

## LUKEWARM

### Revelation 3:14- To the Church in Laodicea

<sup>14</sup> “To the angel of the church in Laodicea write:

These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation. <sup>15</sup> I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! <sup>16</sup> So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. <sup>17</sup> You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. <sup>18</sup> I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.

<sup>19</sup> Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. <sup>20</sup> Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.

<sup>21</sup> To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne. <sup>22</sup> Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

#### MESSAGE:

In our worship services this Lenten Season we’ve looked at some letters Jesus sent to churches in Asia Minor. In these letters, Jesus praises the churches for their strengths but He also points out problems they have which need correcting. The letters deal with the spiritual sickness which can set in at a church when its first love is no longer God.

Before dictating His letters to John, Jesus shows him—and us—a model of how a church is supposed to operate. The church, he says, is a lamp which shines God’s light into the world. The oil that keeps the lamp burning is the Holy Spirit which comes to its members through the Word of God and the Sacraments.

The first church we looked at was the church at Ephesus. This was a lively church, strong in its faith and its outreach the community. The members had weathered persecution yet had stuck to their faith. There was only one problem: they had drifted away from their first love: the love of God’s Word and Sacraments which had nourished their faith, motivated their outreach and strengthened their perseverance in the face of persecution.

The second church we looked at—the church at Pergamum—had also abandoned their first love. Instead of reaching out to their neighbors with the Gospel they had become preoccupied with their own needs. Theology had been replaced by “me-ology” and what had been a lighthouse for the Gospel was turning into a spiritual playpen. Like the prophet

Balaam, who forsook his duty to God and tried to get paid for his prophecies, or like the Nicolaitans who tried to capitalize on God's forgiveness by using it to justify sinful lifestyles, they had become self-absorbed and narcissistic.

The third church—the church at Thyatira—had entered the next state of spiritual entropy. When a congregation begins serving itself instead of serving God and its neighbors, it needs to find a way to justify its selfishness. It becomes susceptible to what Jesus calls “the teachings of Jezebel.” Jezebel, of course was the evil wife of Ahab, the O.T. king of Israel who encouraged pagan religion in Israel and did everything she could to wipe out the worship of Yahweh Elohim, the God of Israel.

The fourth church we looked at was the church at Sardis. At Sardis, the worship of God and the preaching of His word had all but died out and “Jezebel-ism”—pagan religion—had taken over. The church was spiritually dead and its works were displeasing to God. It's only hope lay in repenting and turning back to the Word and Spirit of God. In His letter, Jesus admonished them: *“Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard, obey it and repent.”* (Rev. 3:3) If they refused to do this, Jesus says, they would die.

Now we come to the final church, one which is in its death throes—the church at Laodicea.

[Vs. 3:14] Jesus reminds them that he is the only source of truth—truth that comes only through His word. As he had prayed for His disciples on the night before He was crucified: *“[Father], sanctify them by the truth: Thy Word is truth.”* (John 17:17)

[Vs. 3:15-16] The word “lukewarm” would have been familiar—and offensive—to the people of Laodicea. Their water came to them through an aqueduct which carried it several miles before delivering it to the city. Hot water was a luxury and cold water was not to be found: the only available water was lukewarm. Jesus is saying that just as their water is lukewarm, so is their faith. They were neither hot in their zeal for Christ nor cold in their rejection of Him: they were simply indifferent. And this, according to Jesus, is the worst spiritual condition into which someone can fall. It's reminiscent of words Elijah used when he scoured the Israelites of his day, saying, *“How long will you limp between two opinions? If the Lord is God—follow Him! If Baal is God—follow him!”* (1 Kings 18:21) St. Paul, who fiercely persecuted Christians before he was converted, was at least zealous for serving God even though he was misguided. Pilate, on the other hand, who asked *“What is truth?”* was indifferent. Being lukewarm, the church at Laodicea was tottering on the edge of apostasy and death. Jesus issues his harshest rebuke to this church. He tells them, *“I am about to spit you out of my mouth.”* (Rev. 3:16)

Then we are told the reasons for their indifference. [3:17a] Laodicea was the wealthiest city in Asia Minor. There were three industries that thrived there: banking, textiles, and ophthalmology. Its banks included a mint; its woolen cloth was sold all over the world, and it produced an eye-salve for which there was great demand. It was full of people who thought of themselves as “having arrived”—who thought, *“We are rich, we have acquired wealth, and we don't need a thing.”* (Rev. 3:17) Their worldly eyes had become so full of glitter they had lost their spiritual eyesight.

So Jesus lashes out at them with the sharp, double-edged sword of his mouth: [3:17b]. Wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked! Don't you bankers know that you are poor? Don't you textile tycoons understand that you are naked? Don't you ophthalmological geniuses realize that you are blind? See yourselves as you really are and repent! God has given you the gift of repentance: use it! You bankers won't find true wealth in the mint at Laodicea because true wealth can be found only in Christ. You textile tycoons can't cover your nakedness and shame with wool cloth because only Jesus' blood and righteousness can cover your sins. Eye salve may heal eyes but it can never open them to the love and grace of God. Only God can do these things for us and He can only do them if you repent.

So, Jesus writes: [3:19] The call to repentance. Always, always the call to repentance! God always stands ready to hear the confessions of a repentant heart. To all people—Jew and Gentile, believer and unbeliever—rich people and poor people—it doesn't matter. Jesus invites everyone to open the doors of their hearts and repent of their sins so that He can enter in and join them in table fellowship. His Word and His body and His blood are the only things that will wash away your sins and restore faith to your hearts.

Jesus concludes: [3:21-22]

God never gives up on His church but His church sometimes gives up on God. In spite of everything—even the desire to spit them out of his mouth—He implores them to come home to Him. Having no commendation to offer them he can only offer them hope—the hope of regaining their spiritual life by making Him once again their first love, rededicating themselves to His Word and Sacraments and reaching out to their neighbors with His Gospel. God loves to raise the dead to new life because He is the God of the living—not of the dead.

Repentance clears up our spiritual eyesight and opens our ears to God's voice. It draws us to His Sacrament of the Altar where our sins are washed away and we are restored to His presence. It showers us with the inestimable wealth of His grace and mercy and peace. It is an inexhaustible resource—the gift that keeps on giving. We are called to repentance again and again in our Christian lives so that God can forgive us again and again. So that our natural hearts of stone can be melted by the only agent that can permeate their rocky crags: the pure, life-giving grace of a loving Christ.

The question I posed at the beginning of this series of Lenten messages is: Is our church God's church? I am happy to say that in my estimation, it surely is. I have not found a single member who is not devoted to God's Word and open to the work of His Spirit. When a member of this congregation gets sick he is deluged with cards and visits from fellow members. We have members who spend significant amounts of time and energy bringing the love of Jesus Christ to people in need. Could we do more? We can always do more. But I am convinced that what is done here is done out of Gospel-softened hearts, and that the day will come when they will rejoice to hear their master say: Well done, good and faithful servant!"

Amen.