



First Love

Revelation 2:1-7

Week 1 | Jan 7, 2018

Summary: Like the church in Ephesus, Willowdale is a hardworking, doctrinally sound, and persevering church. Our faithfulness and fruitfulness over 62 years of history provides plenty of proof. But like Ephesus, in the midst of our ministry we could lose sight of both Christ and the body of Christ as the objects of our deepest love and affection. Jesus had to send Ephesus a message: “You have forsaken your first love.” Let’s learn from this painful critique and make sure our first love is truly first in our hearts. We do that by **remembering** the height from which we have fallen, **repenting**, and **reenacting** the things we did at first. In other words, we re-engage.

Discussion:

1. Read Revelation 2:1-7 from three different translations.
2. What do you love about Jesus as you see him in this passage?
3. How do you see Christ’s commendations and critique of Ephesus applying to Willowdale? The sermon suggested a pretty close parallel. Would you agree?
4. Are there additional or different things that you think Jesus would commend in our church? What about additional critiques? (Be cautious not to run too far in a negative direction here.)
5. The fact that Jesus offers pointed feedback—and threatens judgment—might strike us as out of character or out of sync with the gospel. How do you reconcile this with the fact that we, like the Ephesians, live in the New Testament era, in the age of grace?
6. The solution to the problem of forsaken love, Jesus says, is found in three things:
 - Remember [“the height from which you have fallen”]: What are your best memories of your earlier days with Christ and your best days with Willowdale?
 - Repent: What is one change of mind, attitude, or action that God is prompting you to make?
 - Reenact [“do the things you did at first”]: What practices do you need to reactivate?
7. We started this series by rating our marriage to Christ and the church. How hopeful are you that this rating can improve by the end of the Ephesians series? How prepared are you to reengage and work for improvement, versus just waiting to see if it happens?

Additional Reading

What is the church?

Church is the textured context in which we grow up in Christ to maturity. But church is difficult. Sooner or later, though, if we are serious about growing up in Christ, we have to deal with church. I say sooner. I want to begin with church.

Many Christians find church to be the most difficult aspect of being a Christian. And many drop out—there may be more Christians who don't go to church or only go occasionally than who embrace it, warts and all. And there are certainly plenty of warts. It is no easier for pastors. The attrition rate among pastors leaving their congregations is alarming.

So, why church? The short answer is because the Holy Spirit formed it to be a colony of heaven in the country of death. Church is the core element in the strategy of the Holy Spirit for providing human witness and physical presence to the Jesus-inaugurated kingdom of God in the world. It is not the kingdom complete, but it is a witness to that kingdom.

But it takes both sustained effort and a determined imagination to understand and embrace church in its entirety. Casual and superficial experience with church often leaves us with an impression of bloody fights, acrimonious arguments, and warring factions. These are more than regrettable; they are scandalous. But they don't define church. There are deep continuities that sustain church at all times and everywhere as primarily and fundamentally God's work, however we may desecrate and abuse it. C.S. Lewis introduced the term "deep church" to convey the ocean fathoms of tradition that are continuously re-experienced "at all times and everywhere." I like that: deep church.

Church is an appointed gathering of named people in particular places who practice a life of resurrection in a world in which death gets the biggest headlines: death of nations, death of civilization, death of marriage, death of careers, obituaries without end. Death by war, death by murder, death by accident, death by starvation. Death by electric chair, lethal injection, and hanging. The practice of resurrection is an intentional, deliberate decision to believe and participate in resurrection *life*, life out of death, life that trumps death, life that has the last word. Jesus life. This practice is not a vague wish upwards but comprises a number of discrete, interlocking acts that maintain a credible and faithful way of life, Real Life, in a world preoccupied with death and the devil.

These practices include the worship of God in all the operations of the Trinity; the acceptance of a resurrected, born-from-above identity in baptism; the embrace of resurrection formation by eating and drinking Christ's resurrected body and blood at the Lord's Table; attentive reading of and obedience to the revelation of God in the Scriptures; prayer that cultivates an intimacy with realities that are inaccessible to our senses; confession and forgiveness of sins; welcoming the stranger and outcast; working for peace and justice, healing and truth, sanctity and beauty; care for all the stuff of creation. The practice of resurrection encourages improvisations on the basic story as given in our Scriptures and revealed in Jesus. Thousands of derivative details proliferate across the landscape. The company of people who practice resurrection replicates the way of Jesus on the highways and byways named and numbered on all the maps of the world.

This is the church.

— from *Practice Resurrection*, by Eugene Peterson

