

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons
“Performance Reviews”
Revelation 2-3 (selected verses)
5th Sunday after Pentecost
June 19, 2016

Today is the second installment in this sermon series on Revelation. We recall that Revelation is a letter written from the Mediterranean island of Patmos by Pastor John to seven churches on the mainland of what is present-day Turkey.

In chapters 2 and 3, today’s Scripture lesson, readers are essentially given what we might call a performance review for each of the seven churches.

These letters, like performance reviews that may be routine for you and me in our various workplaces, follow the same general pattern, more or less. What comes first is a salutation of sorts: “to the angel of the church of _____: these are the words of him ” The angels are not the pastor or the clerk of session of the respective churches; rather, what Pastor John is doing is riffing off of the Roman custom that there were patron gods for cities and industries in the Roman Empire. In this vein, we might say that Pastor John was referring to and addressing the corporate spirit of each church. What follows then is an introduction and a short description of Jesus himself, the one whose words Pastor John received in a vision and is now conveying to the respective recipient church. What comes next is a performance review. In three of the seven churches, there are both strengths and weaknesses to be mentioned. In two, Smyrna and Philadelphia, there is heartfelt praise and no blame at all. In two, Sardis and Laodicea, there is no praise at all. The pattern continues with a call for repentance for most of the churches, and then Pastor John’s signature sign-off: “Let anyone who has an ear, listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches” followed by a promise of the goodness, joy, wholeness that will come to the hearers if they bend their congregational life and witness toward the way of Jesus Christ.

As our Scripture lesson today, I will be reading Pastor John’s specific words to the first two congregations in Ephesus (where he speaks of both strengths and weaknesses) and in Smyrna (where he offers pure praise), and then the seventh congregation in Laodicea (where he truthfully cannot offer any words of praise). I will very briefly summarize Pastor John’s performance review of the other four churches.

Let us listen for God’s word.

.....

REVELATION 2: 1-7

The church in Ephesus is doing a lot of things right. Their theology is absolutely impeccable. And they not only believe the right things, they have been unswerving in not doing as the Nicolaitans did and counseled others to do, that is, they have not accommodated to the economic, social, and political activities of the Roman Empire.

Here, however, is where the Ephesian church was falling short. Preoccupation with their theology of love had overwhelmed their love for one another. As Brian Blount so aptly puts it, “in the same way that a healthy cell can metastasize into a cancerous one, their commendable insight degenerated into discrimination...Once known as a loving community, they had suddenly become a policing one. Ephesian faith had become a matter of Ephesian quality control.” (1)

Keep that up, Pastor John says, and your lampstand (a symbol that is carried over from Revelation 1: each church is represented by a golden lampstand) will be snatched away. Keep that up, Pastor John says, and you won’t have need of a lampstand, because you will have killed your church all by yourself. Ah, but if you return to the love that brought you together in the first place, you can count on pancake breakfasts and potluck dinners and church picnics on the grounds for all eternity.

REVELATION 2: 8-11

Smyrna was an economically prosperous city, but the church in Smyrna was not. Economically, the church in Smyrna was poor.

They were also suffering opposition from their neighbors. While there was likely no empire-wide persecution of Christians during the reign of Domitian, there may have been some local oppression. For instance, Christians who did not participate in civic parades or events intended for veneration and worship of Caesar were discriminated against economically or socially. The identification of Christ as the one “who was dead and came to life” in verse 8 would have reminded the members of First Church Smyrna that Jesus himself experienced suffering and death, and thus is able to walk alongside them in their current experiences of poverty and exclusion. (2) Because of this, the Smyrnans are rich in the things that really matter.

I feel compelled to say a parenthetical word about the condemnatory language that Pastor John uses when speaking of Jews. Scholars conjecture that what may have been situation is that some in the Jewish community were doing the Romans’ investigative work for them. Knowing the Christ-believers, many of whom were themselves probably Jews, would not acknowledge Caesar’s lordship, synagogue members pointed them out and thereby offered them up to persecution. It is for such scandalous squealing that Pastor John spewed out the epithet “synagogue of Satan.” (3) We must remember that Pastor John was himself Jewish. He identified strongly with the traditions of Israel. Thus, it is incumbent upon us to view Pastor John’s rhetoric here as a sibling dispute within different branches of the Jewish family rather than as anti-Judaism. (4) We absolutely must reject such language as appropriate in our own day.

