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The National Presbyterian Church

First Love

Revelation 2:1-11

Rev. Earl F. Palmer

Last Sunday we entered the first chapter of the Book of Revelation. This remarkable book, it's a good book. It's a book of comfort for those who suffer and were in intense pressure in the first century. It's written before the fall of Jerusalem, before 70 A.D. Nero is the emperor. After the fire of Rome in 64 A.D. there was a terrible, irrational persecution; it made no sense at all. But Christians were chosen by Nero as scapegoats and blamed for the fire of Rome. And so throughout the empire, Christians were in danger. And that's also true in the Roman Province of Asia, which was where Ephesus is. And so this book is written to comfort those Christians. And it's been a book of comfort for people who've been in stress ever since. It's not a book to toy with. It's a book to read carefully and thoughtfully and with restraint, because there's a lot of imagery in this book. It starts with a vision that John has. And so many parts of this book, you have to stand back and say, "One wonders." And just stand back. Yet, the clear teaching and the chorales later that we'll meet are very instructive and helpful. As one great writer said, "It's a book about power – bad power and good power. But it shows that the good power of God's grace and his faithfulness is stronger than bad power."

I've titled this whole series, "In Faithful Hands – The Good News of the Book of Revelation." And the study guide has been prepared and it's avail-

able for any of you that would like to get it at the Information Desk, to use in Bible study or for yourself as you go through this book.

John has an amazing experience and the first chapter tells about it. He meets the risen Christ in his dream, in his vision, and it's terrifying to him. At first because the risen Christ has a sword and his presence is so awesome, John tells us that he fell down as if he were dead. And then a big surprise: Jesus Christ puts his hand on John's shoulder and says, "Don't be afraid. I am the Alpha and Omega; I am the beginning and the end. I'm the one who is, who was and will be. History is boundaried by me" (Revelation 1:8). And then he gives John this amazing vision and tells him to write a letter to his churches. John is on Patmos. It's a Roman quarry island used as a prison island. A few miles away is the city where he was Bishop, Ephesus; a city where St. Paul went and spent 2 ½ years there. And now later, John is there. Then he's arrested and put on the island of Patmos. And he writes seven letters to the seven little churches that surround Ephesus. And that's how the Book of Revelation begins, with the seven letters.

You heard one of them just read, the first letter, the letter to the Church of Ephesus. I want to read also the second letter, too. The second letter is to the Church of Smyrna, which is just a few miles from Ephesus. Actually, in modern days, it's Izmir, one of the largest cities in Turkey. I think the third or fourth largest city in Turkey is Izmir. It's right on the coast. It's a huge coastal city today. It was called Smyrna in those days. It was a very famous city for one reason. It had an acropolis. Many cities in ancient times had an acropolis in the middle of the city, a huge outcropping. And on the acropolis of Smyrna were temples, many temples to Roman emperors who had been deified – a temple to Tiberius, a temple to Augustus. And then also temples to Zeus and other Greek gods. And so the temples on the acropolis of Smyrna gave the effect that when you were coming up in a ship, you'd be dazzled by it. And so they called it the Crown of Smyrna. You'll see that plays a part in the letter. The Crown of Smyrna was where all these temples were. And the Christians are in this city too. It's one of the churches, probably started by Christians in Ephesus that had come over and started a church in Smyrna. And they're suffering. They're suffering and facing trials. They feel poor and perhaps helpless. And so, listen to the letter they receive and then we'll look more closely at the letter that was written to Ephesus.

"And so the message to Smyrna: To the angel of the church in Smyrna,"

[angel means 'messenger']. "These are the words of the first and the last, who was dead and came to life. I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you're rich. I know the slander on the part of those who say they're Jews but are not, in a synagogue of Satan." [Probably referring to the temple worship at the top of that hill.] "Do not fear what you're about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested." [Here, the devil and Satan are both mentioned as adversaries of that church.] "Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so you'll be tested. For ten days, you'll have affliction. Be faithful, even unto death. I will give you the crown of life." [Notice the play on words. Their city is famous for the Crown of Smyrna. 'I'll give you a better crown, the crown of life.' Wow.] "Let everyone who has an ear listen to what the spirit is saying to the churches." [In all of these letters is the Holy Spirit who walks among the seven lamp stands, which are the symbol of the churches that write this letter.] "Whoever conquers will not be harmed by the second death" (Revelation 2:8-11).

The word 'conquer' means whoever wins the victory now will not be harmed by the second death. Some of you may die, but there's a greater boundary that belongs to God. That's the letter to the Church of Smyrna. I have a better crown for you than temples of Smyrna. I have the crown of life for you.

