May we never hear the voice of Jesus say of us or our church — “You have the name that you are alive, but you are dead.” (Revelation 3: 1) In Christianity you can look good on the outside but be spiritually dead on the inside. We may give the appearance of looking “churchy” but the reality on the inside may just be emptiness. We may have, as I like to call it, “church world” down pat; attend meetings, show up, be seen, talk the talk, have our name on a church roll. But alas, we may have never produced even one piece of spiritual fruit for the Kingdom of God.

I am preaching on Jesus’ seven letters to the seven churches in the book of Revelation. There is a digression, a downwardly spiraling decline that starts with losing Jesus Christ as our first love. The push back of the world has us gradually lose our first love (Ephesus and Smyrna); we then slide down further and farther away from Jesus and become like the church at Pergamum, the compromising church; we may then continue the slide into the abyss and become like Thyatira, the morally corrupt church; and then if we do not turn and return to our first love we can become the dead church, like the church at Sardis had become.

“I know your works”, says Jesus to the church at Sardis. (Revelation 3: 1) Your works are the fruit produced for the Kingdom of God. What are “works” and “fruit”? The Gospel of John, also written by the writer of Revelation, has in the 15th chapter, has Jesus’ words within it saying: “I am the vine and you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit.” (John 15: 5) If the branches produce no fruit, they are pruned away. They are pruned away so that the branches connected to the vine, the Lord Jesus Christ, can produce more fruit. Dead churches produce little or no spiritual fruit. They become dead by losing their first love, the Lord Jesus Christ. Churches alive with Jesus produce much spiritual fruit. People are always drawn to Jesus; “If I, even I, am lifted up, I will draw all men unto me”, promises the Lord. Do people want to profess Jesus as Lord and Savior through ministry? Invited anyone to come to church? – that’s fruit. Are people drawn closer to Christ through times of stress and pastoral need? – that’s fruit. Do people want to pray more? – that’s fruit. Do young people hunger to come to church? -- that’s fruit. Do people desire to study God’s Word? -- that’s fruit. Do people want to worship the Lord in holiness? -- that’s spiritual fruit. Do people want to serve the Lord in mission and service? – that’s spiritual fruit. Does a generosity of the Spirit invade someone’s heart and make them want to give to the Lord, not out of obligation, but joy? -- that’s spiritual fruit. Is there a desire within to keep God’s commandments and love one another? -- that’s spiritual fruit. You cannot fake production of spiritual fruit— “Apart from me you can do nothing”, says the Lord (John 15: 5) So a church that is spiritually dead is one that has drifted apart from Jesus and so produces no spiritual fruit for the Kingdom. Do you produce spiritual fruit for the Kingdom? If the answer is no, or that you do not produce much fruit, then it is time in Lent to return to your first love once again...
I served a church many years ago that had a great reputation, but alas, if Jesus had come and with his fiery eyes observed us, would have said: You have a reputation, a name, for being alive, but in truth, you are dead. I remember starting a prayer ministry there, sort of like our Fellowship of Concern at The Church of the Covenant, that also had once a month a face-to-face prayer time in the chapel. I had a prominent woman come in and say to me: “Now, Stu, we don’t want to go all Fundamentalist, do we?” It was just prayer. I had another woman make an appointment, come in and say about my sermons, “Stu, all you talk about is prayer and faith and Jesus and the Bible and the Holy Spirit. I want something that is relevant for my life!” I was rendered speechless and that takes a lot. For the life of me I wanted to say, “How sad that God is not relevant for your life.” But I didn’t. Another man came in to make an appointment and said, “Stu, we don’t want to hear about the love of God anymore.” Ouch. I should have had the presence of mind to ask, and what is going on in your life that makes you not want to hear about God’s love? That church had a giant choir, had more than 600 people a Sunday in worship, had a big operating budget, its reputation was that it was alive. But at some point I realized it was the opposite of being alive: it was dead; it had lost its first love; it did a lot of things but they were all disconnected from Jesus; it did “church world” very well; but it produced little or no fruit for the Kingdom. It is not lost on me as a pastor that some of the greatest fruit producing churches are smaller and some of the dead fruit producing churches are larger. There were a group of Camerounian Presbyterians who had migrated from Africa and they were part of that church. I always seek out and try to find the people who “Prayed Me” to their church in advance of my being called there. And I discovered that it was the Camerounians who were secretly praying for someone like me to come and be their pastor. So Stu and the Camerounians would get together and pray together in secret, so as not to awaken the dead, so to speak, or go all “Fundamentalist” on them. It is never that a church is completely dead or completely alive; nor is it true that an individual is completely dead or completely alive. Even in the most alive Christian there are still parts of our hearts that need Jesus.

Now the church at Sardis and other churches like them will be raptured first at the second coming of Jesus. You know why? Because the Bible says, “The dead in Christ will be raised first.” But this season of Lent, leading to Holy Week, and culminating with Easter Sunday, is a perfect time to come alive in the Lord Jesus Christ. Are there parts of your heart that feel dead? Then invite the life-giving presence of Jesus to enter in and come alive. “In Christ shall all be made alive!” Are there parts of our ministry here that are sleepy or moribund and need to be awakened? “Awake, O Sleeper, and rise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light!” Because all of Lent leads to Holy Week, and all of Holy Week leads to Easter, and Easter is about everything that is dead coming to life again in Jesus’ name. I don’t want just the reputation of being alive; I want to be alive in Christ and produce fruit for His Kingdom in His name. Come back to your first love; come back to the source of all life; come back to Jesus this Lent. Amen 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!