

Lost Love, Revelation 2:1-7

Elgin, Sept. 11, 2016 Rally Sunday

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Let us pray: God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, renew your Spirit within us to confirm our faith, so that we might be refreshed in love for you and each other. Amen.

Introduction

As we start a new program year and all that goes with that, we are also continuing our theme for this calendar year of 2016, which is that the Bible describes, even predicts, the problems that churches find themselves having today, and offers solutions. After doing this all year long we have come to Revelation chapter 2 and 3, where Jesus talks to seven churches one after another: He identifies a problem, warns the believers what to do about it, and reminds them of the promise they have received of eternal life. For the next several weeks we are going to be studying the letters to the seven churches in Revelation: what they were commended for, their problems, and the solutions.

Many pastors and scholars in the Pietist background of the Evangelical Covenant have understood that the seven letters themselves fit into the end-time cycle of visions. I am skeptical of that model. First, the letters were dictated to John before he was caught up into heaven in his visions. Second, these seven churches all existed at the same time, and as scholar Craig Keener of the NIV Application Commentary states, each of them was expected to read each other's mail. So we are finding that each church had its own sets of issues, but all these issues were present at the same time in the days of John, and these same issues are present today.

Another approach is for a preacher to identify which of these descriptions in the seven letters best fits the church that is going to hear the Sunday sermon. There are reasons to think of

Elgin as being in a place similar to what the Christians in Ephesus were experiencing when John wrote to them. They are praised for remaining steadfast in their doctrine, and for resisting the innovations of heresy. They are criticized for losing their “First Love,” meaning their love for each other, their love for the lost, and their love for God.

Eight years ago I might have said, “This fits the problems at Elgin Covenant.” But six years ago we started our consultation on Vitality with Peter Sjoblom from the Central Conference office, and a new season began as we affirmed our values for communication with each other. Four years ago Pastor Greg came on, and cast a vision that we are a church of disciples who make disciples. Disciples Making Disciples is the vision behind G-3: Gathering, Growing, Going, which has surfaced for the church through the CE Team that Pastor Greg leads. These are reasons to hope and to persevere. I do not discern that Jesus Christ is warning us that this lampstand which is Elgin Covenant is about to be removed from its place.

The start of this new program year has been exciting. We had fifteen kids this last Wednesday between Kindergarten and Sixth Grade for our first G-3 Kids Club of the Year. Before and after that lots of people put in lots of extra time and effort this week to get things ready in terms of the building itself, the technology we use, our teaching material, and our staff rotation for the kids. I am grateful, joyful, and pumped up for all that was done. I also know because I saw it for myself that while these people were pouring their sweat equity into today, others were caring for members who are unable to be with us because of illness or infirmity.

So I have forgotten now why I decided to title this message “Lost Love.” Maybe my arthritis flared up. Or maybe, when people are busy and stressed, which as you know comes along with getting a lot done, maybe I heard one too many complaints and got down on the small stuff instead of seeing the big picture. But one of the values we affirm is that we think the best of

others in the church. We have hit the ground running this fall, because when we think the best of others then we know that the bottom line is that Elgin Covenant has lots of godly people who are doing godly things for the church, its members, and the community.

God's love is breaking out here, so when we look at the text today in the words of Jesus to the Church in Ephesus and identify their problem as "Lost Love," I cannot use that as a bludgeon to accuse Elgin Covenant of something that is not true. Lost Love was true in Ephesus, it is not true at Elgin Covenant as a whole. So this morning this message is addressed to the individual conscience: Are you able to discern that God's love happens here at Elgin Covenant? If you can't discern that, then who is off in their spirits? Me, or You? If you are projecting lovelessness on the part of others, is it possible that it is you who have lost your first love?

1. First Things

Jesus calls out a problem in the Church in Ephesus, that they have lost their First Love. The solution which is that they need to do the things they had done at first. At the beginning of the address, Jesus instructs John to write to "the Angel of the Church in Ephesus." This is a mystery: Is Jesus blaming an angel for the failures of the church to which he is associated? In verse 5 he states: "Remember the height from which you have fallen!" That has references to scriptures of angels falling from heaven. It is not fully understood in our flesh today HOW we as a church are a body of Christ, parts of a single mystical entity. It seems that through these seven letters churches are being warned that their failures as a corporate whole, in the case of Ephesus the failure to be alive in the love of God, may affect how a church will experience eternal glory.

But this brings us to another issue. The angel is associated with a church over an entire city. In those days Christians met in their separate house churches, each with a host and perhaps a teaching pastor, but no one said, "I belong to the Covenant" or "I'm a Baptist" or "I'm a

Lutheran” or “I’m a Catholic.” There was an apostolic unity to the church. As Paul writes to the Church in Corinth, Christ will not be divided. So I wonder if there is even now a representation in heaven of Church Angels identified not by denomination, but identified by a region or a city. Rather than talking about an angel for Elgin Covenant, perhaps it is more appropriate to speak of the Angel of the whole Church in Elgin.