The next four letters are addressed to the churches in:

Pergamum, who have mostly withstood evil, but have been too influenced by local culture;

Thyatira, who are filled with faith, but too tolerant of members who mislead others;

Sardis, once faith-filled and alive, but now mostly dead;

Philadelphia, powerless and threatened, but faithful. (5)

Finally, we come to the church of Laodicea. Laodicea’s performance review contains the harshest critique, and it also contains that most wonderful promise. The Laodiceans’ situation was the exact reverse of the Smyrnans. This congregation was privileged. It was economically well-to-do. Laodicea was a city of wealthy bankers, and they would have felt chagrined at being labeled poor. It was a city of medical schools that pioneered pharmaceuticals for the betterment of sight, and they would not have appreciated a performance review that labeled the entire municipality blind. This city full of merchants who were famous for the fine black wool produced there and who outfitted the Greco-Roman world in the finest textiles would not have been amused to hear someone call them naked.

But in Revelation, Christ is harsh with those whom he loves. His harshness is not meant to destroy. It is meant to teach. Pastor John’s critiques are knocks on the door to the Laodiceans to move away from the center...to become not the sickening, lukewarm water that had to be piped into Laodicea from mineral springs some distance away since they had no water source of their own but fresh, living water, transformed into wine at the heavenly banquet table.

Taken together, Pastor John is laying a challenge before all seven churches.

In all seven churches, there was strong motivation for the Christ-followers to accommodate to their surrounding Roman culture, to blend in, to not stand out and thereby bring not only attention, but retaliation, even persecution, from the imperial authorities.

Embedded in his performance reviews is a clarion call to these congregations. In a classic “Don’t ask, don’t tell anyone that I’m a Christian” kind of environment, John was telling them to stand up and stand out. He was telling them to pick a fight with the surrounding culture. He was like Steve Kerr, both passionate and patient, coaching from his heart and his head on the sidelines of Game 7 of the NBA finals, telling them that Christ wants them to come screaming out of the Christian closet, even though doing so may mean the same consequences that it meant for Jesus himself. (6)

My dear brothers and sisters, Pastor John’s call to the churches of the first century could not be more relevant to us today.

On this weekend one year ago, four days after the shootings in Charleston, I shared a story about an event that happened at Davidson College Presbyterian Church on February 19, 1950.

Carl Pritchett, the pastor at the time, was preaching, and in the middle of his sermon, the siren at the fire station on Main Street began wailing. Carl cut his sermon short, gave a final prayer, and told the congregation to leave and help put out the fire. The fire was on Brady's Alley, the walkway between Toast and the Needlecraft Center. In their history of Davidson, *One Town, Many Voices*, Jan Blodgett and Ralph Levering write that there were 87 poor and working-class African-Americans who lived in eleven small, run-down rental houses on Brady's Alley. Carl Pritchett appealed to the town and to the students for clothes for the families, but he didn't stop there. The literal fire was extinguished, but Carl and others tended the flames of the Spirit, organizing a town meeting in the high school auditorium, attended by roughly 350 residents, that led to a broad-based community effort to improve living conditions. A Citizen's Housing Committee was organized. They came up with a practical plan of action: passing a new housing ordinance which required that all houses have bathrooms, sewer service, and electricity with the town board spending \$30,000 that summer and fall to provide the sewer service to Brady's Alley which had heretofore been lacking. (7)

