

LETTERS ABOUT LOVE

Scripture Lesson: Revelation 2:1-11

Text: Revelation 2:1ff

Songs: R4 1,4; PH94 1,4; R563; PH436; R349 1,5

Dear Friends in Christ Jesus our Lord,

The section of Revelation which is most often preached in Reformed and Christian Reformed circles is this one, the seven letters to the seven churches. They are indeed interesting and instructive for the church today. Today we begin with the first two letters to Ephesus and Smyrna.

The messages that I heard preached on these seven churches were sermons of warning. The judgments with which God threatens these churches--and ours!--is great. It is important to hear the words of warning that God gives. Indeed, if we don't, heed these words we perish.

Yet you noticed that today's message is called "Letters About Love." If these are letters about impending judgment, why call them "Letters About Love?" One of the dangers of studying God's word is that we focus on the verse before us and forget the context in which they are written. The context is crucial for a correct understanding of these letters just as it is crucial for correctly understanding any passage of the Bible. The sermons I heard were only on the letters so they missed the immediate context.

Perhaps you remember how the message ended last week Sunday evening. We saw how Jesus was dressed as the High Priest but everything in the chapter pictured Him and the powerful King. Rev. Hoeksema wrote, "All elements indicate Christ is King-Judge." Then Jesus spoke, "Do not be afraid." We saw this is still what Jesus says to us and to His church, "Do not be afraid." Here at Sully where we seek to be a caring congregation we have as a major part of our message, "Do not be afraid." Jesus also gave the reason for not being afraid, "I am the first and the last." As long as Jesus is in control, we do not have to be afraid. That is true in our personal life, government life, church life, and business life, in every dimension of our living. Christ still says to you and to me, "Do not be afraid."

If Jesus speaks these kinds words, "Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last," then why these stern letters to the churches? Two reasons: A common sense one and a Biblical one. When our children do wrong and need to be punished, it hurts us as parents more than our children. Then why do we do it? We do it because we love our children. Only a parent has deep and special love for appropriately disciplining their child. Peggy Post, etiquette editor of Good Housekeeping answers a letter from a couple went to an expensive restaurant to celebrate. At a table near them were unruly children who were spoiling their evening. Could they reprimand those unruly children? Peggy Post answered that they have no right, but they could have spoken to their waiter. Peggy Post knows only the parents may discipline. When I was growing up in the Lansing, Michigan, Christian Reformed Church there was a family with children our age. They were very unruly in church. We were often told we might never behave in church as those children did. One Sunday morning as the minister was preaching these children were being especially unruly. Sitting right behind them was a dignified elderly couple who had contributed much to the church. They could not concentrate on the minister's message. Finally the man could take it no longer, and right out loud, louder than the minister, he said to that family, "Make your kids be quiet or take them out." Then he and his wife stood, and marched right out of church. My parents said, "Somebody had to tell that family sometime, but not in church and not during the sermon." That couple never returned to the Lansing church. Everybody in church agreed the family did not discipline their children in church, but it was too embarrassing for this couple to return because they had over stepped what Peggy Post wrote about: Only the parents may discipline. That same theme is spelled out clearly in the Bible. Already in

the Old Testament we read, “Proverbs 13:24.” God writes these letters to His children, backed by Christ’s love and care.

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We saw last week that these churches were like a hologram; twist it a bit and you see a different picture. We saw the seven churches could be seen in the light of the seven cities with Roman Post Offices, or Pleiades held together by a chain, or the seven stars on the Roman money. As we go through these letters we also want to tilt the hologram enough so that we see ourselves at Sully. These letters were written not for just one church, but for all churches in all times and places. If all we do is look at the letter back then, we miss the most important reason Jesus put the letter here: To teach you and me who are living today.

“Revelation 2:1.” The first letter is to Ephesus. Jesus reminds us that He alone has the right to say these things to us. This what He says.

“Revelation 2:2.” Don’t those words describe Sully? God knows our deeds. They are many. Our support of missionaries and Christian education are exemplary. Numerous members of the congregation have volunteered to help those in need both in this country and overseas. We work hard. We have determination so we do persevere. Those are characteristics of the hardworking Sully church family. We also believe that there are three marks of a true church: Good preaching, faithful practice of the sacraments, and Christian discipline designed to bring repentance. When members err, we do discipline. Not everybody likes it. It hurts. Yet we are faithful to that which Christ challenges us, “Revelation 2:2b.”

