

A TALE OF TWO CHURCHES
Revelation 2: 1-7 and 3: 14-22 – January 8, 2012
The Church of the Covenant

I remember reading Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, back in high school, and the opening famous quote I believe begins...*"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. It was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness. It was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us..."* It was these two seemingly contradictory attitudes that constitute the reality of Dickens' day; and may I say, it is two seemingly contradictory things which nevertheless are what hold the church of Jesus Christ together, and who make The Church of the Covenant who it is.

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times... As the Presbyterian Church we are entering into one of those periods where there will be church wars and rumors of wars. The PC (USA) has been struggling with issues such as Biblical authority and ordination issues now since I was under care in Washington Presbytery more than 30 years ago. The very first Presbytery meeting I attended was an angry one, where the Green Valley Presbyterian Church was leaving the denomination and then the Candidates Committee asked me to stand up on the floor and say why I wanted to be a Presbyterian minister. I was the very next item of business. Maybe there was a part of me that should have said –*"Are you out of your mind? You want me to commit to be a minister in the midst of this hoo-ha?"* And the church has gone through at least 4 or 5 sequences of these battles over the years I have been ordained. As I shared why I felt called to be a Presbyterian minister I remember looking out at the faces of the people; God had positioned me to give them a sense of hope in that meeting, to remind them about what and WHO really is important. One little old lady cried as I shared my statement of faith and feeling called to be a minister. She needed to hear that her church that she loved was going to be OK. So I find that the issues are rarely those over which we seemingly are fighting; they are the presenting issues; the surface issues; but there are ones far deeper that need to be discovered and discerned. It is the worst of times in that there will be some conflict with Christians saying mean things about one another. But it will be the best of times because we learn who we really are in the process and WHO really holds the church together. Hint: Its not us. It is Jesus.

Our scripture for today from the Letter to the Seven Churches section in the book of Revelation is helpful, I think, in unpacking two seemingly contradictory things that nevertheless make the church, the church. The first section focuses in on the church at Ephesus. It begins by being highly complementary to the Ephesians. It complements their *"works"* and their *"patient endurance"*; the letter from Jesus Christ Himself complements how they do not *"bear"* evil people and how they are *"bearing up for my name's sake."* (*Revelation 2: 2,3*) It is clear from this letter that they have stood up and fought against unbelief; they have taken on people who are undermining the faith; they have been strong and orthodox and staunch in their right believing. But then Jesus notes of them that, *"I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first..."* (*Revelation 2: 4*) They have been staunch; they have been immovable in their faith; they have stood up against unbelievers and people who might compromise the faith which has been entrusted to them. BUT...Jesus says in the process you Ephesians have lost the love you had at first. *"God is love"* we may remind ourselves. We cannot hate our brother whom we do see and say we love God whom we cannot see. Yes, *"hope and faith and love abide"* but always remember that *"the greatest of these is love"*. (*1 Corinthians 13: 13*) Can we be correct in our believing and cold in our heart? Can we have the right scripture but the wrong spirit? Can we battle over truth and wind up losing the love we had at first? Can we be ever so correct in our right belief but

alas and alack in the process lose the very love which Jesus died to bring to the church? Yes, we can. I've watched churches lose the love they had at first—Jesus is clear: *"REPENT and do the works you did at first"*; come back to the first love you had at the beginning. I've watched it happen, time after time after time, over more than 25 years of ministry I have watched Ephesian-like attitudes kill the love of congregations and without the love of Jesus at our heart we are nothing, we can do nothing, we will have nothing. That's the tale of one church, the church at Ephesus.

Then, there is the tale of another church, the church at Laodicea. The church at Laodicea is rich in material possessions but as Jesus notes in His letter to it, *"you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked."* (Revelation 3: 17) They are *"lukewarm"*, as He says. They run *"neither cold nor hot"*. (v. 15) They are a perfect example of a church that has sold its soul to its culture, is an enculturated church, is more about what is going on with its culture than what is going on with God. They are the church that has so gone over to the world and is so worldly that they don't care anymore. They are the "Whatever Presbyterian Church"; do whatever, think whatever, be whatever; we really don't care. They are a mirror image of their culture; they are not being reborn into the image of their Savior, Jesus Christ. Their power comes from their money and their prestige, not the Spirit of the Living God. They have lost their faith. And in the process they lost their holy power. The thing the Ephesians focused on, the Laodiceans forgot. Jesus says to them in this letter: *"Those whom I love, I reprove and chasten, so be zealous and REPENT."* (v. 19) That's the tale at the other church, the church at Laodicea.