Friends, this week I had a conversation with a pastor who serves in DuPage County, who has heard of Love Elgin Day, and has colleagues in DuPage County who envy the Churches of Elgin that we cooperate the way we do as often as we do, and Love Elgin was his example. Many of you have experienced the Joint Churches of Elgin worship service every Good Friday. More often for me has been the annual Pastors get-together and prayer for TLC, the Elgin Life Center, where I’m praying and eating with Catholic priests and Pentecostal evangelists. These things glorify God, and these were the things done at first, when Christians cooperated in mission, evangelism and redemption in their cities without concern for personalities and theological distinctions. If congregations as different as Thomas More and an independent charismatic fellowship can cooperate in shared mission, it can happen within a congregation too. Returning to the things Christians did at first is possible two thousand years later, right here, when you are willing to forgive and forebear the small stuff in order to show Christ to the world.

That is already happening in the congregation which is Elgin Covenant, so I am not accusing the corporate body. Rather, each individual here must decide for yourself where your love is. Discern for yourself whether you have gotten on board this Holy Spirit train which is taking Elgin Covenant to places I have not seen in my ten years and two months serving here.

2. Ears to Hear

Now some of you might be wondering that since John is speaking to a heavenly corporate

reality, and to city-wide fellowships of believers, maybe there is no application to a single congregation or to the individual. Maybe Pastor Jonathan is barking up the wrong tree.

Yet look at verse seven: “Let those with ears hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.” That is the call to the individual believer to discern God’s Word, each within ourselves. Those who have ears for this word of encouragement are experiencing joy in their hearts and hope for the future. You are being fired up to serve in love for God, each other and your neighbor through the ministries and encouragement of Elgin Covenant. Others may need ears to find this sermon convicting, and not in the sense of convicting someone else: “That person over there sure needs to hear this sermon.” If that is your first thought, then this word about lost love might be for you more than anyone else.

Craig Keener whom I mentioned before had mentioned that the love that was lost was for God and for one’s neighbor, meaning fellow believers and the world of the lost outside the church. The Apostle John, whom tradition connects as the author of the gospel of John, the letters of John, and Revelation, is very explicit that no one can claim to love God while hating their fellow believer. This is stated in First John chapter starting in verse 20. It is found on page 1281 of the pew Bible if you want to follow along.

Updated translations replace brother with a more inclusive expression, but it’s not “brother and sister.” From their study of what John is talking about, they have re-translated “brother” to “fellow believer.” So let’s read, making that substitution. “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates a fellow believer, that person is a liar. For anyone who does not love a fellow believer, who can be seen, cannot love God, who cannot not be seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love their fellow believers.”

So it may be that some have lost love for the church as a whole or for people in the church, because of various disappointments, but they think that are continuing to love God. First John calls that false, loving God while disrespecting fellow believers is not the solution Jesus calls for in the letter to Ephesus. Some might protest that they love the people who are lost more than they love the people in the church. Again, for the New Testament this is backwards. The New Testament is clear that love within the church becomes its own evangelism to those outside it. If we do not have the resources of love for those within the church, our love for the lost is not sustainable. It is simply a wrong-headed view to think that God can be loved, and the lost can be loved, while the church can be scorned, ignored, side-lined or berated. That is why so much of New Testament teaching is devoted to solving the problems in the church by reminding believers to love one another. If we fail at that, it is impossible that we are loving God, and unbelievers who surround us will have no reason to think that the church has anything to offer them.

Conclusion

This is not an accusing sermon for the church as whole. I believe, that Christ is present here, walking in the midst of this lampstand. Jesus is not done with the congregation and he is not done with this city. If you can agree that a great start to Kids Club is a reason to celebrate, AND that a fundraiser we hosted here two weeks ago collected over \$2600 for Love Elgin Day is a reason to celebrate, you have caught the Holy Spirit train. But pay attention: If you think only one of those or none of the above is a reason to celebrate, that train is running over you and it's not stopping for you and you must be in a great deal of pain.

If you agree that getting all our floors done and some new paint for our ministry here is a great thing as we start our program year, and that Pastor Henoeh establishing AMEN House on the islands of Chile for ministry at the ends of the earth is a great thing, you are on the train. If

you only celebrate one or the other or none of the above, wow, that Choo Choo is rolling right over you. That's gotta hurt.

What have you lost that is holding you back from this New Testament vision, this command of Christ in Heaven to do the things that were done at first: To Gather, to Grow, and to Go: To be disciples that make disciples. These things are being done here. More can be done and should be done, certainly, but the only things that will matter, the only things that CAN matter in the spiritual economy of Christ and our future glory, are the things that are done in love for God, which we know we do because we love each other and we love the lost, all three together: We gather because we love each other, we grow because we love God, we go because we love the lost.

Hop on, because this train has left the station. Amen.