

Rev. Luke C. Werre
Peace, Sun Prairie
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Ash Wednesday

Revelation 2:1-7

THE LETTER TO EPHESUS: LOVE LOST, DEATH FOUND

Things here at Peace are going well. Can you believe in 20 short years our annual budget has grown from a little over \$100,000 to nearly \$600,000? Our Sunday attendance by over 100 more per week? That we are stalwart leaders among our sister congregations in supporting our synod, Lakeside Lutheran High School, and other ministries? In the meantime what a beautiful facility we have with the addition of the fellowship hall, entry, library, and offices. Only 14 years ago we started a Christian school. We have successfully graduated three classes from eighth grade. We are in the tedious, but exciting process of designing a new school to build. Our Sunday School program is pumped up and thriving. We have dedicated people who sacrifice without any pay or earthly reward long, countless hours and inconvenience and energy to support the ongoing ministry here in multiple ways. There are believers here who love Bible study and are concerned about doctrine, delving into the Word –open, friendly, embracing people who also love outreach and reaching the lost. And Peace congregation, down through the decades has resisted pressures both outside and inside to abandon faithfulness to the true, saving doctrine and faith –cultural pressures, or the temptation to dead, uncaring orthodoxy on the one hand or the pressure towards the vacuous, pop-mentality of mainstream Christianity today.

You better believe Christ takes notice of all these things –takes sheer delight in them. That’s because He is the one who brought these things into being by the power of His Spirit working through His Word and Sacraments. None of these wonderful things happening here is to our credit or earns our way to heaven or wins points with God because they are all a gift from him.

Christ gave a glowing review to His church in the ancient city of Ephesus too. Christ dictated these words to the Apostle John, the last living apostle: *“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands.”* Christ is not separated from His churches like He is away in heaven. Each of His churches is like a golden lampstand, and He walks among them, is present with them through His Word and His Sacraments.

Christ said to the Ephesians, *“I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.”* Christ loves the fruits of faith that He produces in His believers by His own Spirit.

But when He looks at what *we* produce and what comes from our hearts, His evaluation changes its tone. His evaluation of the Ephesians goes on: *Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember 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.*

In all the excitement, the growth, the blessings, the richness, the busyness, the activity, the intense concern here at Peace, have you and I lost our first love? Every day the Staten Island Ferry crosses the New York Harbor right past the Statue of Liberty. Inevitably some business exec who makes the commute every day buries his face in a newspaper hardly noticing. But some 8-year-old boy of a tourist family in amazement scrunches his nose up against the window of the boat to get a better look. When it comes to the marvel of God’s kindness to us in the person of Jesus Christ, are we more like the 8-year-old or the business exec?

Do we come to church more out of habit than out of hunger? Is it more out of duty than of wonder? Is your greater concern what’s going on in your life than what He did for you? Making sure that things go right than that He has made things right between you and

God? Remember how proud and excited you were on the day of your confirmation at the age of 13. And now? When's the last time we were truly, honestly excited by the forgiveness of our sins? If the glass doors of the church were closed would we push our noses up against the glass to see it, strain our ears to hear it?

Perhaps we have lost our first love. Our hearts are not naturally inclined to think of God first. We especially have disdain for His gift of forgiveness in connection with Jesus Christ. If we lose our first love then all that we find is death. For apart from Christ that's all there is from God: Death.

But Christ became human as we are, journeyed on this planet, found death for Himself on our behalf. He was punished with the death that we deserve when He suffered and died on the cross. Because of Christ' sufferings God has completely pardoned you and me –declared us forgiven and guilt free.

Think of it: We are perhaps among the most privileged people who've ever lived as we get to hear or be exposed to the Word of God every day if we wish. Yet still we've neglected it, lost our fervor for it. If someone destroyed their liver with too much drinking and you donated your liver to him, --yes it meant that you had to be permanently hooked up to a machine in a hospital room the rest of your life. If that person didn't quit drinking but went on to destroy the liver you gave him –would you have much compassion for such a person?

But God continues to have compassion for us because of Christ's suffering and death. He doesn't begrudge us. What wondrous love is this? And because of what Christ has done, He says to us, "*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.*" Trust in Christ and you have overcome all things –sin, death, hell, the devil, the world and all problems –and eternal life in heaven is yours. What could we love more than that? Who could we love more than Him?