So the tale of these two churches taken together is that, on the one hand like Ephesus, if you are so holier than Thou and self righteous and use your faith and the Bible to harm and put people down, you're going to lose the love you had at first and be of no use for the Kingdom. And on the other hand like Laodicea, if you are so loving and accepting that you love and accept everything that goes on in the world, you're going to lose the center and core of transforming work you are to do in the world. Christ transforms culture, culture doesn't transform Christ. So the tale of two churches is that a church needs to be BOTH faithful AND loving; if it overemphasizes its faith and its belief it is in danger of losing its love; if it overemphasizes its love and acceptance it is in danger of losing its faith. Two things, sometimes seemingly contradictory that both need to be kept in a creative tension with one another, lest Jesus comes and demands the church repent and turn from its ways.

May I say, it is my belief that The Church of the Covenant today is a pretty good expression of the balance and the creative tension between faithfulness and love. I've been here now for 3 years and I can say this church is amazingly faithful, it is staunch in its believing, it is focused on the Lord Jesus, and it has been that way as a church for a long, long time. It is part of its identity; who it is as a congregation. And equally, may I say, The Church of the Covenant today is a loving, caring and compassionate church; it has a big heart for people and for God. It is part of its identity; who it is as a congregation. We ARE the tale of two churches—faithful to Jesus and His Word—loving to one another and our world. That's who you are; that's who we will remain. Beloved, I am absolutely committed as your pastor to maintaining these two key identities because I believe they are what makes the church of Jesus Christ, the church of Jesus Christ.

So how do these two seemingly different and divergent things stay together? How does a church that is both faithful and loving remain together when "It is the best of times and it is the worst of times"? It becomes all about Jesus. When He is our focus then He is the spiritual glue which keeps not only these two things together but keeps us together. Spiritually speaking, it is the Spirit of Jesus Christ which stands at the center of these two things. It is HE who is our peace; who has made the two one. It is He who will bring down any dividing wall of hostility that may seek to harm us or divide us as a

congregation. As long as we walk together through this time we will be fine. As long as we walk with Jesus through this time we will be fine. That's why Jesus says: "*Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him...*" (Revelation 3: 20) We have to invite Jesus in. We have to ask Him to be present and to be the spiritual glue that keeps us all together. He is always there willing to keep divergent things together in HIM. All things hold together in HIM. He always stands knocking at the door seeking entry into every situation. And should we choose to really invite Him into our midst, and to pray to Him and ask Him to do a great work in us, and to come in all His fullness to reveal His glory in the midst of trying times. God particularly delights in doing mighty works in trying times. He will show us a better way than we can figure out ourselves. He will take our hand and walk us step by step through every discussion, at every turn, if we let Him. If we lead from HIS faith and we lead from HIS love we will be just fine each step along the way. We may trust HIM implicitly to lead us, if we invite Him in.

Biblical commentators on this passage from Revelation, "*Behold, I stand at the door and knock...*" say it never represents anything other than spiritual opportunity. There is no fear in opening the door to Jesus; there is only spiritual opportunity. Ah, It may well be the best of times and it the worst of times, but it is firstly and foremostly a time of *incredible spiritual opportunity* to see whether or not we truly are both the faithful AND the loving church we have always believed ourselves to be.

It is the best of times and it is the worst of times, it is the age of disbelief and the age of resurgent faith, it is the epoch of disagreements, but it is the epoch of refocusing on Jesus as the source of our life. It is a time of darkness but in the midst of that it is also a time of Light and of Jesus being and becoming the light of the world. It can seem the winter of despair but in truth it is just God setting up Jesus Christ again to come in the power of His resurrection to bring a new spring and new life for His church. But of course it all is contingent on us hearing our Savior's knock and inviting Him in. We can do nothing without HIM, but we can do all things through HIM. Let us trust HIM that as we walk hand in hand together with HIM in this time that it will be the best of times for us. It is the tale of two churches.

And Amen.

*By: The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, PA
IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*