We tell this story with pride and appreciation now, with historical hindsight telling us that this was the absolutely Spirit-led and right thing to do. But it wasn't so easy when it was happening. Not everyone appreciated that the church should be involved in such things. Carl Pritchett was interviewed by Don Shriver for a collection of Presbyterian civil rights sermons entitled *The Unsilent South*, published back in 1965. Shriver writes that Carl Pritchett repeatedly had preached the New Testament view of race relations to several generations of college students, but as he took in the full meaning of the fire on Brady's Alley, Carl Pritchett said, "I decided to go to the end of the road on the issue." And he went on to say that it was the only time in his entire ministry that he had ever needed medication to be able to go to sleep at night. (8)

At the close of the service a year ago today, this congregation, remembering the powerful story of forebears who dare to stand up and stand out, walked out of our sanctuary and down Depot Street and across the railroad tracks, and singing "We Shall Overcome," we joined hands with our brothers and sisters and prayed for the healing of the sin of racism which still infects our national soul.

That was one year ago today.

And here we are once again at worship in the aftermath of yet another horrific shooting, this one targeting a gay bar, a place of sanctuary and acceptance and joy for the LGBTQ community in a way that is analogous to the way that Mother Emanuel Church symbolized sanctuary and acceptance and joy for African-Americans in Charleston.

And what would Pastor John's performance review be of us who are Davidson College Presbyterian Church?

I have to believe that in some areas of our performance review, we would get decent marks.

I am grateful to serve as pastor of a church that is committed to standing up against racism.

And I am grateful to be the pastor of a church that last Sunday opened the doors of our Lingle Chapel to the community to be a place of sanctuary and worship, a place to bring tears of sorrow and anger and embody hope and courage, in the wake of the Orlando massacre. I am so grateful to be able to say when it happens, and it does happen more often than perhaps some of you would think, that someone asks me as a pastor here, "I believe that the Spirit is leading me to DCPC, but I have to know, 'Will I be welcome there?'" and I am able to say, without hesitation, "Yes!"

In answer to Pastor John's question, "Are you willing to stand up and stand out?" or, to put it the way that fits with our DCPC story, "Are you still willing to run toward the fires that are burning out there in the world?" there are more ways than I can name in a single sermon that DPCC is saying yes to the question.

But the Orlando shooting has placed Pastor John's question before us in a particularly urgent way.

There are so many fires burning that need to be doused with bucketfuls of Christian love. Christ has poured out this love upon us and filled us up with it. And Christ is calling us to run toward the fires and drench them with love is love is love is love that we will not give up on believing can extinguish the hate and violence that have the world too much in its grip.

What is the fire toward which the Spirit has given you the passion and the patience to run toward?

Race?

LGBTQ?

Gun violence?

Mental illness?

Refugee resettlement to combat rampant xenophobia?

One of the things that our governance task force has identified as not having a “home” if you will in our orderly DCPC structure is what governance task force member Al Sudduth has labeled “Church and Society.” The governance task force which ultimately will pass on their recommendations to the planning committee who will ultimately pass on their recommendations to the Session (how is that for Presbyterian decency and order?!!) to create a place for these efforts.

But in the meantime, here is the question for each of you? Is there a particular fire that the Spirit that speaks to the churches is calling you to run toward in terms of devoting some focused time and energy? If so, let us know about it.

We will send out an email early this week to put the question to everyone, but if you feel a burning in your heart right now, write it next to your name on the fellowship pad which is passed down the row during the time of the offering. We will see what issues, what “fires” rise to the top and gather for conversations and prayer around these topics and trust that the Spirit which speaks to the churches will take us where Christ wants us to go.

1. Brian K. Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 51.
2. Barbara R. Rossing, *Journeys Through Revelation: Apocalyptic Hope for Today* (Louisville: Horizons, 2010), 17.
3. Blount, 54.
4. Rossing, 17-18.
5. Louise Lawson Johnson in Rossing, 21.
6. Blount, 82-83.
7. Jan Blodgett and Ralph B. Levering, *One Town, Many Voices: A History of Davidson, North Carolina* (Davidson, NC: Davidson Historical Society, 2012), 164-165.
8. Carl Pritchett. Quoted by Donald W. Shriver, Jr., editor, *The Unsilent South: Prophetic Preaching in Racial Crisis* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1965), 100.