But I want to especially focus on the first letter, because the first letter is so important. Ephesus is the grand city of the Roman Province of Asia. It has in it one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world, the Temple to Artemis. That temple was so big, with 88 columns, each column almost twice the height of the columns in the Parthenon. In fact, two Parthenons could be put inside of the Temple of Artemis, this amazing temple. And, by the way ironically today, only one column still remains. Everything else was taken away later, to put in other buildings in other parts of the ancient world. But at that time, it was a grand temple. Alexander the Great himself had rebuilt it after a fire. So it's one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world. They also have an amphitheater that can seat 28,000 people. It's still standing in perfect condition in Ephesus.

That's the city where Paul preached and taught for 2 ½ years. And now John is the Bishop of that city. And he writes to that city and first of all, honors them, the Holy Spirit honors the city, first of all. "I know your works, your

toil, your patient endurance. You cannot tolerate evildoers. You've tested those who claim to be apostles. You've found them to be false. I know that you're enduring patiently" (Revelation 2:1-3). They're a tough church, and they're honored for their courage. They also oppose the work of the Nicolaitan movement. We don't really know who they are, except that the Hypoclitus, an early church father, said that they were a Gnostic group or a proto-Gnostic group. They were teaching that Christ was not a human being, really, he didn't fully identify with us, but he was more like a phantom Christ. And so that's the Gnostic movement; but the Christians at Ephesus didn't fall for that. And so he honors them for that. "You didn't fall for that false Gnostic teaching. You were courageous. You were able to spot false doctrine so that you became alert to the truth."

But they have a problem. How could they have a problem? I mean, they know everything they're supposed to know. They're courageous. They're doing all the right things, except for one problem. And here's how it's put in your text. "But I have this against you. You've abandoned the love you had at first" (Revelation 2:4). That's a pretty big problem, evidently, because it's such a big problem that the Holy Spirit says, "If you don't repent of that and return to that, I'm going to remove your lamp stand." That's how big the problem was. The lamp stand is the symbol of the church. "I'm going to remove you if you can't solve that problem."

By the way, the Greek text is more dramatic than the English text because in Greek, the verbs are put at the end of sentences instead of the beginning of the sentences. In the actual text it reads this way: "I have this against you. The love at first, the first love you had, you..." and then the verb comes, "You left it behind." That's what that word *afikas* means, "You left it behind." The RSV says, "You abandoned it." "The love that you had at the beginning, you left it behind." What a problem. It is so big that it outweighs everything else, even their courage. It outweighs their orthodoxy. They left the love behind. What in the world could be so important?

Imagine if you went to McDonald's and got a hamburger and some French fries and then the little apple turnover. And then you walk out to the car and you get in the car and you realize, "I left my hamburger behind, and my French fries. But, oh, what difference does it make? I don't want to go back, because somebody's probably taken a bite out of the hamburger anyway, and they've probably rifled my French fries and taken a few French fries out,

and who wants to eat a little bit of French fries when about three of them are missing, because – did they use hand sanitizer when they took out the French fries.” And so you say, “I’m not going to go back for those.” But then you realize, “Oh, I left my wallet.” Now you go back. You won’t go back for the French fries; you won’t go back for the hamburger, but you’ll go back for your wallet, because, “There’s my identity, there’s my driver’s license, my Social Security card. Oh, my goodness, I can’t make it without that.” In other words, it’s so important, it’s so fundamental that I go back for it. And that’s exactly what happens in this letter to the Ephesians. You have something so fundamental that you’ve left behind, you’d better go back and find it.

Well, I want to re-explore that for just a few moments. This sentence can be read two different ways, and both are correct. “The love you had at first, that is the love that saved you.” See, it’s God’s love that redeemed you. “For God so loved the world he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth will have salvation” (John 3:16). The love of God at work in your life. And the other way it can be understood is the love that you work with, that you shared, “Beloved, let us love one another.” Love is the most dynamic word in the whole vocabulary in the New Testament, because it’s a word that’s always moving. It’s a word that moves toward others, as well as what you experience yourself. It heals all the brokenness in you, and it spreads out toward others around you. That’s why he says, “The work ... go back to the first work you did, with the love you have.”

So love can be understood two ways here: the love you experience, that saved you and made you feel safe. It’s like in a marriage when you fall in love with each other and you have a love that makes you married to another person. And it’s fundamental to who you are, but also it’s something you share toward each other and toward those around you. And so it’s that love, too. And for some reason, they left it behind. How could that happen? How could people leave something so important behind? I’ve been reflecting on that. I think there are maybe three possibilities.