“Revelation 2:3.” We have preserved. In the history of our church there were many hardships. In our hundredth anniversary year when we looked back we are surprised at the way our ancestors persevered over hardships for the sake of the vision they had of a church molded in Christ’s name. We are still not growing weary. We are pressing forward in faith with renewed dedication and zeal.

“Revelation 2:4.” What a warning! As we reminisce this year, as we review the faith and vision of our forefathers and foremothers, let’s make sure we do not lose their love for Christ and the Christian faith. We need to be continually challenged so that we do not lose that love.

“Revelation 2:5.” From what heights have we fallen? I can think of three that apply to Sully. What three are you thinking of? If I mention ones you are not thinking of, then we know there are more areas where we have to do some work. I think of evening church attendance. It has slid, perhaps not as much as some other places, but it has slid. Like Ephesus, we are falling. We are falling in our study of God’s word. There is no doubt that in the more simple and structured age of our parents, their devotions at mealtimes surpass what most families do today. While our society life ebbs and flows, there seems to be slippage even though the Education Committee continually comes up with new ways to make it possible for every person to be involved in a Bible study. I fear we are slipping in our commitment to missions. Our pledges go down as our cost for Christian Education rises, but neither have we been as diligent in having volunteers go out. Those volunteers have been a real highlight of our church life. We have not done what we could to continue our zeal for missions.

On the denominational scene we have seen a dramatic and steady erosion of our position. There was a time when, as the largest Reformed Church in America, we spoke, people listened. Satan came into that stronghold and made some people envious, others desired power, and they began from within to attack the denomination. One of our veteran, retired pastors who was a leader in his generation wrote to me, “Our problems are not with the people, but with the pastors in leadership positions.” When their pride began to prevail over the ministry of the church, we began to crumble. We have fallen. We need to repent of false pride that puts us on a pedestal.

“Revelation 2:6.” The heresy of the Nicolaitans was a compromise with the world. Pagan worship involved temple prostitution. These Nicolaitans refused to give up their visit with the temple prostitute so they came up

with a religion that was a combination of the old paganism and Christianity. That compromise Christ hated. He still hates compromise with the world. As Christians we must take our stand firmly for Christ and with Christ. That is the only way we shall prevail against the world and preserve our place as Christ's bride for eternal life.

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“Revelation 2:7.” The phrase “He who has an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches,” has the same ring as Jesus' words during His ministry “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” Jesus and John are both saying, “If you hear this with your ears, also hear it with the invisible ears of your heart.” It is not enough to listen to Jesus, we must also do what He says.

The special challenge to the Ephesian church was to overcome. That is our challenge in Sully. We must overcome the attempts to compromise with the world, the temptation to slide into the way of the world that says evening worship is unimportant, that ignores Bible study, and diminishes the opportunity for Christian service.

“Revelation 2:8” Christ has comforted John by saying, “Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last.” That is the way Jesus now comes to the church in Smyrna.

“Revelation 2:9.” That sounds contradictory to us in our culture, doesn't it? “I know your . . . poverty--yet you are rich!” That describes us at Sully. We are not poor. We have a huge group of college students--and everyone knows how expensive college is. Many of those students are in a private, Christian Colleges. The way people give no one would imagine we live in a low wage area of the country. This congregation gives wonderfully to God's kingdom. Not perfectly, but wonderfully. We do not have the incomes of a New Jersey or California, yet we are rich in the way we contribute to God's kingdom. Denominational leaders comment to me what a leadership role Sully plays in church life here in the mid-West. So we are a poor church in a way. We are not pew to pew millionaires. We are just average, hard-working, honest Christian people. And that makes us rich in Jesus! Never forget that this sentence to Smyrna is a sentence to Sully.

In Smyrna there was a large Jewish population that was livid at the Christian community. They were not driven by devotion to the Old Testament, but by Satan. That is a question we all need to ask about those who continue to rail against our people and our denomination, “What drives them? What makes them say we are not Christian and they leave us?” Ask yourself if their devotion and piety make them say that, or if Satan does?

“Revelation 2:10.” Jewish hatred led to persecution. Polycarp was a famous early church leaders. He became the leading leader in Smyrna and he was martyred. This verse refers to that persecution in which so many Christians lost their lives.

“Revelation 2:11.” The “second death” is how John speaks of hell. John will make that plain in chapter 20 and 21. Those who overcome will spend eternity with Jesus. Next week we will examine more letters to Sully.

