

Revelation, Part 3
"Remember, Repent, and Resume Loving"
A Sermon by Pastor Elizabeth Coleman
Northwest Presbyterian Church
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Text: Revelation 2:1-11

The Church at Ephesus had the appearance of a perfect church. In spite of some deceptive leaders along the way, they had maintained their faith with patient endurance. They had many good works as a testimony to their faith. Their toil for God was obvious, and Jesus commended them for it.

So, they might have been a bit surprised — or even indignant when Jesus said in his message to them that they lacked the kind of love that they had at first.

"What? Us? We feed the poor, we house the homeless on cold nights, we comfort those who have lost loved ones, we help people to overcome their addictions, and we preach the gospel. Isn't that love?"

Yet, Jesus said that the church at Ephesus needed to remember from what they had fallen and repent, and do the works they did at first.

Remember? Back when we first became believers? Remember when we first made the decision to trust and obey Jesus Christ? Remember, when we were first filled with the Holy Spirit and began to pray for others?

We were on fire! We loved God, who had shown us such great mercy as to forgive our sins and give to us the gift of eternal life. We couldn't be quiet about it. We witnessed to people without self-conscious fear or hesitation. Our bold faith was empowered by the Holy Spirit within us, and nothing was more important to us than our relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

We had compassion that was spontaneous and indiscriminate. We wanted justice and righteousness for everyone. We were willing to do whatever Jesus required of us.

But now, we've gotten a little more comfortable in our faith. We pick and choose to do what is more comfortable to our taste. We agree that justice and equality are good, but we are unwilling to work to achieve them. We say, "That's someone else's problem. I've got troubles of my own." We have forgotten what it *means* to love.

Part of loving God is to love God's creation. The breath and spirit that give life to every human being is from God, and is the common factor that unites us all.

Therefore, when one person suffers injustice, it affects us all in the long run. Love does not accept the way things are when the way things are means mistreatment of some and lack of opportunity for others.

Love does not restrict itself to one community or one group, but it asks the question, "Is everyone okay? Are we all safe? Do we all have what we need?"

Love seeps through the boundaries of nationality and class and race, perpetually asking, "Is everyone okay? Is everyone safe? Does everyone have what they need?"

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. referred to that concept as the Beloved Community, people in relationship with each other and with God, in which there is justice, mercy and respect for all people equally, no one life is any more valuable than another. All lives have equal value, and all lives matter.

The justice component of love is often overlooked by well-meaning Christians involved in works for the church and for their community. They take care of their own, but the injustices all around them are like a boring movie that they are tired of watching. So, they tune it out, in spite of the fact that people are being unfairly killed, mistreated, and neglected just down the road from them. These well-meaning Christians say, "That's not my problem."

Jesus says to the church at Ephesus and to us, remember *how* to love and repent of the neglect. Resume that kind of all-consuming love that lit a fire of compassion within you when you first believed and resume that unconditional, boundary-crossing love that you had at first.

Tomorrow, we will celebrate the birthday of a man who took that love all the way to the martyr's grave with him, speaking up for the rights of garbage collectors in Memphis, Tennessee when he was unmercifully shot and killed. He looked beyond his own community in organizing non-violent marches for justice based on concepts he learned from Gandhi, and which are still practiced by people seeking justice all over the world.

Unconditional love involves a willingness to be vulnerable, to open one's heart in honesty to be moved to action by becoming aware of and sensitive to injustices that others suffer. Dr. King wisely said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

Jesus' message not only asks us to resume loving as we did when we first believed, but also warns us that if we don't repent of our lack of love and return to doing love-filled works, he will come and remove our lampstand. A church without real love that is unconditional and includes equal respect and justice for all people cannot continue to exist.

A love that limits itself and restricts its actions to benefit a designated portion of the population is not love at all.

Jesus invites all who have ears to listen to this message. It is for all of us to ponder and to take heed.

To the angel of the church in Smyrna, Jesus acknowledges that they have suffered poverty and afflictions, but he called them "rich." They were physically poor, but they were spiritually rich.

The Jews in Smyrna had slandered them, but Jesus discredits even the Jewishness of the slanderers.

The message that Jesus sends to the Christians in Smyrna is a difficult one to swallow. He warns them that they are about to suffer. They will be imprisoned for 10 days, which is believed to symbolize a short but indefinite period of time. During that time, Jesus says, they will experience affliction.

Jesus assures them that if they will remain faithful until death, he would give to them a crown of life. They would not be harmed by the second death, but would inherit eternal life.

Jesus again invites all who have ears to listen to his message. He appears to open the door to all who endure faithfully to the end of human life, to receive the eternal life that can not be taken away.

Jesus does not promise the church of Smyrna an easy life on earth, nor even safety from harm. They will be tested by their imprisonment, and they will suffer afflictions for a period of time. By warning the church in Smyrna beforehand of what will happen to them, Jesus broadens their perspective to enable them to see beyond the grave to the eternal life that will be their

reward. They must first get through their afflictions, but the end of their story will be one of victory if they remain faithful to the end.

God does not take pleasure in laying heavy burdens on those who seek to follow Christ, but the warning Jesus gives to the church in Smyrna clearly states that it is the devil who is behind their being imprisoned. The one who comes to kill, steal and destroy will instigate their imprisonment and cause them to be tested by suffering afflictions.

Jesus does not promise these Christians that they can escape the suffering that will come. Instead, he gives to them a vision of life on the other side of death, and encourages them to remain faithful until death, knowing that Jesus would give to them life again — life that is abundantly better than what they've ever experienced before.

To the Christians in Smyrna, as well as to some Christians today, it may have seemed puzzling to first hear the good news of Jesus Christ as Deliverer, Savior, and King of Kings, and yet to find out that their allegiance with Him would not automatically exempt them from suffering persecutions and afflictions. They might have wondered why they would have to be tested and imprisoned.

The good news in all of this is that we no longer have to fear death, because in Jesus Christ one passes from life to eternal life, and does not experience what death used to be, which is separation from God. A Christian need not fear death at all, because the transition from this life into eternal life is one in which we never lose consciousness, but we experience the transition as our human spirit leaves our physical body in a seamless process that is natural and pleasant — leaving behind all of the afflictions, diseases and impairments that might have plagued the natural body.

People who have had a near-death experience report that they feel an unconditional love all around them, and all the pain that they had been experiencing in their physical body was suddenly gone, even though they still had a spiritual body with all of their senses still intact, only with heightened awareness and increased perception.

Jesus wanted the church at Smyrna to know that this life is not the end, and that although they would suffer for a limited period of time in this life, they would then receive the reward — crown — of eternal life, and would never have to face death again. This brought hope to a church that was plagued by physical poverty, deception and affliction. It would not always be that way

for them, and it won't remain that way for us, if we will also remain faithful until the end. Amen.