, it was essential for people to see the words clearly to read them. To read the passage well, it was all about **seeing things correctly**. Seeing things correctly is why John wrote these 7 letters to the angels of the 7 churches. The churches needed to see themselves in a proper light. They needed to see themselves as Jesus saw them.

For those overconfident in the job they were doing, they needed Jesus' correction. For those discouraged and overwhelmed, they needed Jesus' encouragement. But none of the letters are about harsh judgement or goodforyou praise. All the letters are about helping the churches see themselves correctly or see themselves as Jesus saw them. Like a good coach or a good boss, Jesus clearly states reality and directs them in the way they need to go. This is true of the letter to the angel of the church of Ephesus, the letter we are reading today.

In seeing themselves correctly, the churches needed to first see Jesus. **"These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands."**

**(Revelation 2:1)** The church in Ephesus can only see itself correctly if it first sees Jesus. The church in Ephesus can only hear these words properly if it knows these words are coming from Jesus.

For the church in Ephesus, there was high praise at the start of the letter. Jesus had this to say about them:

- **I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance.** Whatever the church in Ephesus was doing, it had clear and obvious fruit. It had a reputation for hard work. It had a reputation for pushing forward through resistance and tough times. This church was committed. It had grit and endurance.
- **I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those that claim to be apostles but are not and have found them false.** This church was perceptive. It was able to weed out the personalities and messages that weren't just incorrect but destructive. It kept the truly dangerous and predatory and manipulative people away. They did so through careful thought and testing, not overreaction.

- **You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name and have not grown weary.** Perseverance so nice Jesus mentions it twice! They are committed to Jesus. They are not just hardworking for discipline's sake. They have a purpose in what they do, and that purpose is Jesus. They persevere through hard things and do so with energy.

If the life of the church in Ephesus was **a puzzle**, and each piece was an essential quality of the church, much of the puzzle seemed complete. They had a lot going on, a lot that was reputable. But one thing was missing. Jesus says,

**Yet I hold this against you:**

**You have forsaken your first love.**

If we look at **the puzzle** that was the church. The piece missing was **their first love**.

This missing piece of first love is not just a minor correction that must be made. "You do these things well, this thing not so well, carry on." No. They can no longer be a church if they do not fix this! If they cannot return to their first love they'll be removed as a church. "Repent from the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place." (Revelation 2:5) If you do not get this right, if you do not return to your first love, you cannot be a church anymore!

**What is the first love they have forsaken?** If we were in Sunday School, the correct answer would be \_\_\_\_\_. But that's not the likely answer. Does this sound like people that don't love Jesus?

**"You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name and have not grown weary."**

**(Revelation 2:3)** This sounds like people that love Jesus very much! They are willing to endure anything to follow, and they do anything to follow in his name. They are committed to Jesus and will put up with any hardship on his behalf, with energy!

The first love is the love that was the engine of their church at the beginning. It's not about their allegiance to Jesus – that part has always been clear. But the love for one another and for others that clearly characterized their community was gone. The first love foundation of the church probably had the same pattern that followed many of the early churches that we find in Acts 2.

**They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)**

The very early church described in Acts 2 was a church that was full of love. It was defined by extravagant love. It was characterized by eagerness to be together. People were willing to give up

money, goods, resources and time for one another. Many of the churches that sprung up in cities throughout the Roman Empire would have followed a similar pattern. Many churches start with the love and enthusiasm of Acts 2. But very few ever stay there.

At the start this church was an accepting, messy vibrant place to be. You could belong and know you were loved without condition. You received genuine love and care and were eager to extend that to others. Now this was a hard church for the weak and struggling to attend. The church was too busy to put up with messy people. People who couldn't get their act together were no longer valued – they were resented.

At the start the church loved God and people well. This was love with action. Now they still love God. There's nothing higher or greater than God to them! They love God, but they no longer love each other well at all.

They have remarkable strength but they have no tenderness, no compassion toward one another.

They are doing absolutely everything that we have come to describe as faithful, but they have absolutely no patience for those that are struggling. They value being correct over being loving.

It's a faithful church. They've got a big strong church machine going on in Ephesus. But the machinery of being the church in Ephesus is pushing away the people that it used to value and embrace. The invitation to belong in the church and belong to Jesus was now a demand to behave by a strict rule of order. If you could not behave and believe in a very specific, demanding way, you could no longer belong.

The church in Ephesus does so many things well. But they have fallen so very far from what they used to be. They have lost that first love that vibrantly existed at the start, and now they are orderly and correct. And Jesus looks at this orderly, theologically correct church and says, "I'm not going to let you be a church anymore."

Jesus isn't offering a choice here: he isn't saying you need to either do things well or be loving. The assumption is that you should be able to do both. But if you cannot conduct yourselves with love and care, the order and efficiency do not matter.

Jesus says, "return to your first love". The answer isn't to get rid of the other stuff that Jesus complemented them for – the good deeds, the hard work, the perseverance. The answer is return to your first love.

When we look at **the puzzle that is Ephesus**, it seems that love is simply a missing piece. But I think the puzzle Jesus is really seeking to see is one that **nearly all the pieces are labelled with love**. There is still one very important piece concerning good deeds, hard work and perseverance, but the dominant reality and engine is to be love – the first love that you started with.

I grew up going to a messy church. It was on the fundamentalist side, but it was a place where I knew I was loved. As a teenager I was given opportunities to lead and serve and be valued like any other person at the church.

When I left this Nova Scotia church to go to Bible college in Alberta, it was the only time I felt the loss of leaving. I didn't weep over leaving my parents, my friends, my girlfriend at the time – I cried over leaving my church. It was the place I felt I most belonged and had the greatest value in the world.

Then I went to Bible college. I learned how we should do church properly and efficiently. I learned how other churches did things, CORRECT things! I was surrounded by enthusiasm and commitment and dedication. (It was probably more youthful passion, but it FELT like commitment)

After Bible college I returned to the church where I belonged. They weren't doing the things I had learned in Bible college. They were messier than what church ought to be. From my experiences at college I had an idea of what passion and dedication looked like, and my church did not have it.

None of my observations were true. My church was behaving and loving as it always had. It was as messy as ever. But I had lost my first love. I returned with judgement and severity and impatience and intolerance. I was operating as one that "knew better" and resented those that did not think like me. I needed to return to the love I first encountered there, and the first love I experience when I experienced the grace and love of Jesus.

As people and as a church we always need to do the best that we can. We always need to learn new things and make them part of how we operate. We always need to offer our best to God in what we do. But we can never do so at the expense of love.

Jesus is always calling us into great things in the future. Scripture is full of the encouragement of our future hope. This letter to Ephesus even concludes with "To those who overcome, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God." (Revelation 2:7) Our eyes are always being directed by Jesus to a future hope.

But Jesus is also calling us to return. Return to our first genuine encounter of the love and generous knowledge of God. Return to community that was vibrant and caring and committed to one another.

Reflect with me.

- **What first connected you to Jesus? Why was he so compelling?**
- **What first connected you to Christian community? Why?**
- How can we return to those things?