One, because they saw it as important for the beginning of their life. It was important at the beginning – like in a romance – it’s important at the beginning to say, “I love you.” But then as you go on in a marriage and get involved with mortgages and everything else, maybe you don’t have to keep saying it all the time. Believe me, that’s not true. But I can see how that could happen to somebody. Why is it so important? Well, it’s important for

kids to know. It's important for people to know at the beginning. But as you advance into heavier doctrines, after all, they're fighting the Nicolaitans now – as you're doing heavier things and working in heavier subjects, going to spiritual heights, deeper matters and deeper truths – so we move beyond first things. And I can see how some people could say that. "Love was important at the beginning, but now I'm moving on to greater heights of theology and church government. I'm going to presbytery now." And things like that. "I left behind maybe the thing I needed at the beginning."

Or maybe secondly, we know that love takes time. Love takes time to happen. And because it takes so much time, maybe the Ephesians became too busy for it. It's interesting – I put on the front of our bulletin, a quotation from St. Paul. Because in his letter to the Ephesians, maybe he knows something, too, just like John does. He says to the Ephesians, "I'm praying for you." And in the third chapter of Ephesians, Paul gives his prayer. And he says, "Here's what I'm praying for you, that Christ may go in your hearts of faith, and that you, being rooted and grounded in love," this dynamic word, "may be able to understand what is the height and breadth and length and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses all knowledge" (Ephesians 3:16-19).

Notice, he says 'rooted.' That is a dynamic word. Love has to grow. It has to grow. It takes time to grow. It takes time for love to grow in a family. It takes all your life for love to grow. And if you're busy and have too much to do, maybe love is simply too slow. Or, and this is the most scary possibility of all. Maybe the people at Ephesus are so embattled with false doctrine and embattled with the Nicolaitans and others, that they think that love is not tough enough against – it's a virtue that's good but not tough – and maybe they need to be tougher toward all the falseness they face. And so they have become severe. Orthodox in doctrine, but brittle in life and in living toward one another. And some people are that way. They're very strong on truth but not very strong on grace. They know what they don't believe, and they know what's wrong with your belief. But they're not sure how to share love with you, or with themselves.

What's the cure? It's interesting, the cure that comes in this letter. I think it's a great cure. Three things. First, 'Remember.' Remember the beginning. That's a huge word in the Old Testament and the New Testament. "Remember..." one of the Psalms says, "I will remember the faithfulness

and the love of God" (Psalm 98:3). Remember it. That's the Christian doctrine of meditation. To remember the great truths. To remember what is most basic in your life. The truth you heard at first, remember it. Make sure you remember it. Go back to it. Notice he says, "Go back to the works you did at first. Remember them." Remember what you first said to your wife when you first fell in love with her. Say it again. What you first said and thought about your children as they were young and beginning to grow and they were so cute. Remember it when they're teenagers.

And then the second word is 'hear'. In fact, all through these letters it says, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." And you know, the word for 'hear' in Greek is *acuo*. By the way, we get the English word 'acoustic' from that word, *acuo*, 'hear'. It's the word Paul uses when he says, "As you've always listened or heard me, hear me now." It means, when our Lord says this in the beginning of his Parables, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." He is saying: make room for this. Remember it and make room to hear it, to keep hearing it. It's a dynamic, present tense word. Remember, that looks to the past. You hear, that's in the present. Listen, right now, to all these truths and make space for it. Make sure the room can hear what you're saying.

And then 'repent.' It's interesting, he uses two words here for repent. The word 'repent,' which means to "turn around." Turn around and return to what is concrete. If one is to listen with your head and your heart, and the other is to remember with your head and your heart, now repent means to do it with your body. "Go back and continue the work you did at the beginning." Do something about it. Do something if you want to show your wife you love her, your children you love them, do something. Make it concrete. Love is concrete. It's a dynamic, concrete word. Do something.

And the last word he uses, "To everyone who repents, you'll be a conqueror." And he uses the word *nikawo* here, and that'll be in all seven letters. He who 'conquers.' And the word means, 'who wins this victory'. You'll win a victory when you remember the first love, when you return to the first love, when the first love that you first discovered in Christ grows in you, when it spills out of your life toward those around you. When you remember that, then you will have won the victory. And that's the word he uses.

Notice, "To everyone, then, who wins this victory, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life" (Revelation 2:7). By the way, that's a play on words,

too. Did you know that the seal, the city seal of Ephesus was a tree? “Your city has a tree; I’ll give you the tree of life.” Just like for Smyrna, the crown of life. Now for Ephesus he says, “You can eat from the tree of life.” Not the tree of Ephesus, but the best tree, the tree of life.

Heavenly Father, thank you for this tree of life. Thank you that when we remember and repent and when we hear and make room for your truth and your love, and when your love is in our lives and flows through our lives to others, then we have not left behind the most important thing. And Lord, if we feel we’ve left behind what’s most important, help us to go back and find it so that we can grow in grace as we grow in age. In Christ’s name we pray, Amen.

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Sunday Worship at 8, 9:15 & 11 a.m.
Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.

THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20016
www.NationalPres.org 202.537.0800